Calypso: myth, method, moment

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The narrative contents of this the first episode in *Ulysses* where we encounter its hero for the first time, are not complex. Leopold Bloom in the kitchen of his house prepares breakfast for his wife, feeds the cat, steps out to go round the corner to a shop where he can purchase something tasty for his own breakfast, as his lie-a-bed spouse sleeps on. *En route* he offers a cheerful “good day” to Mr. O’Rourke a publican, and remarks on the fine weather. He manages to buy the last kidney in Duglacz’s shop, while lusting after his next door neighbour’s servant girl, who is also making a purchase. He returns home, where he notices the post has arrived: two letters and a card. One letter is for him, from his daughter Milly, the other letter and the card are for his wife, to whom he passes them on. He returns to the kitchen where he makes tea, starts to cook the kidney, not forgetting to allow the cat to have the bloodsmeared paper in which it had been wrapped. He opens his letter, skims it, then carries breakfast (minus the kidney) upstairs to his wife, where they discuss her forthcoming concert performance and the funeral which it seems Bloom is scheduled to attend that day. Bloom agrees to get his wife a new book from the library returning the one she has done with, *Ruby: the Pride of the Ringby* Paul de Kock. His wife smells burning, the kidney is fast on its way to becoming a burnt offering, but Bloom saves his day and makes a breakfast of it along with tea and buttered bread. As he eats he reads his daughter’s letter. Meal and letter concluded he steps out to the back garden of the house where there is a privy. There he reflectively defecates and micturates all the while reading an old copy of a popular print *Titbits*, with which he eventually wipes himself. He steps out into the bright sunshine as the bells of George’s church sound a quarter to the hour. Mr. Leopold Bloom’s day has begun.

Joyce’s fictional method in this episode is the one to which at this stage we have become comparatively accustomed (Joyce himself in his schema for the novel designated it “Narrative Nature”1 as if his method had been undergoing a process of growth in the text to that point) through the first three episodes of the *Telemachiad, Telemachus, Nestor and Proteus*. It is a method which freely combines third person omniscient narration, with stream of consciousness and a narrative technique operating subtly between these two. Thus the opening is poised ambiguously between the various modes of narration as if
instructing us on what is to come. The first magisterial sentence is exemplary. “Mr. Bloom ate with relish the inner organs of beast and fowls”. Is the verb here used to designate a completed action, as it would normally do in such a syntactic formulation, or is this the less customary usage which indicates habitual practice, predilection? The reader’s mind swiftly leaps from the former to the latter as we learn “he liked thick giblet soup, nutty gizzards, a stuffed roast heart, liver slices fried with crustcrumbs, fried hencods’ roes. Most of all he liked grilled mutton kidneys which gave to his palate a fine tang of faintly scented urine”. But we realise that this is not just a narrative description of Leopold Bloom’s culinary preferences but a step into his current state of mind where he indulges himself in an appetitive fantasy. Our minds however as readers can’t quite shake off the initial impression of that verbal ate (the verb gave accentuates the effect) as indicating a completed action and an image of gargantuan consumption (to which theme I shall be returning) lingers in our sense of the text. Let one further example suffice to exhibit the freely modulating nature of Joyce’s narrative method. As Bloom nears home after his brief journey (a minuscule preview of the greater voyages and adventures to come for this Dublin Odysseus) he imagines the physical pleasures which await him there. The passage runs as follows:

To smell the gentle smoke of tea, fume of the pan, sizzling butter. Be near her ample bcdwarnied flesh. Yes, Yes. [the novel of course famously ends with ninefold yeses]
Quick warm sunlight came running from Berkeley road, swiftly, in slim sandals, along the brightening footpath. Runs, she runs to meet me, a girl with gold hair on the wind.
Two letters and a card lay on the hallfloor.

Here we move from the internal world of Bloom’s consciousness, all desire and hunger for food and creature comforts, to the obviously objective report of a third person narrator in the final sentence, by way of a tantalisingly emotional passage which suggests Bloom’s tremulously paternal state of mind, without quite restricting itself to the contents of his consciousness. For the poeticism of those central two sentences, all romantic syntactical inversion and a decadent’s preciosity, is surely not Bloom’s formulation for all that the second sentence grammatically insists that it is. Again, external reality, consciousness, and the narrative trajectory of the text crossfade into one another through subtle shifts in linguistic register and syntactical deployment.

Such a method is marvellously adapted to Joyce’s purposes in this episode: to weave a simple narrative thread (of the kind I have outlined above) without thereby doing unacceptable damage to the impression of the moment by moment quality of consciousness he also wishes to supply. As one reads, attending to the frequent, swift movements from inner to outer life and to the spaces between them, one is almost mesmerised into sensing that this text is alive in a curious way, and modulations and variegated perspectives mimicking the vitality and instaneity of life itself. The method however is adopted by Joyce not only to achieve this brilliant literary illusionism, but because it can also, almost surreptitiously, carry a huge burden of information, allusion, reference and mythic analogue, which at one and the same time can provide detailed introductions to two of his main characters and develop thematic issues central to the work as a whole. And all this without sacrificing that utterly irresistible sense present here of life being lived moment by moment, with the surprise and freshness of the truly experiential that involves.
Consider at the most basic level how much we learn, almost subliminally, as if these facts are items held momentarily in the consciousness and even unconsciousness of Bloom, about Bloom, about his spouse Marion and his daughter Milly. Marion (Mrs. Bloom is introduced to us as Marion but we learn in this episode that to Leopold she is Molly) has lived in Gibraltar, though she has forgotten what little Spanish she picked up there (Bloom it seems courted her in Dolphin’s Barn on the southwestern outskirts of Dublin). Her father was one Tweedy, a mustachioed gentleman, who rose from the ranks in the British army, who was involved in some way at the siege of Plevna. He also it seems collected stamps. We learn too how Bloom makes his living: he’s an advertising canvasser (“No use canvassing him for an ad”) who takes a professional interest throughout the episode in advertising signs and newspaper campaigns. We hear that Bloom knows Simon Dedalus, Stephen’s father, socially, for he has been in his company when that public house thespian had mimicked Mr. O’Rourke, the publican Bloom greets on his morning venture out for a breakfast treat. The Blooms now live in Eccles Street which apparently they rent rather than own, for Bloom is not a ratepayer, requiring a Mr. Kearney to act as a guarantor to allow him to borrow books from Capel Street public library. But the Blooms have not always lived in Eccles Street. They once lived, as Bloom’s recollections inform us, at Saint Kevin’s parade, where they had the pleasure of a man named Citron as a neighbour and there are indications too in the episode that they lived close to Holies Street when their daughter Milly was born. Slowly we become aware of Bloom’s Jewishness, despite the unorthodoxy of his appetites. His sense of desolation as he briefly contemplates the miseries of the Diaspora confirms that: “The oldest people. Wandered far away over all the earth, captivity to captivity, multiplying, dying, being born everywhere.” No wonder he hurries home, where he finds the letter from Milly whom we learn is working as assistant to a photographer in Mullingar (a town about 46 miles west north west of Dublin). Milly is fifteen and has already started to notice men, telling Bloom in her letter of a young student she has met named Bannon, a cousin it seems of Blazes Boylan. And perhaps most crucially we learn that the Blooms did have a son named Rudy who died in infancy. He would have been eleven, Bloom remembers.

At another level we learn as well various things about Bloom’s personality. We note that he is inclined to changes of mood, almost in tune with the momentary changes in the weather. As a cloud covers the sun his mood dips. It is as if at the start of a day his mood hasn’t quite stabilized. He fluctuates, as C.H. Peake has noted, “between feeling young and feeling old, between satisfaction and regret”. But certain responses seem more like characteristics of personality than just fluctuating effects of the environment. Throughout Calypso Bloom seems inclined to a kind of passivity, in response to his wife’s slothfully imperious orders, to his own disturbed recognition that he may well be about to be cuckolded by Blazes Boylan (who has rudely written to Mrs. Marion Bloom, committing a solecism to be sure, but displacing Leopold in script as he will replace him in bed) and in response to an intimation that his daughter may lose her virginity soon, to her young student perhaps. But this passivity is attended by an innate sympathy for people and animals. He saves the cat a tasty lick, he’s indulgent of old Professor Goodwin “Dreadful old case. Still he was a courteous old chap”. The last sentence of the episode is one of true sympathy: “Poor Dignam!” as the church bell tolling the hours reminds us of the bell which has tolled for that recently dead man, whose funeral Bloom will attend at 11 a.m. And despite the fluctuations in his mood in this episode Bloom remains chronically attached to information, scientific lore and opinionation of all sorts, which by
the end of the book will have made him a walking compendium of mildly interesting but useless and often inaccurate data. As the sun nears the steeple of George’s church he ponders “Be a warm day I fancy. Specially in these black clothes feel it more. Black conducts, reflects, (refracts is it?), the heat”. It absorbs actually, as Joyce would have us know. But no matter, for there’s something touching about this put-upon husband, who anticipates cuckoldry and who has the painful inheritance of Jewry to endure, with its vengeful God and experience of persecution, who keeps resolutely to secular explanations of a dangerous and troubling universe. It is he who can explain the etymology of that big word **Metempsychosis** which Molly has come upon in the course of her less than educative reading, as if a correct knowledge of linguistics can transcend the violent mysteries of life and death:

Cruelty behind it all. Doped animals. Trapeze at Hengler’s. Had to turn the other way. Mob gaping. Break your neck and we’ll break our sides. Families of them. Bone them, young so they metempsychosis. That we live after death. Our souls. That a man’s soul after he dies, Dignam’s soul....

7 The fictional method which Joyce employs in this episode allows him therefore not only to create an impression of the moment by moment quality of consciousness but to supply us with a great deal of information about the Bloom’s family life, and about Leopold Bloom himself. It allows much else as well. Through the episode we become aware not only of this fine sunny morning in Dublin (the date is indicated as the 16th since Bloom reflects that Milly’s birthday has occurred the day before on the 15th) as a moment in time made up of moments, but as a point in history. The references to Molly’s father’s military past, in Gibraltar, at Plevna during the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-78 when England sent the usual gunboats and considered intervention to prevent the expansion of Zsarist Russia, call into our minds that *Ulysses* is a work of the age of imperialism, composed during or after a terrible imperial war. We learn too of the imperial ambitions of the Japanese, then at war with Russia over disputed territorial claims in Manchuria and Korea. For Bloom recalls Simon Dedalus mimicking the publican O’Rourke: “Do you know what I’m going to tell you? What’s that, Mr. O’Rourke? Do you know what? The Russians, they’d only be an eight o’clock breakfast for the Japanese.” The episode also includes references to the new nationalisms that were fomented in this age of imperial hegemony and ethnic resurgence. Bloom calls to mind both Sir Moses Haim Montefiore, a Zionist father figure who supported the Jewish colonization of Palestine in face of widespread European anti-semitism and Arthur Griffith the robust (and as it happens somewhat anti-semitic) Irish Irelander and founder of Sinn Féin. We hear briefly too of militant Irish rebellion in the person of James Stephens the Fenian leader. And the butcher Dlugacz, is briefly identified as an enthusiast, presumably for Zionism.

8 Imperialism was of course essentially about wealth and control of the world’s resources. About economics in fact. In the scheme which Joyce employed as a compositional guide as he worked on *Ulysses* he identified each episode with a particular art: History, Rhetoric, Literature, Music etc. The relevant art in *Calypso* is Economics. Accordingly there is much about money, value, business, wages and wealth in the episode. We are told the valuation of a house on Bloom’s street; the salary earned by Milly in Mullingar; about old man Tweedy cornering a market in postage stamps; about a scheme to invest in a fruit plantation in Palestine and how young men from even such a dismal county as Leitrim come to Dublin as barmen and emerge eventually as grocers, the Findlaters of the age or even as Lords Mayor like Dan Tallon. Bloom ponders the economics of such transformations:
Where do they get the money? Coming up redheaded curates from the county Leitrim, rinsing the empties and old man in the cellar (old man is the dregs of glasses, re-used by the unscrupulous bar staff). Then lo and behold they blossom out as Adam Findlaters or Dan Tallons. Then think of the competition. General thirst. Good puzzle would be cross Dublin without crossing a pub. Save it they can't. Off the drunks perhaps. Put down three and carry five. What is that, a bob here and there, dribs and drabs. On the wholesale orders perhaps. Doing a double shuffle with the top travellers. Square it you with the boss and we'll split the job, see?

The relation between the individual arts and the individual episodes of *Ulysses* is a complex one. It is very much easier, it seems to me, to discern the thematic significance of the Homeric parallels in the scheme (and that is difficult enough in some cases) than to relate each art to its episode in a convincing manner. Indeed Peake has argued “While the epic reference forms a commentary on the central themes, situations and action of the novel, and the organs compose a metaphor for the corporate life of the city, the arts column is essentially a checklist for the benefit of the author – its effect on the reader is achieved, not by recognition of the scheme, but by his total impression that the condition of all the fields of intellectual endeavor in Dublin have come under scrutiny”3. In *Calypso* the relationship may be more thematically integral than this allows. The episode is clearly about appetite, consumption and waste, about desire and failed fulfilment, about images and commodity fetishism. In fact this episode seems, it can be argued, to occupy itself with the stage in European economic history recently addressed by Franco Moretti, in his brilliant essay “The Long Goodbye: *Ulysses* and the end of liberal capitalism” (in his book *Signs Taken for Wonders*, 1983). There he identified (drawing on Marx and the Marxist historian of modern Britain, E.J. Hobsbaum), a stage in British history when imperialism sought to solve, by exporting surplus populations and by the exploitation of cheap natural resources, a crisis bred of disequilibrium in the Free Market of classic liberalism. Moretti sees the crisis as a breakdown in the liberal idea of the market which “in turn entails the decline of the liberal form of bourgeois society, to which the free market guaranteed rational functioning, automatically regulating its conflictual, irrational and private foundations.”4. The result is the economics of over-production and the exploitation through advertising of appetitive, irrational impulses that cannot be satisfied – a political economy of imperialist predators, of desire, consumption and evacuation so that the market may voraciously sustain its uncontrollable growth.

*Calypso*, this episode which reveals its historical moment as the era of imperialist adventurism and of other new irrational forces, nationalism, Zionism, re-invigorated anti-Semitism, which takes economics as an aspect of its material, opens with an image of the gargantuan consumption of offal, an appetitive infringement of taboo. Bloom, as we meet him, seems as predatory as his cat whose mental life is adapted solely to the hunt: “She understands all she wants to.

Vindictive too. Cruel. Her nature. Curious mice never equal.” The cat is seen as possessing “avid shameclosing eyes” (no taboos here) with “Milkywhite teeth” “and eyeslits narrowing with greed till her eyes were green stones.” This last image combines in subtle fashion a hint of imperialist plunder with feral impulse; the same impulse evident for a moment when a trader accepts payment later in the episode: “A speck of eager foxeyes thanked him.”

The predatory and the appetitive present in these images and in the descriptions of eating, drinking, the breeding of cattle, in the episode are, we must note, associated with the sexual impulse in Bloom’s consciousness. Economics, predatory appetite and
unsatisfied desire seem accordingly aspects of irrational impulse in Calypso, animalistic and even perverse. Mr. Bloom's hunger is almost erotic in its sensory indulgence. This is suggested in a passage which reads like an extract from one of Molly’s mildly salacious library borrowings. These are merely sausages as Mr. Bloom sees them: “The shiny links, packed with forcemeat, fed his gaze and he breathed in tranquilly the lukewarm breath of cooked spicy pigs' blood.” Bloom lusts after his neighbour’s skivvy (breaking one commandment and wishing to break a second) as if she were a succulent piece of meat, hurrying, unsuccessfully, with his non-kosher purchase so that he can follow her in the street “to catch up and walk behind her if she went slowly, behind her moving hams.” Molly to him is like a lactic beast: “He looked calmly down on her bulk and between her large soft bubs, sloping within her nightdress like a shegoat’s udder.” And as Bloom imagines the sexual dangers Milly risks in Mullingar he imagines her a piece of fruit ripening for the picking, like one of the oranges or citrons he has earlier day-dreamed about, or an olive, like those in the jar from Andrews, the merchant in Dame Street, which Molly hadn’t cared for. So instinctual sexual desires intermingle in the episode with economic fantasies or miracles, barmen to grocers, “Orange groves and immense melonfields north of Jaffa”, in a world of predatory impulses, consumption and the evacuation with which Calypso draws to a conclusion. Throughout there is no sense of economic life obeying rational, self-regulating principles as it was assumed to do under liberal capitalism and a free market. It is grounded in as primal and as irrational a level of human identity as hunger and libido. And even human culture which the modern economy delivers in proliferating, mass-produced printed form (in novels like those by Paul de Kock and prints like Titbits) is simply another example of consumption and evacuation. We see therefore Molly searching through her book with a hairpin because her fingertips are greasy with butter, that is when her husband has rescued it from under the bed beside the chamber pot; Bloom reads Titbits at stool; each of them enjoying the somatic pleasures of the text.

13 It is by now a critical commonplace to associate the emergence of fictional realism as the dominant mode of the English novel in the early nineteenth century with the era of liberal capitalism in Britain. A self-regulating free market (classically defined in Adam Smith’s The Wealth of Nations) seemed to the rational mind to be the product of a reality which, obeying principles of order, could be adequately represented in a mimetic art form. It was by contrast the determining assumption of the high Modernism of the early twentieth century (in which Joyce’s text is a notable entry) that such realism was no longer capable of such representation and indeed that representation itself was a misguided, because impossible, artistic ambition. It may be possible then, to read Modernism’s radical eschewal of mimesis as in part a response to the changed economic conditions of late nineteenth century Britain and Europe, a century of progress being brought to a premature end by the first Great Depression of the last quarter of the century which Britain had met by hectic imperial outreach and others by ethnic enthusiasms of one kind or another. In such an explanatory context it does not then surprise that Ulysses in the Calypso episode at the very least, should employ a radically Modernist method, in which no perspective is granted priority and mimesis is not implied as a normative artistic mode, to exhibit the irrational, instinctual and predatory quality of the economic factor in human life.

14 For Modernism, as it abandoned the epistemological certainties of realism and the empirical and even economic certitudes (many of the Modernist writers were obsessed
with economic theory) which secured them, the matter of meaning was a central problematic. It was in artistic practices rooted in theories of myth as a mode of primitive consciousness that embodied truths in narrative acts rather than in the discursive propositions of rational thought, that writers as different as T.S. Eliot, W.B. Yeats, and D.H. Lawrence sought to re-invest with meaning what was reckoned a meaningless world. Superficially considered, the Joycean project in Ulysses can seem to be similarly directed. The Homeric analogues of this text can seem just one more example of Modernism’s desire in T.S. Eliot’s famous words, to give “a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history.” And the non-realistic methods which Joyce employs to such effect in so many sections of Ulysses, including the blend of objective narration, stream of consciousness and an intermediary mode, seen at work in Calypso, are of course as well-suited to the mythic method of high Modernism, as they are to the presentation of consciousness and historic zeitgeist. It is, however, only when we examine in detail how the Homeric analogues are worked into the text that we come to realize that something rather different than the endowment of “shape and significance”, of meaning indeed, is taking place. Calypso supplies a pertinent occasion. The episode takes as its Homeric parallel Book Five of The Odyssey which tells of the seven year sojourn of Odysseus, in thrall to the nymph Calypso on her island of Ogyvia. In the Homeric telling of the tale Odysseus is less than happy with his lot on the nymph’s island but needs divine intervention to release him. How precisely this set of circumstances relates to the episode under discussion is, to say the least, not entirely clear. Is Molly Calypso? How then is she Penelope in the Ithaca of 7 Eccles Street from where Bloom must begin his odyssey? Or is that a simple-minded question? Does not the mythology of gods and goddesses, of enchantresses, speak only to us of the fact that all deities reside within the human breast and that a man can see a woman at different times as a Calypso (Nymph), a Circe (Whore), a Penelope (Wife)? But there is of course a nymph in Calypso, the print entitled Bath of the Nymph which Bloom had framed for three and six and which Molly thought would “look nice over the bed”. If we see this artistic representation as the Calypso of the chapter we can I think read the Homeric parallels more satisfyingly (in the company of Adaline Glasheen in her fascinating study of the episode¹). The nymph is an image of that purity and idealised sexuality, without the risks of marital congress with its pregnancies, pains and dead child, which has kept Bloom from full, procreative sexual intercourse with his wife for a span of years, just as Odysseus was kept from Penelope by the nymph on her island. And there is too an image of Circean sexuality in the episode, an image that calls to mind that other temptress who by contrast with Calypso tempts Odysseus and his companions to dally in a perverse, hoggish wallowing in the mire of dark bestiality. There are hints indeed in Calypso of Bloom’s own sexual dark side, his sado-masochism (he wonders does the mouse enjoy being hunted by the cat) which is to be graphically realized in the Circe episode in Nighttown later in the book. But here he is momentarily stimulated by an illustration in Paul de Kock’s somewhat questionable novel (Molly asserts, suggesting her taste has been coarsened to a degree by a steady diet of such fictional fare, “There’s nothing smutty in it.”).

He turned over the smudged pages. Ruby: the Pride of the Ring Hello. Illustration. Fierce Italian with carriagewhip. Must be Ruby pride of the on the floor naked. Sheet kindly lent. The monster Maffei desisted and flung his victim from him with an oath.

So Glasheen can caustically observe: “I do not think it random, and I do not think it funny, the configuration of rival queans: Calypso over, Penelope on, Circe under the bed – virgin goddess, earthly wife, hellish whore.”¹⁶. But what is striking about this
configuration as the critic observes it is that two of the images here are commercial products, the one an engraving, presumably re-produced in illustration of the fictional pot-boiler Molly has just finished reading, the other a photographic colour print “given away with the Easter number of Photo Bits”, a soft-porn publication that presented itself as a photographic magazine. The mythic world of epic does not therefore lie beneath or above the text in Calypso as a principle of meaning and order, or as an ideal by which the contemporary is mock-heroically reduced or comically ennobled. Rather it is revealed in this episode, so preoccupied with the economic basis of the world it embodies, to be merely textual, to occupy the zone of the semiotic if you like, as mere cultural artifact, sign rather than significance in a world of signs. For Bloom and Molly, Blazes Boylan, Milly and her student, do not come into existence in this episode as characters in a realist fiction who can be assumed to inhabit a stable reality, adequately mirrored by the procedures of the prose itself. Rather they exist as products of a textuality whose varying deployments are, as we have seen, attuned in method to moments of consciousness and of history, both driven by the irrational, predatory forces of desire, consumption, evacuation, by a political economy indeed of gross disorder, in which the mythic is merely one more constituent of that disorder. For the enchantress Calypso is here simultaneously sexual fetish, commodity and leader item in a marketing strategy. Stripped of her ontological status in the prior order of myth, she enters the world of mere supply and demand and the distorting imbalances between them. She occupies Bloom’s world in fact. The world of advertising, Molly’s world too, the world of fashion and consumerism. She is indistinguishable from those things which constitute to a depressing degree what we are pleased to call the modern. Calypso, I am arguing, is a brilliant diagnosis of that condition as it presented in its early symptomatic pathology.

NOTES

3. Ibid., p. 152.
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