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The Passion for the Real and Joyce's "Cyclops"

This essay reads Joyce's "Cyclops" episode in *Ulysses* alongside Hegel's "Absolute Freedom and Terror" in the *Phenomenology* and Alain Badiou's "The Passion for the Real and the Montage of Semblance" in *The Century*. It posits two interrelated arguments; the first is theoretical, the second interpretive: 1) Nationalism (particularly revolutionary nationalism) tends toward a politics of the absolute, a politics that amounts to a passion for *real* identity. This passion for the real asserts itself through a logic of suspicion, accusation, and—ultimately—negation. 2) Joyce addresses Irish nationalism and notions of 'Irishness' in the "Cyclops" episode, not by attempting any neat, positive articulation of Irish identity, but by immediately foregrounding and dramatizing this logic of suspicion and negation, both narratively and formally—by, in fact, inviting and implicating his reader into a dramatization of the passion for the real.

"There exists a passion for the real that is obsessed with identity: to grasp real identity, to unmask its copies, to discredit fakes... This passion can only be fulfilled as destruction. Herein lies its strength—after all, many things deserve to be destroyed. But this is also its limit, because purification is a process doomed to incompleteness, a figure of the bad infinite."
(Badiou, 56)

The colonial Irish author is presented with a bind. First, there is the question of how to compose an Irish literature in the language of the oppressor, how to dismantle the master's house using the master's tools. The risk, particularly in enunciations of Irish nationalism, is to slip into a formally identical homage to race, to elevate Irish heroes

according to the colonizer's narrative of 'civilization.' There exists, in addition, a second, interrelated, more general risk: that any articulation of national character (particularly a potentially *revolutionary* national identity) might descend into a politics of the absolute: a 'passion for the real' obsessed with uncovering, in this case, *real* Irishness, with 'purifying' the national character—discrediting all traces of Britishness, unmasking the transplanted, the 'inauthentic,' etc. As Badiou states, this passion can only be fulfilled as destruction; it operates in a *purely negative* manner. This is both its strength and its limit. Many things *do* deserve to be destroyed (i.e., the institutions of colonialism), but the totalizing articulation of an absolute national identity can only *continue to function* through further destruction, through negation.

The Hegelian underpinnings here are worth explicating at some length. For Hegel, anything bearing the characteristic of the absolute, such as an absolute (revolutionary) national identity—similar in form to what Hegel calls (specifically during his analysis of the French Revolution) 'universal self-consciousness'—defies realization; it cannot be actualized '*in the real*.' In order to exist within the real, in order to carry out any positive task, the absolute must immediately parse itself into individual subjectivities, thus negating its 'universality': "Established in the element of *existence*, it would carry the connotation of a *determinate* personality; it would in truth cease to be universal Self-Consciousness" (Hegel, 359). An absolute national character arrives at the real only through its paradoxical distillation into the individual; it can only be articulated in the real by a unitary subject. Any ostensible expression of the national character—and any real, positive deed, supposedly enacted in the name of that national character—can only be realized as the expression or deed of an individual.

The absolute is therefore immediately undermined upon its encounter with the real, as it immediately loses its absoluteness. Because the universal necessarily actualizes as atomistic and factional, the universal task operates immediately under a contradictory principal of exclusion. Articulating an absolute (revolutionary) national identity, as a necessarily totalizing task, immediately upends itself within the real; it cannot accomplish any positive deed without first fragmenting and therefore cancelling its very totality. As Hegel states:

The universal, in order to arrive at a 'deed,' must concentrate itself into the unit of individuality and set an individual Self-Consciousness at the pinnacle; for the universal will is *real* will only in a unitary self. But because of this concentration into one individual will *all the other individuals* are excluded from the *totality* of the action, and have only a truncated participation in the action. The resultant action would *not* be the action of the *real* 'universal Self-Consciousness.' Thus [the] absolute ... cannot accomplish any positive task or deed; only *negative activity* is left to it. (Hegel, 359)

With individual actors or factions invoking distinct articulations in the name of a supposed totality, the articulation of a 'real' national identity enters a schismatic logic; the ontological anchoring of the totality becomes entirely destabilized as myriad subjects lay claim to disparate, heterogeneous absolutes. At the moment it meets with the real, any instantiation of an absolute splits into polar opposite abstract articulations; it "divides itself up into correspondingly abstract extremes: into [a] simple, inflexible, cold universality and [b] the discrete, absolute, hard rigidity and stubborn atomicity of real Self-Consciousness" (Hegel, 359). Moreover, these extremes enter into a logical relationship of absolute cancellation. The universal cannot exist in or through an individual, and reciprocally, the

individual cannot exist within the universal. The attempt at realizing the universal through the individual thus becomes an absolute evacuation of the universal, an eradication of individuals—i.e., if the individual is antithetical to the universal, the project of the universal becomes one of purging the individual from it: “the relationship of these two sides, [a] and [b]... is a relationship of completely unmediated, pure negation; more precisely the negation of the individual-as-existent-in-the-universal” (Hegel, 360).

Therefore, the logic is one of chronic purge. An absolute (revolutionary) national identity, as a totalizing project, insists, at a fundamental level, on an absence of difference. Yet because any individual may subjectively enact or evoke a distinct absolute—nullifying the possibility of any stable, real absolute to which one may refer—everyone may reasonably be suspected of betraying the ‘real’ absolute. Moreover, without any stable or real absolute to refer to, there is no means of proving a betrayal, so the suspicion of betrayal becomes tantamount to betrayal itself: “Hence *to be suspected* [of guilt] is substituted for, or has the significance and effect of, *being guilty*” (Hegel, 360).

Everyone may be suspected of betrayal, everyone is guilty of betrayal—opponents, comrades, leaders, and oneself alike. The field of subjective differences (of disparate, subjective figures of the absolute) must be eradicated in the name of the ‘real’ universal, the ‘real’ absolute. The logic of purification is a logic of the absolute destruction of difference: “In this peculiar ‘task’ [of annihilation] that it has, [the] absolute ... is just this abstract Self-Consciousness which annihilates every difference and annihilates within itself every trace of difference” (Hegel, 361).

Rather than succumbing to this logic of suspicion, guilt, and negation, Joyce immediately foregrounds it. We see the logic dramatized, microscopically, in Barney

Kiernan's, especially between Bloom and The Citizen. Bloom's articulations of national identity in general, and of Irishness in particular—his attempts to assert or claim his own Irishness—are immediately cast into suspicion, satirized, undermined, accused and condemned:

—What is it? says John Wyse.

—A nation? says Bloom. A nation is the same people living in the same place.

—By God, then, says Ned, laughing, if that's so I'm a nation for I'm living in the same place for the past five years.

So of course everyone had the laugh at Bloom and says he, trying to muck out of it:

—Or also living in different places.

—That covers my case, says Joe.

—What is your nation if I may ask? says the citizen.

—Ireland, says Bloom. I was born here. Ireland.

(Joyce, 272; 12:1421-31)

Bloom's definition of a nation here, "the same people living in the same place," is meaningful insofar as it is inadequate—a failed attempt to articulate the criterion for a national identity—and his attempts at further clarification, "or also living in different places," only exacerbates the formulation's inadequacy. His subsequent justification of his own Irishness, "I was born here," seems similarly inadequate. But the important point here is not so much Bloom's personal, particular inability to establish a formal criterion for a national identity, not his own personal 'lack of Irishness' (though the particulars of Bloom's 'otherness' are obviously important in this chapter); rather, Joyce seems to be pointing, somewhat overtly, to *the very lack of these formal criterion, to the impossibility of*

articulating or activating an absolute national identity without immediately undermining its absoluteness, immediately entering the logic of suspicion, guilt, and negation. As Badiou states, “we are in the realm of suspicion when a formal criterion is lacking to distinguish the real from semblance” (54).

Crucially, none of the characters involved in this conversation—including, conspicuously, The Citizen—offer any alternative formal criterion (indeed: “The citizen said nothing only cleared the spit out of his gullet”). Our suspicion, perhaps, as readers, is that if any one of these bar patrons were to attempt a positive articulation in the same vein, the results would be *equally inadequate, equally suspect*. In fact, the patrons’ articulations regarding a national identity—following the *modus operandi* of the “Cyclops” episode, the very logic of negation—function exclusively through irony; their assertions, their implicit ‘defenses’ of Irishness, serve a *purely negative* purpose. What we witness, then, is not merely the ousting of Bloom’s particular otherness, but the ousting—when we are faced with an appeal to the absolute—of *the inevitable fact of otherness, the inevitable suspicion/guilt of otherness, the inevitable proclivity to purge otherness*. Joyce seems to be portraying not just a decentered subject in Bloom, *but the very lack of a stable center to which we may appeal*.

Bloom’s claim, then—“Ireland. I was born here. Ireland.”—is not *simply* inadequate; it is *inevitably* inadequate. But, crucially, it is also, inevitably, *not nearly inadequate enough*. It cannot be easily cast aside as ‘the exception which proves the rule.’ It demonstrates, rather, ‘the rule of exception.’ The very fact that Bloom makes some claim to Irishness, and because Bloom does *seem* to have some claim over Irishness (he *was*, in fact, born in Ireland; though the particulars of why he *seems* to have some claim are largely irrelevant in

the Hegelian model), he enters into, and foregrounds in the “Cyclops” chapter, the aforementioned field of subjective differences—of disparate, subjective figures of the absolute: the paradoxical ‘individual-as-existent-in-the-universal,’ which incurs, logically, necessarily, *negation*. Joyce does not cast Bloom against a stable, absolute Irishness; we must resist the reading that interprets Bloom as the *sole outcast*. Rather, Joyce employs Bloom to foreground the mutual negation of the absolute and *all* its particular subjects—the impossibility of an ‘absolute Irishness,’ the impossibility of anyone being ‘absolutely Irish.’

Indeed, The Citizen—the supposed embodiment of stark Irish nationalism—fairs no better than Bloom. All of his claims toward (an overtly absolute, essentialized) Irishness are, like Bloom’s, immediately cast into suspicion, satirized, undermined, etc. His nationalist articulations, in fact, fall victim to both risks mentioned at the beginning of this essay: they appear as homages to race, formally identical to those of the colonizer; they employ the colonizer’s discourse of ‘civilization’ in order to elevate Irishness. And, moreover, they enter immediately into the logic of destruction, of purification and negation—discrediting Britishness, unmasking the ‘inauthentic’: “To hell with them! The curse of a goodfornothing God light sideways on the bloody thicklugged sons of whores’ gets! No music and no art and no literature worthy of the name. Any civilization they have they stole from us. Tonguetied sons of bastards’ ghosts” (Joyce, 266-7; 12:1197-1201). The Citizen accuses Blazes of being a traitor’s son; he ridicules the British Navy and the empire at length; he repeatedly derides Bloom’s Jewishness, accuses him of “swindling the peasants and the poor of Ireland.” When, one line later, the Citizen remarks, “We want no more strangers in our house,” one cannot help but suspect that the house he speaks of is

only constituted as a house insofar as there are strangers inside it—that every articulation relies, immediately, on negation (Joyce, 265; 12:1150-1). And, crucially, even in the midst of all this rhetorical negation, we see The Citizen fraternizing with agents of the colonial hegemon (police officers, etc.), and we are forced to confront that fact that The Citizen—that, indeed, *anyone*, according to The Citizen's own appeal to an absolute, essentialized Irishness—will never be 'Irish enough,' will always, immediately and inevitably, be suspected of difference, of betrayal.

We see Bloom, also, criticized not just for his apparent inability to articulate an Irish national identity, but his apparent inability to *enact* an Irish national identity. Among many other examples, Bloom is ridiculed for not partaking of the 'wine of the country' (Guinness Stout), and, moreover, for not standing a round of drinks for those at the bar. It seems important, however, that The Citizen also fails to stand a round at any point in the episode; and perhaps we are invited to suspect that he *rarely or never does*—another subtle insistence that any criteria we may alight upon, while not necessarily arbitrary, are inevitably inadequate: inevitably, themselves, subject to suspicion and negation.

Alain Badiou resumes the discussion of the logic of suspicion, guilt, and negation in his explication of 'the passion for the real.' Badiou repurposes the Hegelian vocabulary to emphasize the interplay between semblance and the 'real.' In Badiou's terms, because the absolute cannot actualize within the real, can never become absolutely real, it must always be constituted by (and therefore suspected of) semblance. That is, because the figure of the absolute necessarily bisects itself into polar abstract extremes upon its encounter with the real—and because the universal can only actualize through its opposite, namely individual subjectivities—the absolute, in its abstract universality, can only *appear* to be real, can only

be played out through the myriad semblances entertained by individual subjectivities, within fictions where the absolute is merely represented as, or occupies the role of the real, but never achieves any reality beyond semblance, beyond being *one account among many*.

For this reason, any and all evocations of the absolute within the real must be suspected of semblance, which amounts to a betrayal of the ostensibly 'real' absolute.

Badiou remarks:

I think the crucial point (as Hegel grasped long ago with regard to the revolutionary Terror) is this: the real, conceived in its contingent absoluteness, is never real enough not to be suspected of semblance. The passion for the real is also, of necessity, suspicion. Nothing can attest that the real is the real, nothing but the system of fictions wherein it plays the role of the real. All the subjective categories of revolutionary, or absolute, politics... are tainted by the suspicion that the supposedly real point of the category is actually nothing but semblance (52-3).

In a similar way that an absolute national identity is unattainable through a process that necessitates individuation, the 'real' is unattainable through the semblances which attempt to represent, reach, or replace it. In a similar way that an individual cannot carry out or enact the real universal, but merely a subjective, contingent instantiation of it, semblance cannot achieve the real, but merely situate it through representation; it can only evoke the real insofar as it is *other than the real*. The passion for the real, of course, amounts to the futile destruction of semblance.

Following this formulation, we can see how Joyce foregrounds the logic of suspicion and negation not merely at the level of narrative—principally between Bloom and The Citizen—but also at the level of form: Joyce stages the disruptive interplay between the parodic interpolations and the account of the Nameless One as just such a 'system of

fictions' that *explicitly* situates the real at a distance, insofar as each section is—overtly, hyperbolically—*other than the real*; and insofar as each section, especially the entire narrative of the Nameless One, is—again: overtly, hyperbolically—*one account among many*. Indeed, “Cyclops” is the only episode in *Ulysses* that employs the first person, foregrounding the narrative’s role as *one account*, and, necessarily, (emphatically), calling suspicion upon itself.

Crucially, we must resist reading the parodic interpolations as the sole interventions of overt semblance; we cannot interpret the Nameless One’s narration as the ostensibly ‘realist’ through-line, the standard *from which* the interpolations deviate. In this formulation, it would be too easy to conflate the Nameless One’s narration with ‘the real’ and bracket the interpolations as ‘semblance’—to *other* the interpolations against a ‘realist’ counterpart. If we privilege one half of the “Cyclops” episode, if we defer to the Nameless One’s account as ‘the real,’ we find a chapter that does not foreground the figure of the bad infinite, but rather elides it. We would dismiss the interpolations as *merely different, merely disruptive*—as the masks we must cast aside in order to, indeed, access the real. Instead of privileging the ‘real,’ however, Joyce is asking us to *privilege difference*. We must recognize, again, *the inevitable fact of difference*, and then we can recognize, in the foreground, the formal dramatization of the passion for the real, the logic of negation: *the suspicion/guilt of difference, the proclivity to purge difference*.

Indeed, Joyce seems to be not only dramatizing the logic of negation inherent in the passion for the real, but implicating his reader in that logic, that passion. The chapter *does* seem to beg us, even through the densest interpolations, to *figure out what’s actually going on*—to cast aside the masks of the interpolations and ‘access the real’; but, we are also

asked, immediately, to *suspect* the Nameless One of semblance. The Nameless One's narration, itself, functions predominantly through a logic of suspicion, accusation, and inevitable guilt. Right away we are faced with an accusation: "Did you see that bloody chimneysweep near shove my eye out with his brush?" (Joyce, 240; 12: 6-7). The Nameless One is heavily implicated in the system of gossip which suspects, accuses, and inevitably condemns Bloom of having won a large sum of money on a horserace (the very condemnation which exacerbates the fact that Bloom does not stand a round of drinks). And as the Nameless One addresses us, the implied reader, in a formally identical act of gossip, we witness the logic of negation reach its endpoint. With every overt rhetorical insistence on the 'real,' every conversational iteration of "faith," "begob," and "true as you're there," we are forced to suspect our narrator even further—as Badiou remarks, "the logic that imposes itself is that the more a subjective conviction presents itself as real, the more it must be suspected" (54). Moreover, when we land on lines such as, "'Twixt me and you Caddareesh," (Joyce, 262; 12:1002) and, especially, "Didn't I tell you? As true as I'm drinking this porter if he was at his last gasp he'd try to downface you that dying was living" (Joyce, 270; 12:1362-3) that we are, in fact, most likely, seated at a bar with the Nameless One, *drinking*, leaning close, implicated immediately in the logic of suspicion, accusation, and negation.

In the end, the task of articulating an absolute national identity is formally juxtaposed with the task of accessing the real within the "Cyclops" episode, and we are led to realize that we have no 'real' formal criteria in either case, that both of these tasks can only, necessarily and inevitably, instigate a logic of negation, of purification: everything is suspect, everything is guilty, *including ourselves*. As Badiou writes: "The traitor is,

ultimately, oneself" (54). Therefore—after dramatizing the passion for the real, after inviting and implicating us into its logic of negation—Joyce seems to insist that, in order to truly confront the "Cyclops" episode, we as readers must ultimately relinquish this passion and, instead, acknowledge *the infinite difference*, or what Badiou calls, "the difference of the Same." In order for the chapter to exist at all, *it must be different than itself*. The implicit insistence is that Irishness, itself, must exist within an interplay of infinite difference, that it must, immediately, be different than itself—that to pin it down as an absolute is, necessarily, to watch it vanish.