

JENNIFER WICKE

Joyce and consumer culture

‘My consumers are they not my producers?’

James Joyce, *Finnegans Wake*

James Joyce’s writing is famously, notoriously difficult, especially his two epic works, *Ulysses*, sometimes described as the book everyone claims to have read but no one actually has, and *Finnegans Wake*, whose difficulties have led to innumerable reading groups formed for the sometimes lifelong task of reading and puzzling over the book, a page or two at a time. A famous photograph of Marilyn Monroe exhibits the paradox of Joyce’s fame as a writer, coupled with the complexities of his writing: Monroe, wearing a swimsuit, sits in a park absorbed in *Ulysses*. The contradictory conjunction of movie star with great book in the picture is worth, as they say, at least a thousand words – how could the icon of mass celebrity culture, and a supposed ‘dumb blonde’ to boot, undertake the reading of the twentieth century’s supreme work of high literature? It turns out that Marilyn Monroe did succeed in reading at least parts of the book, and the fact that she wanted to make the effort says as much for the celebrity of Joyce and his novel as it does for the intellectual aspirations of the star. In fact, the paradox of the photograph lies not its seeming encounter between opposite poles of modern culture, but in its proof that James Joyce’s rarefied literary works are also themselves artifacts of mass culture. Any reader or student approaching them for the first time has Marilyn Monroe as an inspiration, and as quirky evidence that Joyce’s writing, like Joyce the author, is as much a part of mass culture or consumer culture as we all are.

The many invaluable skeleton keys to the allusions and literary references in *Ulysses*, to take Joyce’s major work of mass culture as an example, imply that an encyclopaedic knowledge of Western literary culture is a prerequisite for reading and even dimly understanding this great novel and totemic book. The intimidation factor in approaching any of Joyce’s writing, except perhaps the stories that make up *Dubliners*, is extremely high. But it is just as true to say that fresh readers (or re-readers) of *Ulysses* go into the book’s world with a skeleton key already in hand – their knowledge of the rhythms, the media, the forces, the pleasures, and the pains of

mass culture and consumer society. Before even cracking open the book, its modern readers are already connoisseurs and critics of Joyce's primary world of allusion, the wide nets his book tosses out to draw in the flotsam and jetsam of modern mass culture, of an everyday life comprised of shopping, ads, mass entertainment, posters, fashion, spectacle, news, and the information bombarding us from multiple public sources. Joyce's consuming subject, or in other words the subject matter that consumed him as a writer, was the replication in the very words of his art of this new modern world of mass culture. His task is to render it visible in all its energies, its splendours, and its miseries, too. A famous character in a Molière play is surprised and delighted to discover that just by talking in ordinary sentences all his life, he has been speaking 'prose' – he had thought prose was a rhetorical genre as mystified as 'poetry', and as beyond his grasp. While no one would deny the complexity of James Joyce's literary universe, it is also true that in a sense we know how to speak its language, or at least one of its major tongues – the mass cultural language of consumer subjects – because we have been speaking it all our lives. Joyce's textual world is not hermetic, elitist, arcane, or removed from everyday life: it draws from it and transforms it, without ever abandoning it. In another context, responding to criticism of the circus as a no more than tawdry example of mass culture and the epitome of its false spectacle, the writer Jean Genet replied 'its sawdust is gold dust'. Joyce's writing translates the textures or sawdust of mass culture in an alchemy whereby its gold dust becomes literary coinage. In this sense, Joyce is not the Olympian modernist writer paring his fingernails atop a mountain of literary complexity: he is instead one of us, a bread and circus man *par excellence*.

That mass, commodity culture is one of Joyce's major subjects has come to be critically acknowledged, as our own critical awareness of and obsession with consumption has increased. The imbrication of *Dubliners* and *A Portrait*, of *Ulysses* and even *Finnegans Wake* in a material world awash in the detritus of consumer objects and the subjectivity of the everyday universe of consumption is now evident. Many things follow from this recasting of our regard, and the decision to take it as important that these texts are extravagantly interlaced with consumer minutiae – not the least what critical paths we then choose to take through Joyce's texts. At this stage of discovery, however, the approach to consumption is still inevitably filtered through long-standing theories of consumer culture, the status of the commodity, and commodity consciousness, or recent theories of those now pressing issues. It will be all the more useful to look at Joyce's texts not just as sites for the application of currently interesting rubrics like 'commodity fetish' but as spaces with privileged access to mass culture. In other words, new things

can be learned about the matrix of consumer society by reading Joyce, if these texts are seriously held to have the issue of consumption at their root. Joyce and by extension his writings understand things about the mysteries of mass culture and of how consuming works that we still haven't completely figured out. If we think of consumer culture as simply 'popular', or 'fun', or even more strongly, as 'junk' or 'trash' to be feared, we will be blind to the rich weaving of the mass cultural Joyce's writing makes. The topics of consumption and mass culture must be framed as philosophically, aesthetically, and politically grand and significant enough to warrant such attention: after all, the culture of consumption *is* the culture of modernity.

What consumers consume in modern society are commodities – that's why 'commodity culture' is often a substitute phrase for mass culture. Commodity is a word that describes something bought and sold in a market economy, but the 'commodity form', as Karl Marx delineated it in a definition that has stood the test of time and history, what makes commodities different from ordinary objects, is their arbitrary relationship to one another. Commodities are exchanged on the market for a value determined by their relationship to other commodities, not to any intrinsic worth or 'usefulness'. The commodity system allows for the exchange of goods, services, and money interchangeably, with all of these pegged to their market value, not to any inherent value each may have. Marx also noted that this commodification process extends, in a capitalist economy, to human beings as well. The value of the work that people could do would need, in a mass society, to be turned into a commodity also, an abstraction that covers over the human element in the exchange of commodities. To take one small example from Joyce, in *Ulysses* Leopold Bloom's daughter Milly takes a brand-new kind of job in the entertainment industry, working in a photographic shack at a seaside resort where her prettiness is a commodity used to lure young men on vacation to have a snapshot made of themselves standing on the beach with her, Milly, in a daring bathing costume. Everyone in a consumer society to some extent turns their labour power – even if it consists in having a cute face and a good figure – into a commodity they then exchange for a wage or payment. As will be discussed below, Joyce by no means deplures commodity culture, just as he does not repudiate mass culture (which is a subset of the former), in part because the personal and economic alternatives to be found in past and recent Irish history are in many cases worse: feudalism, slavery, colonial oppression, or underdevelopment. Nonetheless, Joyce is among the first modern writers to link the commodity form with modernity, and to give it a face and a name.

Mass media forms such as journalism, lithography, photography, advertising, film, audio-recording, and ultimately radio distributed the knowledge

of what and how to consume to the mass public, so much so that all the new industries of media technology, entertainment and information were intimately bound up in the formation of modern culture. Every aspect of mass culture and media technology makes an appearance across the spectrum of Joyce's writing, from newspapers, magazines, gramophones, silent films, newsreels, telephones, telegraphy, and photo studios in the earlier works to radio and even an intimation of television in *Finnegans Wake*. More so than any other modernist writer, Joyce not only acknowledged that modern literature was intertwined with mass culture and mass media, but saw that the older media technology of the book was capable of encompassing newer media within its covers – not by ignoring mass culture or shutting it out, or worse, repudiating it, but by exploring its furthest reaches.

What may be called the 'GPI' factor in Joyce's writing, his emphasis on the insanely general paralysis of Ireland as a simultaneously underdeveloped and overdeveloped (culturally exploited) country, finds some of its thrust in the attempt to render Ireland modern, linguistically if in no other way. Joyce's story 'Eveline', in *Dubliners*, makes explicit the ways that mass culture and a consumer society were among the few wedges of potential freedom or at least self-transformation available in turn-of-the-century Dublin. Eveline turns away at the last moment from her only chance to escape the grim realities of her life for what might, presumably, be a better and happier life across the ocean – in Buenos Aires, no less, where she has been invited by the sailor she loves. Tickets purchased, waiting in line for departure, Eveline famously lets Frank go; as he implores her to board the ship, she ceases to see him, and turns back. Throughout the short story Eveline has been rehearsing her escape, essentially grasping at the modern, by her intersections with the version of mass culture on offer in Dublin. All these rehearsals occur within the spaces of mass culture – in the department store, at the amusement grounds, in the popular theatre, listening to gramophone music and to popular songs. These exposures to the wider world are filtered in every case through media, consumption, and commodities. The alternatives for Eveline are the horrors of her homelife, her work as an unpaid slavey and possibly sexual slave for her father, and the blighted demographics of a Dublin where it was almost impossible to expect to find a man to marry. What holds Eveline back at the ship's railing is the deathly psychic grip of her domestic tomb, cretonned with dust, where her father holds sway over the encroachments of mass culture as modernity – he even found the low-tech organ grinder's music playing outside the windows of his wife's death-bed an occasion for a xenophobic slur against 'foreign' music. Eveline's entry into the mass cultural with both feet would figure her modernity and her escape, not just from her father and her loneliness, but as a figure for, almost a ship's

figurehead for, the vanishing potential for an Irish modernity and an escape from colonization.

Eveline's vanishing horizon of expectations is cruelly gendered by the demands on her for endless housekeeping, for accepting patriarchal violence without a murmur, and for having her only hope of earthly salvation come floating in to her in the form of a possible husband. All of these strictures are connected, though, with either the limitations a colonial violence has imposed, or with the exacerbations of religious proscription it has induced. The irony in Eveline's miniature tragedy is that her desires and hopes are channelled to her through mass cultural, in other words metropolitan, and ultimately British colonial, means. But this is partly what Joyce thinks are the contradictions of Irish history, and its mixed hopes for independence. For Ireland to become a modern nation, it will have to decolonize its mind, in the phrase made famous by the Kenyan writer Ngugi wa-Thiong'o. Eveline is an example of how hard that will be to accomplish: through no fault of her own, her mind can barely find any uncolonized surface. Many readers of Joyce's *Dubliners* and of 'Eveline' in particular adopt an anti-consumer mentality that is foreign to Joyce's writing, and propose a moralistic interpretation of the story that faults Eveline for her pathetic romantic notions, brought to her courtesy of the demon mass culture. To look at mass culture and consumer society in the more complex and richly interwoven way Joyce does, however, is to see that Eveline's mind, and also that of the Irish public, will need to deploy the techniques, tactics, and textures of modernity most often supplied to the society by mass culture. It is possible to claim that the sailor Frank in Joyce's story doesn't exist, except in Eveline's fevered mind, or it is possible to believe he exists but that his intentions are evil, that perhaps he intends to ship off Eveline to Buenos Aires not to marry him but to work in a brothel, the same form of 'white slavery' now experienced by untold thousands of Eastern European women. Buenos Aires was historically a centre for the importation of Irish women and girls whose poverty made them vulnerable to sexual exploitation, and Eveline's shrinking back at the end of the tale may be a *frisson* of terror that is fully justified by historical precedent. She might have been on the verge of a commodity exchange much more serious than Milly's stint as a 'photo girl'. No matter which interpretation of the ending we prefer, or both, since the ending is indeterminate, Eveline's poising on the cusp of escape and falling back is not a moral failure on her part. What she shares with her fellow Dubliners is a failure of imagination, a direct result of an entombing culture. For Eveline, for Ireland at the time, the siren songs of mass culture can never be played too loudly. They make the familiar strange, and raise the imagination quotient necessary to throw off the mental shackles of GPI.

As critical fashions alter, and as other modes of inquiry arrive at a perhaps temporary exhaustion, increasing attention to the material concerns so evident in Joyce's work have emerged, and it has served to shift the perception of *Ulysses*, for example, from a monument of aesthetic erudition to a dynamically social text. In line with these preoccupations a new concentration on what could loosely be called the features of the marketplace, or modernity under the sign of capitalism, or of the forces of social exchange, has also been discernible. Among the facets of the critical diamond are advertising, fashion, and consumption as a practice and a state of mind. Whether issuing from the right or the left, the primary tenor of theories of consumption is distinctly negative. On the one, that is, the right, hand, consumption is a fallen if eminently necessary social process, which is mercifully refined out of existence in the rarefied circles of art and culture – *Ulysses*, for example, can be held up as an artifact impervious to the deprivations of mass culture and rigorously defiant of consumption, having made itself unconsumable, the veritable proof of its artistic merit. The left hand of this argument doesn't require that texts attain a purity unsullied by signs of traffic with social relations, since the assumption is that texts arise from social contexts, or are social contexts themselves, but consumption arrives equally tainted in this arena, because it is the very marker of ideological control and the very symbol of capitalism's incursions into art and culture.

With advertising, the scenario is even worse, since the suspicion that ads originate out of commodity exchange is essentially correct. Ads are not, however, individually responsible as artifacts for the social arrangements of late capitalism. Ads do not cause barter, cottage industries, or pastoral communities to vanish; their existence certainly does bear witness to and furthers the inexorable encroachments of a capitalist social process, but ads are also a human creation subject to manifold private and collective uses. The horror of social inequity and violent hegemony is to some extent writ small in ads; when they are read as singular artifacts, as individual texts, their 'messages' can indeed be nightmarishly negative – misogynist, racist, imperialist, domestic, corporate, and so on. That isn't, however, how ads are read in social reading, where they are invariably multiple, intertextual, incomplete, tentative, and provisional as a collective desire mechanism.

No one better understood the social reading of advertisement than James Joyce. *Ulysses* deploys both real ads and invented ads within itself, always with an eye, though, to advertising as a practice, a multi-dimensional space for cultural creation allied, of course, with the goal of market exchange. Ads float free of this rootedness in the commodity, however, as the throwaway ad embodies so well. Joyce sets individual ads floating down the river of his text as if they were bubbles of modernity – inscribing the text with its material

present-ness, as the circulation of ads does in everyday life. Joyce comprehends how the implicit 'ideology' of ads necessarily floats freely, becoming unmoored from its social context and entering the imaginary space of a potentially altering social reading.

What happens 'between' *Dubliners* and *Ulysses*? The scrupulous meanness of the realist depiction of Irish modernity in the former collection gives way to the textual farrago, with actual interpenetration of advertising, mass market fiction, and the like, in the latter, modernist *Ulysses*. One way to answer the question is to see *Ulysses* as a species of advertisement in its own right, an advertisement of the very modernity of under-modernized colonial Ireland as it moves to a post-colonial status. *Dubliners* makes use of the literary genre of realism to sequester its allegorical impulses – the stories collected under the rubric of *Dubliners* may look like strictly realist depictions, but they are allegories of everyday life in Dublin, using the material details of description to produce a cumulative effect of repetitive intensity. *Ulysses* makes use of the emblematic mode of advertisement to produce its historical and literary effects. This may seem to be an unwelcome revisionary claim – a bad thing to say about *Ulysses* and a crude way of knocking it off its high art perch – if advertising is thought of as essentially a label put on a commodity. Advertising, however, considerably exceeds this role, and in the abstract sense approaches the auratic power of other discourses Joyce revered, among them religion and literature.

Take the House of Key(e)s ad that so dominates the 'Aeolus' chapter, at least in terms of Bloom's peregrinations. Bloom's link to Joyce as an author should be accepted quite literally in this instance. Bloom after all invents the political pun on the Isle of Man and its independent parliament he will try to recapitulate in the ad for Alexander Keyes's wine shop, by wittily seeing that the emblem for the parliament, the crossed keys, would make a vivid and politically arousing symbol for a shop named after its owner, Keyes. Advertising allows for these unexpected cross-over points, because it uses all the rhetorical facility of language to memorably name human exchanges. At bottom, the ad will represent the wine shop and will try, of course, to stimulate people to come into said wine shop. The new wine in the old linguistic bottle of Keyes is the reference, slightly veiled, to the crossed keys and their political symbology. Joyce draws a comparison between the literary procedures of Bloom as ad man and Joyce's political procedures as literary man. Ads are constellations of desire; prise them apart, recirculate them, translate them, and they signal a transubstantiation devoutly to be wished. Wishing is part of the game – decolonizing the mind has to do with the articulation of wishes, and their creative enactments. Joyce's entire book works – on only one of its many levels – as if it *were* the Keyes ad.

The shocking conclusion is that Joyce's rewriting of advertising is in some ways also the textual avenue of decolonization, in Joyce's relation to the reading public. Joyce's book is written, as it were, after the fact, or during the fact; it is not a substitute for the complex and violent struggles of individuals and groups, the Easter Rising, the formation of political parties and parliamentary and nationalist parties of several stripes, the historical process of enforcing a partial independence of Ireland. It is asking too much of the book, or any book, to try to make *Ulysses* the harbinger or the instigator of these changes. What *Ulysses* does indubitably participate in, and make, is a material event in Irish culture, in English-language culture, in European culture, whereby high art establishes its modernity by decolonizing mass culture, especially advertisement. *Ulysses* forces us to read our (English-language and European) high art literary heritage through the prism of mass culture, and to read the mass cultural as a transubstantiating discourse exhibiting the aura of the everyday. The book is an advertisement within the precincts of modernist European writing for the astonishing and unexpected modernity of Ireland, for the triumph of the colony, the periphery, as supremely modern, most fashionable, the apogee of the 'mass cultural'. What we also have to read in *Ulysses* is a relation to mass culture, and not just any mass culture, but this specific mass culture, of the city of Dublin, Ireland, colony of Great Britain, circa 1904, and the social readings it produces. To the extent that *Ulysses* advertises the modern, it places us as readers in the position of the public reading: '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' (*U* 17.1770–3).

Ulysses has continued to be the very best advertisement for modernism extant, the colony's perfect revenge. What it advertises is not the glory of British literature, but the velocity of decolonization brought about by the literary imagination, tunnelling from within the English language, and the very wide span a casual vision – or a social reading – can take in.

The antipathy toward consumption at all levels, and the consequent celebration of what is difficult, avant-garde, or modernist as its counterpoint is a prevailing, one might even say the distinctive, feature of contemporary critical thinking in a variety of guises. Often this animus crystallizes in the valorizing of a more authentic, original, or folk culture now eradicated by consumption, or of a working-class culture thought to have more authenticity, or by extolling avant-garde practices precisely for their repudiation of consumptive strategies, in the quite stereotyped vision of what those strategies are thought to be. Even more ironically there is an attempt to recuperate aspects of mass culture as sites of resistance or struggle, with the hidden

assumption that those participating in the consumption in the first place are entirely victimized by their contact with a hegemonic cultural industry enforcing its hierarchies in and through mass cultural schemes. The problems arise when the social analysis proceeds from such a reductive view of consumption, which then obscures consumption's manifold possibilities, political and otherwise. Not the least of the results of this oversight, if perhaps less immediately relevant to many people, is the inability to locate the really majestic foresight of *Ulysses* in its understanding of consumption.

Consumption is a mode of work, that, in contrast to its reputation as the passive, effeminate and mindless side of consciousness and modern social being, is in fact a highly complex social and psychic labour, whose results are often contradictory or ambiguous, but never simply foregone conclusions. Work in this sense is not necessarily the physical labour involved in procuring the object of consumption – which, of course, can be a symbolic object as readily as it is a can of beans on the supermarket shelf or a new lipstick from the department store cosmetics counter – nor only the labour sometimes required to physically transform the objects which enter our lives. Instead, this work may signify the time of possession, a particular context of presentation as a gift or as memorabilia, or the incorporation of a single object into a stylistic array that is used then to express the creator's place in relation to others similarly accoutred. The object is transformed by its intimate association with a particular individual or social group, or by the relationship between these, and such transformations are the work of consumption. This is not to say, of course, that all objects are or can be consumed in some transformational way; without question, there are networks of commodities deployed in powerfully oppressive ways, and the estrangements and refractions occasioned by that oppression are only too evident as the backdrop and even the substance of daily life. However, assigning an intrinsic negativity to the commodity, and an equally mordant and inescapable pathos to consumption, has highly reductive effects on how we gauge the social world and the possibilities inherent in it.

To move back to textual terrain is to find *Ulysses* in some senses anticipating this quest for another means of qualifying the social relations of consumption, which are, in modern times, essentially what we call culture. A common approach to *Ulysses*' greatness, or to its quintessential modernism, depending on the style of the critics involved, is to valorize *Ulysses* for its 'dialectic with mass culture', a debate the book wins as it relentlessly reasserts its own imponderable difficulty, its avant-garde or modernist critical edge, and defies consumability. If we consider *Ulysses* to be engaged in another kind of encounter with consumption, however, the boundary lines are not so tidy. *Ulysses* enacts the contradictions of consumption – as a work

meant for consumption that is also about the work consumption entails. *Ulysses* sets up a space, both a physical space (the book) and a temporal space (the time involved in traversing the book), for the consideration of this problem. The either/or insistence so embedded in the high art/mass culture debates which swirl around *Ulysses* is alien to this text, which parades itself as an exemplary work of consumption instead.

Gerty MacDowell is a paradigm text for seeing these two senses of 'work' in action. The circumstances of Gerty's life are pitifully catalogued in 'Nausicaa' – a drunken father, a dead mother, too much household labour to accomplish with too little money, a physical disability exacerbating the dearth of marriageable males, a violent male society surrounding her. Against these limitations she posits a work of consumption that is her own salvation, as much as it is the voice of her nation struggling to be born. Gerty is a national 'heroine' in a certain sense, a heroine of everyday life who keeps going in the face of domestic violence, social invisibility, and colonial repression.

The 'Nausicaa' chapter in which she appears as a character is proving to be as rich as a plum pudding for those who have discovered the relation of Joyce's writing to mass cultural texts, ads, and images. Gerty looks particularly smart in the emperor's new clothes she is allotted – many analyses of her character disdain her or pity her for her so-called entrapment in what they see as an inevitably oppressive web of consumerist images of female beauty, fashion, and romantic fantasy. Gerty's interest in the twilight world of beauty culture is criticized as bad faith or false consciousness; Gerty has succumbed to enslavement by beauty ads, has become a victim of feminine objectification, and, even worse, is seen as allowing her own transformation into a commodity, used and abused by the gazing Leopold Bloom. The logic of this analysis depends on the castigation of consumption as passive enthrallment, as feminine false-consciousness run amok; Gerty's perceived predicament is thought to follow as much from her subtle use of 'eyebrowline' as it does from her unmarried state. This is not the place to go into all the theoretical problems with accounts of the gaze and of the female as object; they become very serious, though, when adherence to a particular notion of the female as commodity and consumption as feminine thralldom intersect to give us a Gerty who is either passive sexual victim to Bloom, removing every grain of her own sexual desire, or the passive victim of a capitalism which foists its cosmetics and its shirtwaists and its unattainable desires off on an equally blank slate of a young woman. These questions are not meant for a moment to evade the harsh omnipresence of gender inequality or the rigid sexual hierarchy obtaining in Dublin then and to some degree now; they are meant to point to the chapter's own vastly more sophisticated treatment of

the gendering of the work of consumption and the forces which come into play in the ambiguities of performing that work. Gerty may be 'penetrated' by an advertising lexicon superimposed on *The Lamplighter's* domesticating prose, but Gerty refashions these items into her own treasured collection. An ungainly term for what happens in consumption, the personal meanings that are invested in an array of consumables that then give them personal, as opposed to exchange, value, is 'recontextualization'. A new context for the array of consumed items or images or experiences is found. The 're-' in recontextualize is the same as the 're-' in representation, the complicated process by which literature reconfigures what it presents. Joyce's practices as an author are not that far off from those of his character Gerty MacDowell: he takes bits and pieces of little value to others and by placing them within an ensemble, renders not only the whole but the parts much greater than their sum. The new context is akin to a florist's wire that allows for a design of blossoms which hides the structure underneath, as if the flowers were floating in air.

The collection of items in her drawer is Gerty's inventory of transformed objects: 'It was there she kept her girlish treasure trove, the tortoiseshell combs, her child of Mary badge, the whiterose scent, the eyebrowline, her alabaster pouncetbox and the ribbons to change when her things came home from the wash and there were some beautiful thoughts written in it in violet ink that she bought in Hely's of Dame Street for she felt that she too could write poetry if she could only express herself like that poem that appealed to her so deeply that she had copied out of the newspaper she found one evening round the potherbs' (*U* 13.638–45). Even the contingency of her having found this evocative poem, in its mass cultural garb, accidentally wrapped around the vegetables is an instance of the unpredictable and self-creating aspects of consumption: Gerty is not merely the frozen victim of an insistent interpellation. The fantasy currents running through her life do not mean pure vicariousness, nor does the mythological world suggested by her chosen reading imply pure illusion. The danger in holding out such a revisionist reading is that it gets emptied of any dialectical complexities, and seems to insinuate that all is well in Gerty's world, or that sexism is not an operant element of Gerty's everyday life, which it clearly is as depicted in the chapter. Gerty is shown recontextualizing the objects of her consumer world, not in order to be objectified as a sexual commodity by Bloom, but to let her world open out into a fantasy scripted by her, and for her, in the cosmetic vocabulary of eyebrowline. She is not taken advantage of by a misogynist Bloom across the strand, she takes advantage of the possibilities for escape and fulfilment, meagre as they are, categorized

for her by the allure of the consumer goods she both incorporates and also rearranges.

‘Come what might she would be wild, untrammelled, free’ (13.673). To deny that Gerty has a tiny moment of liberation, of transcending her limitations in a moment of shared fantasy brought about by mass culture, fashion, and mass fantasy is to impose a sentimentality of our own on the more embracing investigations of the book, where Gerty attains a remarkable persona out of the dribs and drabs of commodities, purple prose, and the desires which animate them. Out of the mere ‘stuff’ of clothing styles, advice on manners, and romantic dreams, Gerty creates a lexicon for overcoming – one that parallels Bloom’s own private lexicon.

Joyce’s writing participates in this unusual evisceration of print culture, makes an end run around advertising as modern language, by incorporating its modernity, and then sucking that modernity out, vampirically extracting the essence of modernity and postulating modernities that supersede or exceed this: the modern-ized text of *Ulysses*. We are most accustomed to this process in the vagaries of fashion, for instance as fashion style is used or deployed by women and/or marginal social groups. In the latter case, a fashion trend might be altered or displaced enough to signal both that the ultra-modernity of that fashion is recognized, but is also superseded by being manipulated for new, striking effects that then surpass its former fashion message, upping the ante of fashionability. Joyce’s *Ulysses* could be said to be a book obsessed with fashion. It has not been sufficiently appreciated as a minute registration of the beating pulse of fashionability, circa 1904. There is a peculiar contradiction involved in claiming this; since Joyce completed *Ulysses* in 1922, the fashions charted so carefully in the book are, by definition, no longer fashionable. What Joyce brings off in the book is a kind of retrieval or exhumation of a vanished fashionability, the dynamic of fashion preserved in the amber of the book. The concern for fashion in the text is neither off-hand nor insignificant; it is a crucial strand of the book, and its invisibility for many critics and readers speaks to our own discomfort with both fashion and consumption. Joyce does not relegate fashion to some benighted level, and *Ulysses* contains more on-the-money descriptions of fashions in clothes, shoes, ties, hats and underwear than any ten realist novels – down to the prices for many of the goods. If Joyce fetishizes fashion, what can be the reasons for this? The lovingly rendered details of an entire fashion realm are central to *Ulysses*, and to fix for a critical moment on the figure of lingerie, or lingerie as figure, may be a helpful entry into fashionability as a literary and material problematic, certainly integral to Joyce’s textual modalities.

Lingerie is a small zone or subset of the immense world of fashionability, one that comes highly charged in our culture, in Joyce, and in our contemporary debates over gender and feminism, and in addressing it one can uncover some of the processes of fashion and of consumption which intersect it, while at the same time respecting the material forces behind Joyce's *Ulysses* which cause it to engage lingerie with such passion and exactitude. The dynamics of lingerie in the book are a carefully orchestrated element in the work's passionate engagement with fashion as a performance of historical (and political) transformation. There is a crucial dovetailing here around the line of gender, since consumption has been articulated most prominently as an analogy to female being, and modern fashion has been coded as the province of female vanity. There is no need to adopt a utopian vision of fashion as entirely liberating in every instance to see that as a cultural dynamic fashion is infinitely more complicated than its assignment to strict sexual hierarchy would allow. The interplay of the fashion pulse with the complexities of consuming styles, of gender creativity, and of historical nuance, bears down upon Joyce's work with signal complication.

'Lingerie does it', Bloom opines, on the beach in the 'Nausicaa' chapter (13.797). He is using a fashion term here, since the word was not in common use at all prior to the turn of the century and the sudden upheaval in women's undergarments, in trying to account for the desirability of women in the very new cultural form of the Mutoscope pictures. 'Do they snapshot those girls or is it all a fake?' Bloom wonders (13.796–7). Here we see lingerie on the precipice of eroticized fashion, as a complexly overdetermined shift in the nature of what women wear underneath their clothes comes to have resonances in a set of new representations. Musing on women in the philosophical aftermath of his climax on the shore, Bloom determines telegraphically that 'fashion part of their charm'. He then delivers a formulation which gets at the heart of a mystery: 'Just changes when you're on the track of the secret' (13.804–5).

The secret is certainly not women's bodies; instead, it is the evanescent logic of fashion, which has an internal 'secret' to reveal, or seems to hold out the possibility of one, just as the fashion transforms and alters. That sense of being forever poised on the edge, on the verge of a revelation, is a fashion dynamic Joyce's text wants to explore, because it is also a mystery of contemporary culture, and a key to the representation of history. Walter Benjamin states in the *Theses on the Philosophy of History*: 'History is the subject of a structure whose site is not homogeneous, empty time, but time filled by the presence of the now [*Jetztzeit*].'¹ Benjamin's emphasis on the 'now', as opposed to the mere present, is emblemized in concrete form by references to fashion: 'Thus, to Robespierre ancient Rome was a

past charged with the time of the now which he blasted out of the continuum of history. The French revolution viewed itself as Rome reincarnate. It evoked ancient Rome the way fashion evokes costumes of the past. Fashion has a flair for the topical, no matter where it stirs in the thickets of long ago . . .’

The flair for the topical is a historical force Joyce also aligns to fashion. Once one becomes alert to it, fashion intelligence is sprayed all over *Ulysses*, a fashionability mediated by the location of Dublin as a metropolitan backwater and a colonially underdeveloped nation. In spite of this, or perhaps precisely because of that impetus, fashion is important to the text and to the world of its language. Dublin and its citizens cannot hope to compete in any fashion sweepstakes, where the acknowledged centre would be Paris and the runner up would be London. Still, the absence of fashion would in some sense mean the absence of modernity, the absence of time, the absence of urban life. Fashion in this reading supplies some of the dynamic that the straitened political and social conditions of colonization and abject poverty would otherwise militate against. Moreover, fashion encodes a ‘now-ness’ with special resonance in a colonized setting, as that now summons up both a pressing past and a horizon of futurity, a future with the explosive potential of transformation. Is fashion in *Ulysses* a form of resistance? That would be too univocal a reading in many respects, and would ignore the temporal complexities of a book whose ‘now’ is a shifting one; nonetheless, scenting fashion on the wind is an activity Joyce’s text shares with its depiction of the denizens of Dublin, most of them women, who care about fashion and make sacrifices to be fashionable, not out of mere ‘vanity’, but because fashion is a kind of compact with modernity.

Gerty’s underwear occupies a significant amount of her time, since it has passed over from the limbo of pure necessity to the more articulated world of fashion; Gerty’s adoption of a chaste form of lingerie is one of the many fashion choices with which she makes a world.

As for undies they were Gerty’s chief care and who that knows the fluttering hopes and fears of sweet seventeen (though Gerty would never see seventeen again) can find it in his heart to blame her? She had four dinky sets with awfully pretty stitchery, three garments and nighties extra, and each set slotted with different coloured ribbons, rosepink, pale blue, mauve and peagreen, and she aired them herself and blued them when they came home from the wash and ironed them and she had a brickbat to keep the iron on because she wouldn’t trust those washerwomen as far as she’d see them scorching the things. She was wearing the blue for luck, hoping against hope, her own colour and the lucky colour too for a bride to have a bit of blue somewhere on her . . .

(13.171–9)

These are items of clothing never seen by anyone but Gerty, if we discount the sighting made by Bloom of an edge of knicker, but they set up a force field which invests Gerty's entire world. So powerful is the underlying sense of lingerie, and having the right lingerie, that Gerty even attributes her aborted love affair with the boy next door to her having worn the green-ribboned ones and having failed to put a pair of old underwear on over them inside out, a superstitious practice she knows works 'so long as it wasn't of a Friday' (13.186-7).

We can stand back from this and say with hindsight that Gerty was wasting her time, rinsing out those undies with bluing and bad faith, as they led her to overestimate her chances in the iffy Dublin marriage market. On the other hand, to sweep away the meaning quotient of Gerty's consumption is to do equal violence to her world and her strategies. Her consumption of this narrow array of goods is enlarged and deepened by her fantasy activity surrounding it. Were the chapter simply denigrating Gerty as lingerie consumer its own fastidious accuracy about the fashion items available, their colours and prices and so on, would be inexplicable. Instead, Gerty emblemizes the transformation of even so seemingly *recherché* a consumer choice. For Gerty is a 'votary of Dame Fashion', as the coy prose of 'Nausicaa' describes her (13.148-9). In her electric blue blouse, a colour possible only with the advent of aniline dyes in the late nineteenth century, responsible for giving us magenta and chartreuse as well, she channels some of the vitality electricity was beginning to bring to the cityscape into her own person. This blouse has a 'smart vee opening', another bit of fashion precision, since the inching downward of the female neckline was just barely underway, and the shape of the vee itself thought to be particularly troubling for its failure to hug the neck. Her shoes are 'the newest thing in footwear' (13.164-5), and her skirt a navy one 'cut to the stride' (13.154-5) – a fashion newly instituted to favour the daring athletic walk adopted by female bicyclists. Gerty is also described as having hunted avidly for just the right elements to trim her straw hat; bought slightly shop-soiled, Gerty is able nonetheless to transform the elements into the 'very it' (13.159).

What the chapter calls, deploying a cliché for new purposes, the 'fashion intelligence' (13.197-8) refers to the situation of human beings, women above all, receiving a constant flow of social messages to be translated and rearticulated in the form of fashion. The nascent field of social sciences was interestingly enough already fascinated by the enigma of fashion; so too Joyce registers the pervasiveness of fashion in his modernism. Gerty and her circle of friends Cissy Caffery and Edy Boardman interrogate one another and display to one another on the strength of their fashionability. Cissy has a

flashing moment of transvestism fondly recalled by Gerty, when she dressed in her father's clothing and drew on a burned cork moustache, walking up Tritonville road smoking a cigarette. Another friend wants to dress according to the costumes of her favourite play. Everywhere dress, or fashion, is an ensemble in the broadest sense, a circle of relations both social and personal, enveloping the past, as in the 'halcyon days' costume card Gerty looks longingly at, or projecting into a future, any future not as grim and potentially doomed as that of Dublin. The temptation may exist to judge all this activity as a waste of time, without considering that if this consumption is a waste of time we need to ask how the meta-consumption of Joyce's own text is to be justified, and then, cutting closer to the bone, how our own strategies of consumption are implicated too.

Gerty MacDowell's case perfectly characterizes consumption as an activity, a means of living through the necessary contradictions of subject and object modern culture demands. Of course her case is a gendered one as well, an issue discussed by Jeri Johnson in this volume, but she is not correspondingly stripped of her power to employ objects in rich fabrications of her own making. Moreover, we may have to confront the 'embarrassment' of the woman's magazine as our own; for Gerty, it is a far more productive and educative object relation than anything else she is likely to be exposed to, infinitely surpassing the literature of Mariolatry, the worship of the Virgin Mary, as an attractive cultural force. To borrow from Georg Simmel's study of fashion and consumption, fashion provides a surface which is partly expressive of social being, but which also in part protects individuals from having to expose their private world of taste to the public eye.² In that oscillation between individuality and social definition the complexities of consumption are strongly at play. Gerty should not be seen as locked on one side of the specular looking glass of culture, nor as a utopian traveler between the two realms; instead, she is left with all the perplexities and dead ends and also pleasures of her consuming subjects.

The uncanny moment in the chapter when consciousness shifts from Gerty to Bloom takes place, it should be recalled, at a moment of fashion engineering, when lingerie is being invoked. As fireworks unfurl around them and Gerty throws her head back in ecstasy 'the garters were blue to match on account of the transparent and they all saw it and shouted to look, look there it was' (13.716–17). 'The transparent' is a reference both to the transparent stockings very newly in vogue to replace either wool or flannel ones, and also to the transparency of the erotic veil covering the Virgin Mary and cloaking Gerty too. As her face is suffused with a 'divine, entrancing blush' suddenly Bloom is there as a subject: 'he could see her other things

too, nainsook knickers, the fabric that caresses the skin, better than those other pettiwidth, the green, four and eleven, on account of being white and she let him and she saw that he saw and then it went so high . . .' (13.724–7). The nexus of desire here is not possible to unpack fully – it involves divinity and erotic transcendence as well as the humble litany of undergarment fabrics and their costs. The rapture Gerty feels and Bloom feels does not get conveyed without that echo of advertising language in 'the fabric that caresses the skin'. All these levels are intertwined, intermeshed, underpinned. Just such a rhetorical admixture ends Bloom's own reverie as twilight falls. 'O sweetie all your little girlwhite up I saw dirty bracegirdle made me do love sticky we two naughty Grace darling she him half past the bed met him pike hoses frillies for Raoul de perfume your wife black hair heave under embon *señorita* young eyes . . . showed me her next year in drawers return next in her next her next' (13.1279–85). Frillies – or lingerie – have achieved their own erotic calculus in Bloom's cascading chain of desiring language, lodging there with a vocabulary simultaneously commercial, technical, and eroticized. It should be pointed out that the reverie is also historicized, leaping from past to present to an ecstatic future of return – 'next year . . . in her next'.

And what does Bloom want? Bloom wants the dream of the mass public, the dreams of mass culture, the goods and experiences to consume he knows he will never have. We are told, in excruciatingly fine consumer detail, in the wild inventories characterizing 'Ithaca': from Bloom's dream of his cottage, with every possession in it, to the lifestyle he will be able to acquire as a result. 'In what ultimate ambition had all concurrent and consecutive ambitions now coalesced?' (17.1497–8) is how the question is phrased, and Bloom's internal answer, much truncated here:

to purchase by private treaty in fee simple a thatched bungalowshaped 2 storey dwellinghouse of southerly aspect, surmounted by vane and lightning conductor, connected with the earth, with porch covered by parasitic plants (ivy or Virginia creeper), halldoor, olive green, with smart carriage finish and neat doorbrasses, stucco front with gilt tracery at eaves and gable, rising, if possible, upon a gentle eminence with agreeable prospect from balcony with stone pillar parapet over unoccupied and unoccupyable interjacent pastures

(17.1504–11)

Every element of home furnishing and even upkeep is plotted out, from Axminster carpets with 'cream ground and trellised border' to corner 'fitments, upholstered in ruby plush', administered by a 'cook, general and betweenmaid', with 'carbon monoxide gas supply throughout' (17.1526–50). No more perfect articulation of what Bourdieu, the social anthropologist,

might mean by 'habitus' could exist, because this is no mere wish list of things. Every object is also a relation, implies a work of consumption, a transforming recontextualization of the sort that goes on even with the more mundane goods of actual purchase: in Bloom Cottage, Saint Leopold's, Flowerville, for such are its potential names, a whole range of philosophical and leisure activities are also suddenly possible.

'What syllabus of intellectual pursuits was simultaneously possible? Snapshot photography, comparative study of religions, folklore relative to various amatory and superstitious practices, contemplation of the celestial constellations' (17.1587–91). And in the pendulum swings of contemplation, Bloom, or the text constructing him here, moves from the consumer delights of Flowerville, which also transform his intellectual pursuits, to a cataloguing of his most feared economic trajectory: 'Nadir of misery: the aged impotent disfranchised ratesupported moribund lunatic pauper' (17.1946–7). This ground zero of misery is also the negativity of consumption, the emptying out of consuming possibilities which constellate Bloom's world. The immense cognitive work Bloom performs on the objects of everyday life is attested to on nearly every page of *Ulysses* where he appears; this epistemology of consumption is not restricted to Bloom as a character, however, since it is also the hallmark of the textual style of the book as a whole. It may seem counterintuitive to consider this book in any kind of relation to the books we deem eminently consumable, examples of which dot the text like candy – *Sweets of Sin* will do as well as any other. Its quasi-pornographic status would seem to put it at farthest remove from the Joycean text, since we are convinced that pornography completely bypasses intellection. In fact, *Sweets of Sin* is a nice title for the prevailing view of consumption, since like candy its objects are presumed to go down easily and to vanish into nothingness (death by chocolate, for example), while the appetite for more vacuous consumption is ever whetted by the sinful temptations of those who produce the objects. The book, though, is an incredibly rich text as consumed by Bloom, who takes it up into his own psychosexual, class, and national orbit and gets extraordinary mileage from rearrangements of its fantasy components, not always for erotic purposes – the book can hint to him of mortal thoughts or of philosophical speculations.

Joyce's statement that in *Ulysses* he wanted to render Dublin so materially that, if destroyed, it could be reconstituted from the book gives us additional access into the freeze-dried consumption process this text involves. The quote cunningly evades the fact that the Dublin whose destruction he predicted would, anyway, lie many years beyond 1904. *That* Dublin had already been destroyed, to some extent, by the forces of time and the pressures of modernity, when *Ulysses* was published in 1922. The book never

forgets the evanescence of the consumer world, and yet is equally aware of its perdurability as it becomes social relation, or material and intellectual culture. We know biographically that Joyce was very interested in marketing strategies for *Ulysses*, and by no means assumed that he would have no readership. Most commentaries are so convinced of the credentials of this experimental text and its tremendous difficulty that to seriously consider *Ulysses* in the light of consumption seems risible. Without making Joyce a prophet of any kind, the consumer success *Ulysses* has enjoyed is not incidental, and not coincidental. We are so accustomed to extracting our own activities and our scholarly venues from the milieu of consumption that it is jarring to acknowledge that these, too, are sites of consumption and we are a targeted consumer group. Joyce anticipated the work of consumption following in his wake. *Ulysses* is a consistent academic best-seller, and its various involvements in the legal fracas of obscenity trials and political censorship heighten its allure as a text to be taught in the schools. The book is bound up in a literary tradition and a literary education unavailable to most people, that much is clear, but the erudition and allusion-hunting are indissolubly yoked to the objectified material world. My experience as a teacher of and a writer about Joyce, and a reader of others who write about him, is that there is an extraordinary arena of active consumption built up around the book, where lore is exchanged with the passion of baseball card trading and the deepest satisfaction is to quote well-known lines (and they are almost all now 'well-known' in some context or other) to one another in a vast consumptive relay. We eat Joyce like candy, and we do things with the text, we enact the work of consumption, with the same relish. There is immense satisfaction in negotiating the corridors of *Ulysses* with familiarity, having parts of the text become as comfortably known as the contours of an easy chair, coming upon a line with the poignant tug of a treasured song lyric – 'Mr Leopold Bloom ate with relish the inner organs of beast and fowls.' The manifold possibilities inherent in consumption, the consumption of language, of symbolic capital, the objectification of objects which then take up a place in a private universe, do a certain violence to the positive features of the proliferating universe of material objects, whether these be books, ideas, violet garters, or *Sweets of Sin*, in the increasingly differentiated universe of modernity. *Ulysses* takes up the philosophical and political and aesthetic implications of the universe of consumption, and the strong divide we are ready to make between consumable goods and rarefied literature is a distinction *Ulysses* does not want to make. In so saliently replicating the intricate mechanisms of consumption in its own construction and its own reading process, to say nothing of its material orbit, *Ulysses* prompts us to see the potential so rarely glimpsed or acknowledged in our attitudes

toward consumption. Given that this is our cultural state, which *Ulysses* accepts with equanimity and realism, Joyce can teach us how we have been performing the work of consumption all our lives.

NOTES

- 1 Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (London: Collins, 1973), p. 263.
- 2 Georg Simmel, 'Fashion', *International Quarterly* 10.1 (October 1904), 130–55, reprinted in *American Journal of Sociology* 62 (1957), 541–58.