

# Inventoring “Ithaca”: Things, Identity, and Character in James Joyce’s *Ulysses*

Neil Ramiller  
Reed College

## *Introduction*

James Joyce's novel *Ulysses* is full of ordinary material things. More precisely, *Ulysses* is crowded with the representations of things. Some of them – like a discarded advertising flyer, a bar of scented soap, and a product known as Plumtree's potted meat – reappear here and there across the novel, peeking out from the text as if to challenge us with their apparent significance. Material things become especially pronounced in the penultimate chapter, “Ithaca,” when Leopold Bloom, the central character, returns home and engages with numerous household items and memorabilia, and reflects more grandly on such diverse subjects as the city's water system, the stars and planets, and the physical circumstances of his personal life, reimagined. Joyce presents all of this materiality in a clinical and technical way. The entire chapter is organized as a kind of catechism, with 309 questions and answers, and physical things appear as elements in detailed micro-histories, lengthy process descriptions, point-by-point comparisons, recitations of scientific facts, schemes for civil engineering, complicated fantasies about a better and more affluent life, and long lists of items found in Bloom's house.

The things in “Ithaca” have confounded many literary scholars. Did Joyce intend to emphasize the inherent materiality of things in order to disrupt conventional symbolic or metaphorical readings? Karen Lawrence remarks:

Joyce moves away from the traditional idea of the economy of the novel... [through] the inclusion in the text of the details of life that other writers have chosen to exclude from their novels... He gives us the most trivial details of life rather than the ‘great scenes transacted on the human stage.’ In fact, the presence of details becomes

increasingly prominent in the text, as Joyce deliberately includes random details that lie outside the symbolic form he himself creates. These details resist recuperation as part of the symbolic schema and thus dramatize the innate recalcitrance that materiality presents to the shaping imagination. They represent the wealth of life that cannot be assimilated to literary purposes (Lawrence, 1981: 77-78).

In this essay, I will propose that the things in *Ulysses* are actually far from random, recalcitrant, and unassimilable. Instead, many of them play a crucial role in the definition of character and identity. They work as encoders of personal history, everyday partners in action, and resources for the imagination. Bloom, as we come to know him, is co-constituted with his things, and they help give his character continuity, solidity, and verisimilitude. I will argue, further, that we, as readers, intuitively appreciate this accomplishment in *Ulysses*, because it is closely akin to the way in which we constitute our own identities in the context of the material world. Joyce's grasp of the relationship between the human and the material engages realism in a fundamental way by drawing on the material grounding of actual human identity.

### *Reading the Things in "Ithaca"*

Before I develop that argument, I should note that not all critics have thrown up their hands, when it comes to determining the significance of the things in "Ithaca." Some have proposed that the very intractability of the material in that chapter speaks to the individual's experience of alienation in the modern world. For example, Leo Bersani sees expressed in Leopold Bloom's material environment a profound solitude that goes beyond the character's marital estrangement and social marginality to reflect "a kind of cosmic lack of linkage, a singleness that can be rendered only by images of his floating in interplanetary space" (2004: 226). Bersani believes that the recitation of objects in "Ithaca" expresses a profound and essential disconnection:

It is the relentlessly tedious 'Ithaca,' with its nearly unreadable 'scientific' expositions of such things as the many uses and virtues of water, and the recent restrictions on water consumption in Dublin (when Bloom turns on a faucet), which, precisely because of the impersonality of its technique, becomes a kind of Pascalian meditation on the lack of connectedness not only between human beings but also between the human and the cosmos (Bersani, 2004: 226-227).

Fredric Jameson identifies this lack of connectedness as the "fundamental experience of the modern or of modernity... something like a dissociation between meaning and existence" (1993: 147). In modern living, things lose their meaning, and there is, for both the worker and the consumer, "increasing separation, under capitalism... between the subject and the object" (Jameson, 1993: 157). The problem this poses for modern fiction, Jameson remarks, is that:

There is something like a crisis of detail, in which we may, in the course of our narrative, need a house for our characters to sleep in, a room in which they may converse, but nothing is there any longer to justify our choice of this particular house rather than that other, or this particular room, furniture, view, and the like (Jameson, 1993: 147).

The "substantiality of character, of the individual ego" is thereby swept away in "Ithaca" in a deluge of physical things (Jameson, 1993: 153). In the end, Jameson suggests, the subject of Bloom is merely a dream dreamed up by his own things. In a similar vein, Jennifer Wicke finds that Bloom is largely "a subject formed by advertising" for consumer products (Wicke, 1988: 130). It is small consolation that he is "a practiced advertising subject" (Wicke, 1988: 133) who can produce his own personal narratives based on ad copy; "the constantly unfurling 'stream of consciousness' that is Bloom's narrative style is largely made up of his 'mind' wending its way through the eddies, currents, and shorelines of advertising or advertised goods" (Wicke, 1993: 130). Wicke concludes, "Individual identities are fictions, being comprised, as they are, of shared pieces of the host language" of advertising (Wicke, 1993: 148).

Douglas Mao finds more broadly that the generalization and abstraction that are hallmarks of modernity threaten to obliterate the essential individuality of both subjects and objects:

The reading of the discrete thing as representative or symptom of anything other than itself, that is, could become unsettling to the degree that it seemed to partake of the subordination of individuals (humans and objects) to system, a process that for the modernists as for their Romantic predecessors represented the essential direction of modernity at its most destructive (Mao, 1998: 6-7).

Even so, Mao sees, more hopefully, a potential for recovery of individuality. This hope rests in the sentimental engagement that is evident in Bloom's tour of the things in his house:

... the catechistical form of 'Ithaca' in some measure distances the reader from the scene, introducing a dose of the modernist irony Joyce cannot do without; yet the ultimate effect of the arcane and stilted exchanges is neither to mime some alienation on Bloom's part nor to render us contemptuous of his bric-a-brac. It is, rather, to evoke in us something of Bloom's feeling for the things around him (Mao, 2011: 39).

Mao concedes that many of the items inventoried in "Ithaca" support daily living; nevertheless, "the objects exert their principal claim on Bloom's attention and on that of Joyce's reader via their sentimental values" (Mao, 2011: 39). Sentimentality arises in connection with things "stripped of practical force by their removal from the circuits of exchange and use" (Mao, 2011: 40), and it is marked by "a defiance of instrumentality" (Mao, 2011: 57). As reflected in Bloom's musing over objects associated with his father's decline, his daughter's childhood, and earlier and better days with his wife, sentimentality attaches to things of the past and present, and "resists the forward movement of time and looks with unhappiness on the change that makes old things cease to be" (Mao, 2011: 44). However, the infusing of things with personal history also enables, in a shift both from memory to imagination and from the past to an idealized future,

the detailed narration of Bloom's utopian fantasies, including his explication in the chapter of the personal paradise of Bloom Cottage. As Mao remarks, "the sentimentalized image of the known provides a point of stability amid the nebulousness of utopia, a foothold for the imagination in the country of the unimaginable" (Mao, 2011: 55). In this way, the material provides affective linkages between "memories of things Bloom had once... descriptions of things he has now... [and] dreams of things he might have someday" (Mao, 2011: 49). More modestly, the sentiment that attaches itself to memory-charged objects in his home also offers a basis for more practical and attainable aspirations, as when remembrances of teaching his daughter using a mantel clock and a stuffed owl prompt musings about pedagogical possibilities for his wife Molly and new friend Stephen Dedalus.

Sentimentality, then, offers one alternative reading to the critics' alienation thesis. Another is seeing a role for things in Joyce's long-running project to find "epiphany" in the experience of ordinary living and everyday observation (Budgen, 2004 (1934)). Declan Kiberd comments, "Joyce... believed that by recording the minutiae of a single day, he could release those elements of the marvellous [sic] latent in ordinary living, so that the familiar might astonish" (Kiberd, 2009: 11). Steven Connor expands:

Joyce... had a preoccupation with the capture of the indefinite definiteness of the here and now, which he called 'epiphany.' The Joycean idea of epiphany involves the interfusion of the finite and the infinite, or an eruption of the eternal in the temporal, and his practice tends toward the attempt, not to show the godly in the momentary, as though a screen were suddenly made transparent to a blazing light behind it, as to show the radiance of the moment itself, untransfigured, but lifted into itself (Connor, 2014: 194).

Litz joins Mao, Kiberd, and Connor in discerning more than alienation in the things of "Ithaca." Litz finds in Joyce's "encyclopaedic detail... the epic impact of overmastering fact" (Litz, 1974: 387). In that detail we can read an essential code to Bloom himself:

... 'the dry rock pages of Ithaca' are supersaturated with Bloom's humanity, a humanity that is enhanced by the impersonality of the prose... Once again, in the contrast between the apparent coldness of the episode's form and its actual human effects, we are confronted with a paradox to be solved (Litz, 1974: 393).

Resolving this paradox in which things, so starkly represented in "Ithaca," speak to the humanity and individuality of Leopold Bloom calls for examining in ontological terms the relationship between the human and the material. This will take us beyond modern alienation, beyond the grounding of identity in commodities, and even beyond sentimental attachment to consider how, in a fundamental way, *to look at Bloom's things is to look at Bloom himself.*

#### *Toward a Phenomenology of Things in Fiction*

The alienation that some literary critics see reflected in the things of *Ulysses* relies on the Cartesian premise that subjects and objects are fundamentally separate. When one accepts that separation, the individual, represented by the character of Bloom, must somehow be brought together with the things around him. However, it is a signal failure of modernity that such reconciliation is no longer possible. The effect, at its worse, is a dissolution and a dispersion of the subject himself, who becomes a dream dreamed up by his own things, or a mere effect of advertising discourse. Joyce, such critics conclude, is therefore depicting that failure in "Ithaca" through the tedious and scientific listings that resist conventional assimilation into the narrative. By contrast, critics who see in Bloom's things an emotional investment grounded in personal history or the more transcendent experience of epiphany offer a kind of pre-modern reconciliation between subject and object. Nevertheless, for those critics the separation between subject and object still remains a starting point.

But *what if the premise is the problem?* In entertaining that question, we begin with Douglas Mao, who paraphrases Wyndam Lewis' contemporary critique of Joyce (and Henry James) in this way:

Taking their cue from Flaubert, James and Joyce cram their fictions with solid objects, but since these objects come explicitly mediated through particular consciousness, the total effect of their works... will be to undermine the solidity of the perceived world (Mao, 1998: 107).

Turning the critique back on Lewis, we might ask whether mediation, rather than solidity, is actually the point, when it comes to understanding the role of those "solid objects" in Joyce's storytelling. For his part, Mao remarks how in "Ithaca" the "traces of the inhabitant are imprinted on the interior" (Mao, 2011: 43). Steven Connor, meanwhile, identifies a kind of absorption taking place in Bloom's experience of the other, including the things around him. In such an engagement with otherness, Bloom becomes "enlarged" and "pluralized" (Connor, 1992: 205). Umberto Eco takes the point further by suggesting that Bloom and the bits and pieces of Dublin he encounters really become one and the same, along an indistinct boundary between the two:

In the flow of overlapping perceptions during Bloom's walk through Dublin, the boundaries between 'inside' and 'outside,' between how Bloom endures Dublin and how Dublin acts on him, become very indistinct (quoted in Wicke, 1988: 140).

Ariel Freedman, then, makes explicit the challenge to the Cartesian separation between character and the material in narrative:

... in touch there is no subject and no object... but instead a contact zone that evades binary categorization. For this reason, Joyce's realism rejects a singular omniscience in favor of a representation of the world mediated through a plurality of senses... [Bloom's] speculation, like the work of Joyce as a novelist, extends the boundaries of his own ego by containing multitudes (Freedman, 2009: 465-466).

In summary, the things in *Ulysses* are more than props or tools for characters, and character is more than a motivating factor for the inclusion of certain things. Instead, there is an inescapable identity between the two, a kind of co-

constitution that requires the author to create the subject and the subject's things as part of a unified whole.

As noted, Freedman claims that this co-constitution helps to produce realism in Joyce's storytelling. However, setting fiction aside for a moment, isn't it actually more realistic to say that an individual's identity is a matter of the boundaries drawn around it? Isn't identity a product of the many acts of exclusion that permit the individual to declare what is "I" versus "not I"? In fact, a twentieth-century phenomenologist would likely have answered "no" to these questions. One of the phenomenologists' central projects was to unwind the subject-object premise. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, for example, gave this example of a soccer player and his relationship to the equipment and spaces of his sport:

For the player in action the football field is not an 'object'... The field itself is *not given to him*, but present as the immanent term of his practical intentions; the player *becomes one with it* and feels the direction of the 'goal,' for example, just as immediately as the vertical and the horizontal planes of his own body. It would not be sufficient to say that consciousness inhabits this milieu. At this moment *consciousness is nothing other than the dialectic of milieu and action*. Each maneuver undertaken by the player modifies the character of the field and establishes in it new lines of force in which the action in turn unfolds and is accomplished, again altering the phenomenal field (Merleau-Ponty, 1963: 168-169, emphases added).

More recently, Bruno Latour has declared that, "things do not exist without being full of people" (Latour, 2000: 10). We might say, further, that people do not exist without being full of things, since, as Latour explains, "Consider things, and you will have humans. Consider humans, and you are by that very act interested in things" (Latour, 2000: 20).

This essential materiality of the human condition implies that what we commonly take as the distinctive categories of mind and matter, human and material, are secondary constructs that emerge from a relational ontology centered on activities and practices (Graves-Brown, 2000). As such, individual



human subjects are defined "not by some autonomous essence but by the specific networks in which they participate" (Pyyhtinen and Tamminen, 2011: 137). Thinking and feeling subjects, accordingly, cannot be recognized apart from the myriad extensions that bind them to their bodies and to the larger world (Johnson, 1987; Varela et al., 1991).

Returning to Joyce's fiction, we can begin to see how this co-constitution of character and the material works, when Joyce has us occupy the character of Leopold Bloom in "Ithaca." When Bloom returns home from his epic day in Dublin, we grasp through his internal monologue how home is familiar because of its distinctive and remembered spaces and things. Were it not for these, home, as Jameson tries to argue, could be any place at all. Home is furnished with functional artifacts and technologies that make it possible for Bloom to act, in a practical way, as a home-maker – doors, locks, faucets, chairs, kettles, cups, and so on. However, making a place called home is more than exercising practical knowledge. The things we read about in "Ithaca" also evoke family history, prompt recitations of scientific facts, and spur the imagination. Without these things, the Leopold Bloom we follow through the novel could not exist. He could not create himself through his internal dialogue, nor could Joyce have created him. In "Ithaca" Joyce invites us to see this continuing act of creation in Bloom's tour around his house, as some items provide means to get things done, items out of place provoke speculation and commentary, and still other items evoke memories or fantasies. The imagination of fictional character, therefore, is an imagination of the material.

Steven Connor, in fact, has called this accomplishment the *material imagination*. The material imagination is:

a specifically material or finite kind of imagination, an imagination that performs the traditional duty of taking us beyond the merely given or present at hand but does so in ways that seem designed to keep us on terms with its materiality, even as that materiality is something still to be imagined (Connor, 2014: 8).

This means that the material imagination has a double aspect. It is not just the imagination of some world in material terms. It is also the dependence of the imagination itself on the familiar, everyday vocabulary of bodies and spaces and materials. The imagination, however fantastic its adventures might be, is bound to the essential materiality of the human condition. As Connor concisely states, "the phrase 'material imagination' must signify the materiality of imagining as well as the imagination of the material" (Connor, 2004: 41). This means, further, that the material imagination is not the privileged capability of the novelist, but instead comprises "the ways in which the material world is imagined by everyone, all the time, not just scientists, but also poets, children, cultural analysts, cabdrivers, medics and Mad Hatters" (Connor, 2004: 40).

This last observation is a crucial one. It helps to explain how all of those things in "Ithaca" help *Ulysses* speak realistically to us, as readers. The novelist's imagination is closely akin to how we imagine ourselves as distinct and unique individuals in an inescapably material world.

### *Conclusion*

In one passage in "Ithaca," Bloom imagines himself on an interstellar voyage as he ponders the stars in his backyard. Bersani takes this episode as further evidence of Bloom's alienation from modern existence, and as a comment on our own victimization by modernity. However one might interpret Bloom's relationship to distant elements in the cosmos, when he returns upon reentry to the things in his living room, on the mantle, and in the drawers, these items clearly reaffirm his thorough-going interpenetration with material life.

In the on-going reproduction of our own identities as non-fictional beings, we share this fundamental materiality with Bloom, as we do with other well-written characters of fiction. Joyce's deep respect for the details, so apparent in "Ithaca," therefore challenges us to bring a more discerning eye to the

representations of material things in fiction. If we can accomplish this, we will be less tempted to find the *things* in stories to be tedious and unreadable, as Bersani suggests, or random, recalcitrant, and unassimilable, as Lawrence claims. Furthermore, we will hesitate before choosing the now easy and well-worn path of modernist critique and concluding that the material and human have become fundamentally estranged (per Jameson), lost to particularity in the relentless abstraction and generalization of systems (Mao), or mere adjuncts of consumerization (Wicke). It may help us to consider how sentiment reconnects things to characters (per Mao), or how things express the individuality at the heart of humanity (Litz), or how the material is integral to Joyce's own concept of epiphany as the immanence of the eternal in the everyday (Kiberd, Connor). However, Joyce challenges us to go farther than this and regard the identity of character as indispensably fused with the material (Connor, Eco, Freedman), in a manner that parallels the phenomenologist's position on the material extensibility of the actual human self.

In Leopold Bloom, Joyce creates a fictional character who creates himself through practical and imaginary engagement with the things around him. In Bloom's things, then, we see Bloom himself. If we begin to read the potency of things in this way, we can open up passages into a deeper understanding of human character and identity, both fictional and real.

### References

Bersani, Leo. 2004. "Against *Ulysses*," in Derek Attridge (ed.), *James Joyce's Ulysses: A Casebook*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, UK, 201-229.

Budgen, Frank. 2004 (1934). "Conversations with Joyce," in Derek Attridge (ed.), *James Joyce's Ulysses: A Casebook*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, UK, 257-266.

Connor, Steven. 1992. *Theory and Cultural Value*, Blackwell, Oxford, UK & Cambridge, MA.

Connor, Steven. 2004. *The Book of Skin*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, New York.

Connor, Steven. 2014. *Beckett, Modernism and the Material Imagination*, Cambridge University Press, New York.

Freedman, Ariela. 2009. "Skindeep Ulysses," *James Joyce Quarterly*, 46: 3-4, 455-468.

Graves-Brown, P.M. 2000. "Introduction," in *Matter, Materiality, and Modern Culture*, P.M. Graves-Brown (ed.), Routledge, London, 1-9.

Jameson, Fredric R. 1993. "Ulysses in history," in M.T. Reynolds (ed.), *James Joyce: A Collection of Critical Essays*, Prentice Hall, Englewood Cliffs, NJ.

Johnson, M. 1987. *The Body in the Mind: The Bodily Basis of Meaning, Imagination, and Reason*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago.

Joyce, James. 1986. *Ulysses, the Gabler Edition*, Vintage Books, New York.

Kiberd, Declan. 2009. *Ulysses and Us: The Art of Everyday Life in Joyce's Masterpiece*, W.W. Norton & Company, New York.

Latour, B. 2000. "The Berlin Key or How to Do Words with Things," in *Matter, Materiality, and Modern Culture*, P.M. Graves-Brown (ed.), Routledge, London, 2000, 10-21.

Lawrence, Karen. 1981. *The Odyssey of Style in Ulysses*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ

Litz, A. Walton. 1974. "Ithaca," in C. Hart and D. Hayman (eds.), *James Joyce's Ulysses: Critical Essays*, University of California Press, Berkeley.

Mao, Douglas. 1998. *Solid Objects: Modernism and the Test of Production*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ.

Mao, Douglas. 2011. "Arcadian Ithaca," *European Joyce Studies*, 21, 30-58.

Merleau-Ponty, M. 1963 (1942). *The Structure of Behavior*, A.L. Fisher (trans.), Beacon Press, Boston.

Pyyhtinen, O., and Tamminen, S. 2011. "We have never been only human: Foucault and Latour on the question of the *anthropos*," *Anthropological Theory* (11), 147-148.

Varela, F.J., Thompson, E., and Rosch, E. 1991. *The Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and Human Experience*, MIT Press Cambridge, MA.

Wicke, Jennifer. 1988. *Advertising Fictions*, Columbia University Press, New York.