'The opposite of hatred': Undoing nationalism in Joyce's Ulysses

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Abstract

The epitome of chauvinist narrow-mindedness in Joyce's Ulysses is the drunken brawler and anti-Semite depicted in the novel's twelfth chapter, 'Cyclops'. Using his mock-heroic approach as one of the essential stylistic devices in Ulysses, and one of the chief sources of humour in the text, Joyce connects his character to the one-eyed giant Polyphemus of the original Homeric epic. As Randall Stevenson suggests in his study Modernist Fiction (1992), Joyce uses the allusion to Cyclops to warn his readers of any 'one-eyed', narrow or single-minded view of reality (such as nationalism) and the dangerous patterns of behaviour that might ensue from it. However, Joyce's intention is not just to repudiate or mock nationalism, but also to offer an alternative, a way of resisting the dangerous mindset embodied in Cyclops. Stevenson argues that Joyce accomplishes this by the very narrative method his novel employs: with its constantly shifting perspectives, its myriad styles and points of view, it successfully fights against any narrowing of vision – and so, by implication, against any tendency towards localism, division, ethnic or religious hatred. The key word for understanding this strategy in the novel is 'parallax', one of the scientific concepts that Joyce's protagonist Bloom speculates about, referring to the effect whereby the position of an object seems to change when viewed from different points of observation. As Stevenson points out, Joyce uses parallax to fight against paralysis – by which he means the paralysis of Dublin's drab, unimaginative middle-class, and their myopic political views. In her study Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions (2001), Martha Nussbaum likewise focuses on the twelfth chapter of Ulysses in order to analyse the novel's political stance and its repudiation of nationalist and religious bigotry. In Nussbaum's opinion, however, Joyce's strategy in dealing with these issues is inseparable from one of the major motifs in the novel, i.e., the author's celebration of physical love. Namely, Nussbaum argues that hating the Other may be psychologically connected to self-hatred – which stems

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from our inability to embrace our human experience in its totality, including its bodily, disorderly and mundane aspects. Especially sexuality, as Nussbaum maintains, tends to become metonymic and imply everything in our life which defies control. Accepting only the controllable, rational and orderly portion of our being may lead us to project the undesirable psychic contents onto the Other, thus making him/her the object of our hatred. Such self-hatred – eventually leading to the hatred of the Other – may even be prompted by certain works of art, those which, according to Nussbaum, constitute the so-called 'ascent' tradition. These works (written by Plato, Augustine, Dante, Spinoza, Whitman or Proust) project a sublimated image of love and life, constructing in the reader's mind some idealized version of his or her own self, removed from the messiness of one's ordinary existence and one's "real-life body with its hungers and thirsts and fantasies" (Nussbaum 2001). As a result, Nussbaum argues, these works create a wide gap between the constructed reader and the real-life reader, which may cause us anger and self-disgust when we return from the experience of reading and discover that we are still ourselves. Joyce's Ulysses, on the other hand, closes the selfsame gap with the narrative method which Nussbaum calls ''transfiguration of everyday life' and 'the descent of love'. Nussbaum explains it primarily as a descent into the chaos and disorder of erotic love. Joyce's novel, in her opinion, seems to argue that it is only through love (and bodily love at that) that human beings can find an exit from solipsism and connect with the reality of another life. Furthermore, since bodily needs are universal, focusing on bodily love may be an important step towards embracing our common humanity and adopting a cosmopolitan view. Cosmopolitanism is also explicitly advocated by Joyce's protagonist Leopold Bloom. In the twelfth chapter, standing up to 'Cyclops', Bloom points out that insult and hatred cannot constitute a proper 'life for men and women', and 'it's the very opposite of that that is really life'. Militant nationalism, as a chief source of insult and hatred, is the opposite of love and therefore of life. Using Stevenson's and Nussbaum's insights as a starting point, the paper will proceed to explore Joyce's ethical and political preoccupations in Ulysses in order to outline the predominant narrative strategies which the author employs in undoing nationalism.