

Writing Dublin: Joyce, Bloomsday and Tourism in the Irish Capital

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Abstract

In his undeniable masterpiece *Ulysses* (1922), Joyce blurred the limits between fact and fiction from the very beginning as he announced his desire to provide an extremely detailed picture of Dublin, so complete, in fact, that the city could be reconstructed out of his book, if necessary. An exile on the Continent (Trieste, Zurich and Paris) from a very early age, Joyce always wrote of Ireland and his tribute to the Irish capital in *Ulysses* inspired a very original and unique annual celebration. It is called Bloomsday - after Leopold Bloom, the protagonist of *Ulysses* - and it is commemorated on June 16, mirroring the novel's action set on June 16, 1904. The purpose of this paper is twofold: to analyse how Joyce's modernist Dublin odyssey shares some traits with travel writing and to understand the importance of *Ulysses* and its annual celebration to boost literary tourism in Ireland.

Keywords: Literature; Travelling; Ireland; Joyce; Bloomsday

Resumo

Na sua inegável obra-prima *Ulysses* (1922), Joyce justapôs os limites entre factos e ficção ao anunciar, desde a primeira hora, a intenção de fornecer uma imagem extremamente detalhada de Dublin, tão detalhada que a cidade poderia até ser reconstruída a partir do seu livro, caso isto viesse a ser necessário. Exilado no Continente (em Trieste, Zurique e Paris) desde muito jovem, Joyce escreveu sempre sobre a Irlanda e o seu tributo à capital irlandesa inspirou uma celebração anual única e original. Trata-se do Bloomsday - designação que deriva do nome de Leopold Bloom, protagonista do romance - comemorado a 16 de junho, espelhando a ação da obra que decorre a 16 de junho de 1904. Este artigo tem dois objetivos centrais: procurar traços comuns entre a odisseia modernista de Joyce e a escrita de viagens e equacionar a importância de *Ulysses* e da celebração do Bloomsday para o turismo literário na Irlanda.

Palavras-chave: Literatura; Viagens; Irlanda; Joyce; Bloomsday

Ulysses and Joyce's Dublin

In *Ulysses* (1922), for many, 20th century's finest English-language novel, James Joyce provides the reader with quite a peculiar experience: following in the footsteps of Leopold Bloom and, to some extent, Stephen Dedalus, the novel's male protagonists, to get around Joyce's "DEAR DIRTY DUBLIN" (*Ulysses* 183)¹ over an entire day. Surely, there are gaps and omissions, but the exhaustive account of a man's day was not Joyce's sole purpose. The writer's desire was admittedly to "give a picture of Dublin so complete that if the city one day suddenly disappeared from the earth it could be reconstructed out of [his] book" (Joyce qtd. in Butler 11). And so he did. In Joyce's mind the destruction of the city centre as a consequence of the 1916 Easter Rising events was probably still looming, as David Butler suggests (11), and the crystallization of the city in his book could become a guarantee of future preservation.

An exile on the Continent from his early twenties, Joyce always wrote of Ireland and, especially, of Dublin. As Morton Levitt recalls:

James Joyce left Dublin in 1903 at the age of twenty-one. He would return thereafter only three times - once to attend his mother's funeral [...]; once in order to serve as manager of the first motion picture theatre in Ireland [...]; and once to immerse himself for a final time in the physical and moral landscape that would become *Ulysses*. After January 1910, he remained on the Continent, conspicuously removed from his homeland, in Trieste, Zurich and Paris: the most cosmopolitan of writers. We know, of course, that he was at the same time the most insular of writers, writing of nothing but Ireland, nothing but Dublin in fact, writing home constantly for details of Dublin life, Dublin history, Dublin geography that he could turn into fiction. (45)

Joyce's detailed portrayal of the Irish capital in *Ulysses* certainly blurs the limits between fact and fiction.² To this effect, Joyce drew on contemporary documents such as newspapers, maps, letters from family and friends, the often cited *Thom's Directory* of 1904,³ and, no less, on his mental endless repository. As Joyce himself acknowledged, his head was "full of pebbles and rubbish and broken matches and bits of glass picked up 'most everywhere'" (Joyce qtd. in Butler 16). The transfiguration of all this debris into literary pearls is what makes Joyce's tribute to the Irish capital truly unique. Being a modernist Dublin odyssey, *Ulysses* needed a hero and Joyce chose the most improbable one: Leopold Bloom, a travelling salesman and a Dublin Jew; a man in touch with his emotions and in tune with Dublin's rhythms and pace, despite an always pervasive sense of foreignness and displacement. *Ulysses* and its irresistible Bloom inspired, in turn, something equally unique: the novel became the only piece of

literature that enjoys an annual celebration. It is naturally called Bloomsday and it is commemorated on June 16, mirroring the novel's action set on June 16, 1904. As Michael Rogers points out: "Not even Shakespeare's works command such fealty (ever heard of Hamletday?)" (135). No Shakespearean character, and Shakespeare is the great master as ironically recognised in *Ulysses* - "After God Shakespeare has created most" (U 273) - has, indeed, had such an honour.

The purpose of this paper is thus twofold: to analyse how Joyce's novel shares some traits with travel writing, a hard genre to define as it also shares in many other genres - histories, personal narratives, epic tales, accounts of exploration, among other; and to understand the importance of *Ulysses* and its annual celebration to boost literary tourism in Ireland, (re)launching Joyce's home city as a truly literary capital.

In "Modernism and travel (1880-1940)", Helen Carr describes the interval between 1880 and 1940 as the peak of the British Empire and the beginning of globalisation "a process set in motion by that vast expansion of territorial colonialism in the late nineteenth century, and one that continues today through neo-colonial economic imperialism" (73). This process meant that identities "either of self or other, were no longer stable" (73) as they needed to adjust to the changes brought by the encounters with other cultures and heterogeneity in general. As Carr explains, writers were an important part of this as

a remarkable number of novelists and poets were *travelling* writers, whether or not they were in addition actually *travel* writers, as indeed a number were. Many of the contributors to Ford's *transatlantic review* - Hemingway, Pound, Jean Rhys, H. D., Djuna Barnes, Stein, Eliot and Joyce, for example - had also acquired what he had dubbed 'the habit of flux'. (74)

The information provided after the last line of *Ulysses* certainly proves Carr right - "Trieste-Zürich-Paris, 1914-1921" (U 933) - as Joyce was certainly in transit while he wrote his novel. Leopold Bloom, Joyce's modern Odysseus is a traveller himself and he provides the perfect starting point to an affectionate celebration of Dublin's quirks and perks. Indeed, although being an ordinary man, Bloom's levels of empathy are extraordinary. At one point, he comes across a blind man (U 230-3) and the man's impairment causes a strong impression on Bloom who immediately offers to guide him across the street:

He [Bloom] touched the thin elbow **gently**: then took the limp seeing hand to guide it forward.

Say something to him. **Better not do the condescending.** [...]

Pass a common remark:

- The rain kept off.

No answer.

[...]

- Thanks, sir.

Knows I'm a man. Voice.

- Right now? First turn to the left.

The blind stripling tapped the curbstone and went on his way, drawing his cane back, feeling again.

Mr Bloom walked behind the eyeless feet, a flatcut suit of herringbone tweed. **Poor young fellow!** How on earth did he know the van was there? Must have felt it. [...]

Poor fellow! Quite a boy. Terrible. Really terrible. What dreams would he have, not seeing? Life a dream for him. **Where is the justice being born that way?**

(U 231, 233, my emphasis)

Besides showing Bloom's awareness as regards other people's troubles and needs, this encounter reveals an intriguing philosophical side as he reflects on how a blind man may perceive the colour of a woman's hair or skin, for example: "And with a woman, for instance. [...] His hands on her hair, for instance. Say it was black for instance. Good. We call it black. Then passing over her white skin. Different feel perhaps. Feeling of white" (U 232). Wanderer Bloom wonders about the man's alternative perception of everything, including the city: "Queer idea of Dublin he must have, tapping his way round the stones" (U 231).

A good Samaritan and a philosopher of everyday life, Bloom is not short of qualities. Psychologically androgynous and a pacifist, Bloom is described as "a finished example of the new womanly man" (U 614), having a "firm full masculine feminine passive active hand" and an "operative surgical quality", rendered useless by his reluctance "to shed human blood" (U 788). Despite all that, on June 16, Bloom, "the funniest man on earth" (U 612), triggers violent and derisive reactions from other Dubliners, perhaps best personified in a character fittingly baptised by Joyce as simply citizen, who sees Bloom as the perfect candidate to represent all enemies. "We want no more strangers in our house" (U 420), citizen says, and that includes Bloom, who, being a Jew, holds what Zygmunt Bauman describes as an uncomfortable status, belonging nowhere and being abhorred in every milieu (223). Indeed, as Laurent Milesi explains in an essay titled "In-Law and Out-Lex: Some Linguistic Aspects of "Barbarity" and Nationalism in *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*", Bloom and HCE, the protagonist of

Finnegans Wake (1939), Joyce's last novel, share the same ambiguous status "that plies between nativeness and foreignness which Joyce had seen as the positive feature of the original cultural patchwork of his country [...]" (58). This ambiguity is linguistically mirrored by the text (both in *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*) through the numerous mutations suffered by the names of the protagonists. Fritz Senn provides an interesting illustrative list when it comes to Leopold Bloom:

Simple Mr Leopold Bloom of 1904, depending on the epoch into which everything is put, can become a "seeker", the "traveller Leopold", "childe Leopold", "sir Leopold", "Master Bloom", "Mr Canvasser Bloom", and so on through the ages. Bloom himself sports a pseudonym "Henry Flower", a newspaper inadvertently shortens him to "L. Bloom", he is multiply transformed into "Herr Professor Dr Leopold Bloom", "Senor Enrique Flor" or "Don Poldo de la Flora". He is declined, or even conjugated, like a grammatical noun: "Bloom, Of Bloom, To Bloom, Bloom". He can be reduced to "Bloo" or fused to other forms like "Bloowho, Bloowhose, Bloohimwhom", a concave mirror elongates him to "lugubru Booloohoom", a convex one fills him out to "jollypoldy the rixdix doldy". Ellpodlbomool" or "Old Ollebo, M.P." are anagrams of his name. Finally, he can mutate into a participle or a verb: "booming". Even nominally and linguistically, the man of so many roles cannot be fixed. (Senn 66-7, my emphasis)

This constant transfiguration of Bloom's name as it is evoked by different characters in different places and in different times curiously connects Joyce's modernist written masterpiece with the realm of oral narrative, where stories are often reshaped by those who tell the tales. We actually have a proverb for that in Portuguese - "Quem conta um conto acrescenta um ponto." - and there is an equivalent saying in the English language: "A tale never loses in the telling". In his introduction to the Penguin's edition of *Ulysses* (the one followed in this paper), Declan Kiberd claims that this was precisely Joyce's intention and that explains why he chose a Greek legend, "told in oral narrative long before it was committed to writing" (U xxxv), as an inspiration to his text. This oral quality is felt by the readers who often claim that interpreting Joyce's challenging text is easier when it is read aloud. Kiberd is one of them.

Being the epic of one single day, *Ulysses* celebrates Bloom's travels through Dublin, but also through his own mind and personal story, which, in turn, encapsulates the whole of the human experience and history as perceived through the lens of James Joyce. As Brenda Maddox, author of *Nora: a biography of Nora Joyce* (1989), points out in an article titled "Dear, dirty Dublin", "The marvel of Joyce's work is that all human

life is there” (39). Dublin and its monuments, landscapes, sites and people are immortalized by Joyce’s writing and this may perhaps contribute to render the Irish capital an “exhibitionistcity” (U 629) and Bloom a tired man: “He rests. He has travelled” (U 870). Oscillating profusely between the sacred and the profane, Dublin is seen as the New Jerusalem or, to quote the text, “the new Bloomusalem in the Nova Hibernia of the future” (U 606).

Dublin: UNESCO City of Literature since 2010

The story of tourism in Ireland during the twentieth century presents two very different rhythms as it grew slowly since the country’s independence, in 1922, until the end of the 1960s, and considerably faster after the membership of the European Economic Community in 1972 (see Baum, Hearn, and Devine 49-50). According to Baum, Hearn and Devine, tourism was not, at first, seen as a priority (49) and then, when it was beginning to grow more steadily during the 1960s, it was disrupted by the events in Northern Ireland commonly identified as “the Troubles” (50).

There are many types of travellers and one form of travelling is undisputedly tourism. Despite being seen by some as a plague that ruined authentic travelling (cf. Mewshaw 2005), one can hardly deny its growth and current economic significance. The long-term consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic remain yet to be seen, but, recently, mass tourism has found its counterpart in niche tourism or specialized tourism. One offers staged settings for great masses of people; the other exclusive experiences tailored to the customers’ tastes. This last one includes cultural and literary tourism and Dublin is the perfect place to visit for those who seek that particular experience.

Indeed, Dublin, a UNESCO City of Literature (dublincityofliterature.ie) since 2010, is the birthplace of no less than four Nobel laureates of literature: the poets William Yeats and Seamus Heaney, the dramatist George Bernard Shaw and Joyce’s disciple Samuel Beckett. To celebrate UNESCO’s permanent distinction, a sixty cents stamp was commissioned and it surprisingly features a 224-word short story written by 17-year old Eoin Moore, a Dublin teenager who tried to capture Dublin’s spirit. Not surprisingly, on the other hand, the text revolves around the city’s rich and multicultural history, ending as follows: “All of us who travel those arteries step on the words, actions, and lives of those who travelled them before us. The city embodies the people, and the people embody the city”.⁴

Joyce did not win a Nobel Prize but he certainly is a master of literature and if Dublin is, undeniably, a city that breaths literature it is largely due to his major

contribution. Accordingly, the English language and literary tourism in Ireland will forever be intertwined with Joyce's works and, particularly, with *Ulysses* and the very specific celebration of Bloomsday.

Brenda Maddox describes Bloomsday as “an Edwardian orgy of fancy dress, horse-drawn carriages and many stops at pubs” (38). She also points out that “few tourists will have a clue why Joyce commemorated that particular day, but Joyceans “(people who know better than to put an apostrophe into *Finnegans Wake*) know that 16 June 1904 was the day Joyce first ‘walked out’ with Nora Barnacle [...]”, his future wife (*idem*). J. S. Marcus describes the festival in similar words: “Bloomsday participants dressed up in Edwardian garb visit a number of local sites mentioned in the book and often recreate the meals eaten by its characters. [...] Even ordinary Dubliners who wouldn't go near a Joyce book may join in the fun by sporting a straw hat or a walking stick” (n.p.).

Every year, the festivities programme includes a wide range of activities, but the readings and the walking tours are mandatory. In an article titled “In the footsteps of James Joyce”, Stephen Cox revisits Sweny's, the pharmacy portrayed in *Ulysses*. For Joycean lovers and tourists in general, it is still possible to imitate Bloom's purchases on June 16, 1904, and buy a bar of “old-school lemon soap” (18) during one's walks around Dublin. Cox describes the place as a “time machine to Edwardian Dublin” as little has changed since its beginning in 1847:

The chemist's receives many visitors who actively seek it out but Murphy [the owner] believes that a large part of Sweny's charm is the surprise passers-by get on wandering in by chance. It was heartening to see such a love of Dublin in the staff of this appealing time capsule. Stumbling across hidden gems such as the French reading group makes you realise that you don't know your home town as well as you think.

Naturally, 16 June (the day on which *Ulysses* is set) is the busiest day of the year for Sweny's; Murphy says that up to €5,000-worth of lemon soap is sold on this date alone.

This is one interesting example of how Bloomsday became an important event for Dubliners and visitors alike, but there are other as the celebrations pullulate around the city. The readings, for example, are not exclusively indoors in pubs and places like Sweny's; they often happen outdoors. The following photographs provide an example of a public reading, held in 2010, precisely the same year in which Dublin was elected UNESCO City of Literature.



Dublin, 2010



The readings and walkings are complemented by talks and lectures, the exhibition of films or plays, roundtables and book launches, as well as bus tours, and, obviously commemorative meals. In 2010, the Bloomsday programme included the launching of a new edition of *Finnegans Wake*, with a talk by Joycean scholar and co-editor of the book,⁵ Danis Rose, at the James Joyce Centre, in Dublin.

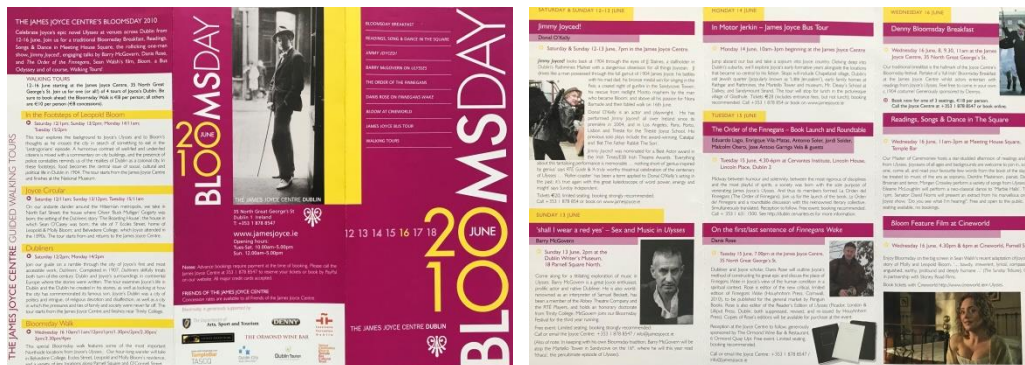


James Joyce Centre, 2010



O'Connell Street, 2010

Besides the many events that take place every year, at the James Joyce Centre, during the entire week around June 16, evidence of Bloomsday celebrations can be found everywhere in Dublin.



Leaflet, Bloomsday Programme 2010

According to its official website (bloomsdayfestival.ie), the first celebration of Bloomsday happened in 1954, on the 50th anniversary of the day depicted in the novel, when a group of writers and other cultural figures organised a daylong parade following the sequence of events narrated in *Ulysses*. Since then the festival has turned into a street carnival accompanied by a series of other initiatives, some of them more academic, as described above.

In 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic imposed serious restrictions on the wanderings of Joycean lovers and tourists in general. Most of the events became online gatherings. Readings and songs, for example, took place on June 16, at 7pm, on Youtube Live on the James Joyce Centre channel. A Bloomsday webinar with Valérie Bénéjam (University of Nantes), Catherine Flynn (UC Berkeley), John McCourt (University of Macerata) and Sam Slote (Trinity College Dublin), entitled “Ulysses, Pandemic, and Social Distancing”, was held on June 16, 2020, from 5pm to 6pm (Dublin time):

The word pandemic - from the Greek πάνδημος - means that which belongs to all people and so works as a kind of plural to the word everyman. Indeed, the Covid-19 pandemic is universal in that it touches everyone, yet it is also singular, each country, indeed, each person experiences it differently. Likewise, *Ulysses* is the great novel of the universal made individual, as embodied by the book’s protagonist, the ‘everyman’ Leopold Bloom. In this webinar, four leading Joycean scholars will discuss what Joyce’s *Ulysses* can say about the current crisis. (*Bloomsday Festival 2020*)

Bloomsday is definitely an occasion in which human contact is key (meals and drinks are shared, people walk together), but this year it became eminently a big event online. Thus, Morris Beja’s definition of Joyceans’ spirit could be evoked to illustrate the situation: “We’re used to dividing the world into two categories: what’s relevant to James Joyce and what isn’t - and the second category seems to get smaller all the time” (qtd. in Maddox 39). Even an event as rare as a pandemic can be a fertile ground for debating Joyce’s modernist novel and its literary and linguistic achievements.

Although being one of the highest exponents of English modernism and English literature at large, Joyce’s relationship with the language was always a bit problematic. As Kiberd stresses in his introduction to *Ulysses*: “The artist in Joyce was dissatisfied with aspects of the English language, despite its formidable expressive powers and despite the skill with which he realized its genius” (U xxxviii). Kiberd continues by emphasising that Joyce’s marginal position regarding the English literary tradition enabled him to use English “without superstition, irreverently, even

insolently” (*idem*). Countless quotes from *Ulysses* and almost the entire Wakean text could prove Kiberd right. However, since the core of this paper is the celebration of Bloom’s day, his words, or hallucination, in the episode of Circe can perfectly illustrate Joyce’s view of the English language: “BLOOM: (Repentantly) I am very disagreeable. You are a necessary evil. Where are you from? London?” (U 619).

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¹ Henceforth identified by its initial: U.

² An initial version of this article was first presented at the International Conference "Touring Travel Writing: Between Fact and Fiction", held between December 5-7, 2019, at FCSH - Universidade Nova de Lisboa (Lisboa, Portugal).

³ *Thom's Irish Almanac and Official Directory* was first published in 1844 and grew over time to include, among others, a street directory for Dublin, a wide variety of information, events, listings and statistics on the UK and Ireland, and names, addresses and occupations for individuals in other towns and districts in Ireland (see www.askaboutireland.ie).

⁴ The stamp was available for purchase since May 2013, at main post offices all over Ireland; at Dublin's General Post Office, in O'Connell Street; and online. For viewing the stamp and reading the entire short story, access <https://www.thejournal.ie/fighting-worlds-stamp-912325-May2013/>.

⁵ In 2010, Danis Rose and John O'Hanlon brought out a limited critical edition of *The Restored Finnegans Wake*, published by Houyhnhnm Press. A Penguin edition has been available since 2012.