

The Construction of Space in *Ulysses*, A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, and *Dubliners* by James Joyce

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Abstract:

Scholars in the field of literature often focus on analysing narratives, with particular attention given to how time organisation contributes to conveying meaning. However, comparatively less consideration has been given to the exploration of spatial dimensions. This is gradually changing due to two significant shifts. Firstly, geographers, influenced by a cultural perspective, have started examining the interplay between artefacts and their environments. Their research on landscape design, architecture, and urban structures highlights how physical spaces reflect cultural dynamics and political ideologies. Additionally, there's a growing body of work exploring the geography of creativity, investigating the relationship between localities and the socio-cultural factors driving innovation, whether economic or artistic. Taking its cue from these areas, this research paper will explore Dublin's significance as an inspirational setting for Joyce, its geography as a site for the reproduction of social hierarchies, and its landscape as affected by contested political representations between Britain and Ireland. These investigations will transcend the traditional boundaries of Geography, intersecting with broader spatial theories influenced by postcolonial and postmodern perspectives.

Keywords: space, spatiality, geography, postmodern, postcolonial, modernity

Introduction:

Edward Said's analysis of Yeats illustrates a concern with revealing the imperialist dimensions of geography, where the dominant colonial narrative is confronted by the voices of the marginalised. Postcolonial critiques fundamentally reevaluate the temporal frameworks underpinning modernity, offering alternative perspectives on emergent histories. This critique extends to challenging the singular trajectory of modernity, proposing instead a recognition of cultural diversity and conflicting temporalities. In the context of this paper's focus, scholars like Kiberd, Smyth, and Graham have adeptly incorporated these postcolonial themes into Irish Studies, offering insightful perspectives on the complexities of spatial and temporal dynamics within cultural discourse.

For a considerable period, Frederic Jameson occupied a leading position among literary critics, particularly noted for his focus on spatial concepts within the realm of modernism. He proposed that modernism shifted its emphasis from time to space. Jameson, like David Harvey, highlighted the significant impact of global economic transformations driven by capital, a phenomenon Harvey terms

"time-space compression," which led to a heightened cultural preoccupation with spatial concerns. The emergence of industrial capitalism ushered in an era marked by global economic instability, intensified movements of people, ideas, and goods, and increasingly intricate interconnections.

By the late 19th century, individuals found that traditional anchors of experience, whether in the present or the past, were no longer sufficient. Instead, the prevalent experience became one characterised by a constant flux of distant influences shaping the present moment. This collapse of spatial boundaries meant that the notion of *home* became intertwined with global phenomena such as empire, economic fluctuations, and distant conflicts. The resulting interconnectedness emphasised the importance of simultaneity in cultural discourse. Rather than emerging from a static or idyllic past, humanity found itself navigating a constantly evolving and spatially complex future, perpetually in a state of flux and transformation.

This marks a significant era for James Joyce's *Ulysses*, a novel penned over eight years from 1914 to 1921 amidst a backdrop of revolution, war, and economic instability. These tumultuous events deeply influenced Joyce's mindset. His youth in Dublin coincided with the city's bombardment by British forces during the anti-colonial uprising of 1916, while the outbreak of World War I compelled him to relocate from Trieste to neutral Zurich, where his brother Stanislaus was interned by Austrian authorities. Financial struggles were constant, with Joyce relying on financial support from abroad, thus navigating the unstable terrain of economic geographies.

Margot Norris observes a pronounced materialistic streak in Joyce's worldview, evident in the rich historical context woven throughout his texts. Joyce's historical materialism underscores his recognition of the impermanence inherent in contemporary society, with flux and change serving as central themes in his literary endeavours. While Joyce possessed a geographical imagination, his focus transcended mere spatial fetishism; instead, he used his art to convey broader themes of Irish identity and societal transformation.

Mapping the City of Dublin

Joyce's meticulous approach to writing *Ulysses* involved the use of maps, rulers, and stopwatches to meticulously plot the novel's intricate action sequences. His father's occupation at Thom's, a publisher of street directories, provided Joyce with a wealth of intimate knowledge about Dublin's topography, which he skillfully incorporated into his work. Regular walks with his father through Dublin's picturesque locales enriched Joyce's understanding of the city's cultural nuances, informing his vivid portrayal of its streets and inhabitants in *Ulysses*.

Joyce employed traditional maps as tools, yet his artistic vision transcends their limitations. He viewed modern literature as delving into the subjective realm, exploring the intricate complexities that shape individuals' lives. Heggland highlights the tension between the rigid logic of maps and the diverse, individual paths depicted in *Ulysses*. Joyce intricately weaves topographical details into his work to emphasise the nuanced relationships between routes, perceptions, and meanings.

However, Joyce's focus on Dublin and its spaces extends beyond mere aesthetic concerns. He viewed

Dublin as a neglected cultural centre deserving of literary recognition, comparing it to European cities like Venice. He believed that Dublin was pivotal for understanding Ireland's moral history, confronting issues of religious dominance, colonialism, and romantic nationalism head-on. This choice was not just artistic but also political and ethical, distinguishing his approach from the romanticised geographical imaginings prevalent in the Literary Revival movement.

Joyce's meticulous use of place-names in his works, from *Chamber Music* to *Ulysses*, reflects a tradition of preserving history through geography, akin to the practices of Irish bards. This commitment to preserving local knowledge aligns with Joyce's broader aim of representing truth and responsibility in literature. He critiqued movements like Dadaism for their nihilism and condemned the exclusionary tendencies of certain high modernist circles, advocating for a more inclusive and socially conscious approach to literature.

A comprehensive analysis of James Joyce's spatial poetics necessitates examining not only the textual spatiality, including typography and layout, but also the symbolic imagery such as maps and flags depicted on the cover of the initial edition of *Ulysses*, featuring Greek colours and islands of letters in a blue Mediterranean sea. Moreover, delving into the varied representations of landscapes, passive or active, across Joyce's works is essential. The exploration should extend to the dialectical interplay between space and time, often manifested in gendered oppositions and contradictions, from the Newtonian geometric structures in *Dubliners* to the intricate interpenetration in *Finnegans Wake*.

Themes of Spatiality: Circulation, Labyrinth, and Palimpsest

Within *Ulysses* alone, numerous instances showcase Joyce's utilisation of a geographical imagination to convey layers of meaning, particularly concerning Irish identity within a modern, semi-colonial context. Themes such as conflation and contested equivalences of scales, reflections on porous boundaries, and the implications for original identities are prevalent. However, this paper will focus on three spatial motifs—*circulation*, *labyrinth*, and *palimpsest*—that hold significant local political resonance for Joyce.

These spatial metaphors provide Joyce with critical tools to reflect on Irish identities. *Circulation*, for instance, serves as a commentary on the stagnation within certain Irish nationalist ideologies, emphasising the necessity of addressing material needs beyond mere symbolism. Joyce underscores interconnectedness over isolationism, employing a dynamic metaphor that challenges nationalist perspectives. It's important to note that while space is emphasised, the temporal dimension is equally crucial, as these metaphors co-produce distinct conceptions of time.

A *labyrinth*, on the other hand, symbolises simultaneity, reflecting the complex and intertwined nature of Joyce's narratives and thematic concerns. Joyce employs it to underscore its contingency, particularly concerning Irish identities, where contingency and simultaneity stand in contrast to necessity and hierarchy. The Church and the Crown uphold the latter, imposing rigid subject positions on individuals. In Joyce's portrayal of the city, both imperial and clerical perspectives fail to acknowledge the diverse realities of life or the imperative of treating each life with equal respect.

Additionally, the *palimpsest* serves as a space of memory, preserving echoes of the past and intertwining

spatial and temporal dimensions. Here, narrative history unfolds, perpetuating a cycle wherein past grievances threaten to determine present identities. Living "on another man's wound," as Edward Thompson eloquently phrases it, may sustain a sense of outrage, yet it risks obscuring current sources of discontent. Remaining fixated on the past ultimately absolves present oppressors of accountability.

Before delving into Joyce's use of space to convey meaning in his literary works, it's crucial to acknowledge how he imbued space with significance in his own life. Many critics, including Cixous, have examined Joyce's exile and its profound importance to him. Cixous recognized that Joyce's decision to distance himself from Ireland was pivotal in his ability to confront the ideological constraints on artistic expression in his homeland. Moreover, Joyce's exile served as a continual source of emotional distress, mirroring his perception of how Ireland treated its notable figures. He viewed himself as an artistic counterpart to Parnell, navigating a realm of literary rebellion rather than political dissent.

Joyce believed that his artistic integrity necessitated this separation, viewing exile as both a personal and artistic imperative. He often reflected on Ireland's penchant for exacting a penance from those who dared to leave, complicating any potential return. Even as he worked on *Finnegans Wake*, Joyce harboured reservations about returning to Ireland, vividly recalling past instances of violence and betrayal. His exile, as noted by Ellmann, was not merely a geographical relocation but an essential aspect of his experimental approach to life.

Leaving Dublin in 1904, Joyce made only two brief returns, facing personal trials and betrayals during his final visit in 1912. This traumatic experience served as the emotional nucleus for his play *Exiles*, highlighting the deep-seated wounds inflicted by his homeland and the complexities of personal and artistic autonomy in the face of societal constraints. Numerous Irish writers sought the broader audience and resources of London, but Joyce's desire to shield his art from English influence led him to embrace European modernism and cosmopolitan centres like Paris, Zurich, and Trieste.

Additionally, there was a necessity to create distance from a transforming Dublin to better preserve his memories of a specific era against the backdrop of the city's evolving landscape. Despite his criticisms, Joyce harboured a sense of nostalgia for his father's Dublin, a sentiment he could only fully embrace in exile, where he could momentarily set aside his resentment. Given the significance of distance and separation in his artistic journey, it's unsurprising that Joyce turned to various geographical metaphors to articulate his vision of his native city.

The City and its Geography of Sexuality

Dubliners introduced its trio of themes—gnomon, simony, and paralysis—serving as vehicles to contemplate Irish identity through the lenses of language, colonialism, and religion. These themes could be dissected across a matrix of nine cells, exploring their interplay and significance. In *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, similar themes manifest as nets or traps, ensnaring Stephen Dedalus's soul in the grip of language, colonialism, and religion. Stephen counters the allure of Irish rhetoric with silence, confronts colonial oppression through voluntary exile, and navigates the manipulative tactics of religious authority with cunning.

According to Weir's insightful analysis, the gnomon symbolises mediation, embodying absence, reduction, and replication. This geometric figure, wherein a parallelogram is subtracted from one corner of another, mirrors the dynamics of English language dominance in Ireland, the subjugation to colonial rule, and the subservience ingrained by Catholicism. Colonial Ireland, bereft of its own parliament, remains under the sway of its English rulers, perpetually mimicking their actions inadequately. Similarly, Catholicism in Ireland is intertwined with historical instances of papal concessions to English monarchs, the political influence of bishops, and the perpetuation of subservient attitudes through Jesuit education.

The sacred church took the natural desires of the body and twisted them into instruments of guilt and denial against the soul. In *Portrait*, Stephen finds himself under the oppressive regime of a religious institution, where he feels compelled to embrace discipline by mortifying his body and suppressing his natural instincts. Similarly, colonialism established a moral economy where sacred values were desecrated, leading to complicity among the colonised. British authorities exploited corruption within Irish society to gain informants among nationalists, breeding a pervasive atmosphere of suspicion and betrayal, as illustrated in *Dubliners*.

Dubliners and *Portrait* are both bildungsroman of distinct kinds. *Dubliners* depicts the formation of conscience, highlighting the near impossibility of honest, independent thought or action in Ireland under the influence of Rome, London, and a contrived Connacht. Joyce portrays the contemporaries of his time as morally compromised and virtually shameless, with the testimony of those who resist this corrupting influence offering hope for a new awakening. *Portrait*, on the other hand, charts Stephen's journey from the streets of Dublin to the cultural richness of Paris, exposing him to experiences beyond the confines of Jesuit philosophy and challenging the constraints imposed by church, coloniser, and country.

The spectre of syphilis looms large in Joyce's Dublin, symbolising a broader societal malaise. Referred to as "general paralysis of the insane", it pervades the body politic, manifesting in casual remarks and gossip. However, Joyce resists moralising about sexually transmitted infections, presenting them simply as venereal ill luck. He suggests that misfortune may lead even a virtuous individual into the realm of syphilis.

Barta has proposed that the modernist novel depicts the city as a maze devoid of a centre. In *Ulysses*, Dublin is portrayed as a labyrinth where individuals, like Lord Edward Fitzgerald, might conceal themselves until betrayed by others. Hidden passages, such as the secret door rumoured to have been used for Emmet's midnight burial, add to the city's secretive nature. Dublin becomes a place of concealment, allowing individuals like Bloom to navigate private actions in public spaces discreetly, as seen in his discreet book hunt along Bedford Row or his covert observation of women in carriages. Bloom's aim is to observe without being observed, exemplified by Molly's keen awareness of his movements despite his attempts at secrecy.

This mobility is gendered, yet Molly, with control over the house during the day, leads a life rich in correspondence and social interactions, orchestrating her admirers with precise timing. The labyrinth serves as a metaphor for the mess and complexity of urban life, with Joyce's alter ego, Dedalus,

symbolising the artist navigating this intricate narrative. *Ulysses* transitions from a physical to a linguistic labyrinth, with texts circulating through the city via letters, sandwich-board slogans, advertisements, and newspapers. The juxtaposition of these elements challenges traditional hierarchies of value and contributes to the novel's maze-like structure.

The city, depicted as a living labyrinth, is a hub of simultaneous but conflicting lives. Events unfold within a web of contingent possibilities, with great events imbuing significance upon their context. *Ulysses* is set on June 16, 1904, the day of Nora Barnacle's first date with James Joyce, commemorating their meeting in the labyrinthine city. Despite the potential for myriad disruptions, their encounter persists, symbolising the convergence of chance and destiny within the labyrinth of urban life. The labyrinth serves as a democratic arena where significance is spread uniformly across its expanse. It also highlights the craftsmanship of maze creators, from Dedalus to Joyce.

Conclusion:

Joyce's exploration of spatial dynamics, embodied in the themes of circulation, labyrinth, and palimpsest, provokes alternative yet interconnected inquiries within his work. Circulation elucidates the rapid flux of modern existence, challenging governmental priorities in favour of promoting freedom or efficiency through pragmatic initiatives. Labyrinth democratises the portrayal of urban life and its inhabitants, countering elitist perspectives. Palimpsest offers a perspective on the urban environment, revealing how historical grievances shackle Irish identities and divide the citizens who inhabit the same space. These themes are interwoven with stylistic innovations in *Ulysses*, a novel that scrutinises the social fabric of the city through the circulation of texts. It presents the novel as a decentralised maze, inviting exploration through various equally valid and engaging pathways. Additionally, *Ulysses* earnestly engages with the imperative to historicize, highlighting a particular interpretation of history that both sustains and threatens anti-colonial movements. In *Ulysses*, there's a subtle suggestion of an alternative utopia which envisions a practical, egalitarian, and tolerant society, challenging conventional imagination yet possessing crucial significance in its aspiration.

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