The Postmodern Joyce Emerging in Ulysses: Joyce's Sirens of Words

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The Postmodern Joyce Emerging in Ulysses: Joyce's Sirens of Words

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James Joyce, often presented as a quintessential modern writer, has more recently been given the distinction of making the bridge to postmodern discourse and even of embodying it. Scholars agree on one position only: at some point, Joyce changed his style and turned the modern story into postmodern discourse; otherwise, his position in literary history straddles the modern and postmodern niches. *Ulysses* shows a transition from what Joyce himself called his “initial style.” In this style, we find character Stephen Dedalus, hero of the modern classic *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. By contrast, we find in *Finnegan’s Wake* a different style, which most scholars identify as postmodern. A comparison of “Telemachus,” the first episode of *Ulysses*, with “Sirens,” the twelfth episode, illustrates Joyce’s (r)evolution in narrative technique and language usage as Joyce works to achieve a decentering of characters and narrator in order to focus on the language itself.

The decentering that occurs between “Telemachus” and “Sirens” makes the discourse postmodern in style. The shifting or eradication of centers opens up the possibility of freeplay in language, and language was Joyce’s (postmodern) concern. Joyce recognized the limits imposed on *Ulysses* by the presence of Stephen Dedalus, a character unable to do anything but carry on the “initial style”; Joyce realized that this would eventually box him in, leaving Stephen and the novel’s stylistics little room to evolve (Yee 52). As Derrida postulates, “the center of the structure permits the freeplay of its elements inside the
total form . . . . Nevertheless, the center also closes off the freeplay it opens up and makes possible” (232). Derrida defines the center as a “constant of a presence—essence, existence, substance, subject . . . transcendental, conscience, God, man, and so forth” (231-232). In “Telemachus,” we are introduced to the expected center: Stephen Dedalus from Portrait, the eternal outsider, the reluctant, shabby artist who abides by scowling at all life around him. He is the reference point for all activities and characters. Buck Mulligan introduces us to the work because he is the first person Stephen talks to that morning. Every occurrence happens because Stephen exists to be affected by it; the world of the novel is Stephen’s world. In the interaction of Mulligan, Haines, and Stephen, the focus is on how the two relate to Stephen, not on how Mulligan or Haines relates to the other. Stephen is the object of their jokes, insults, and pleas. In short, Stephen is the center of the text, the point around which all action turns.

Interestingly, even the grammatical structure reveals much about Joyce’s attitudes regarding his character’s importance in the beginning episodes. In “Telemachus,” as analyzed by E.A. Levenston, the language and sentence structures substantiate the person as subject concept in action (265). Most sentences in this first episode operate primarily around the noun, a subject that “occurs in the initial, thematic position” (265). The clauses and verbs describe actions referring directly to the “actor explicitly mentioned as subject” (265). The tyranny of the noun, specifically the tyranny of the proper noun and personal pronoun, cements, from the beginning, the reader’s perception of characters as subjects.

The way Joyce narrates “Telemachus” helps cement the language and characters in his “initial style.” The conversation among Stephen, Mulligan, Haines, and the milk woman is narrated without a sifting through Stephen’s mind. This in itself seems to be an objective telling. Dialog is indicated through the use of a dash (–) followed by a simple referent. The only indicators we have to accompany characters’ speech are facts the listener and viewer could know. Thus, when Mulligan speaks, he may speak “sternly” or “slowly”—but we are never privileged
to know what is inside his mind. Yet Stephen, unlike all other characters, is privileged in two ways. The narrator tells us Stephen feels pain as he recalls his dead mother, thus revealing unarticulated knowledge as early as page four. The narrative insets tell us about Stephen’s thoughts in ways we never know of Haines’ or Mulligan’s and go even one step further. Six pages into “Telemachus,” the narrator stops reporting what Stephen thinks; instead, we hear Stephen’s unuttered thoughts without the filter of the narrator as he talks of Mulligan’s fear of his art. Here, the narration sets up a hierarchy; Stephen is more important than Haines and Mulligan, who in turn take precedence over the milk woman.

In “Telemachus,” speech and action are always distinct. All spoken language is quoted; indicated speech is usually followed by a simple referent such as “Mulligan said” or “stated Haines.” No subordinate clauses are used to report speech. The language construction is clear and clean. The expected and transparent grammatical usage confirms each character’s role and importance in relation to others. In “Telemachus,” the presented reality is that the center is Stephen, a character whose position at the center is furthered most through the narrative technique that privileges him. The words of other characters are not qualified by their thoughts. At the breakfast table, three voices are audible and Stephen’s thoughts offer the unspoken fourth. Although Stephen is privileged in that we know his thoughts as well as his words, Haines and Mulligan, through their insults and other words directed at him, keep Stephen’s voice from becoming the authority. Stephen presents himself as a pondering artist destined for greatness while Haines and Mulligan contradict all he hopes to represent. Mulligan has nicknamed him “Kinch,” meaning knife blade, and when he first calls him up the stairs, he calls Stephen a “fearful Jesuit,” a term Stephen has been trying to disprove since the middle of Portrait.

Even with Stephen as center, from the outset “Telemachus” illustrates Mikhail Bakhtin’s definition of “heteroglossia,” which refers to the existence of many voices that reflect the conversation of real life (Dettmar 28). Heteroglossia is not a trope; it is the “primary condition” of language and “is prior to and subsumes most of the other important
concepts of Bakhtin’s thought,” such as polyphony and the carnival, which the text of Ulysses later illustrates (Dettmar 28-29). “Telemachus” reflects the “primary condition” as we hear the interaction of Mulligan’s, Haines’ and Stephen’s words, and Stephen’s thoughts. The dialogue among the characters is an example of heteroglossia that makes the text polyphonic through its ability to sustain the “multiplicity of autonomous voices” (Dettmar 30).

Within the heteroglossia, Stephen remains the center both because his are the only thoughts recorded and because he still fills the place of the favored in the narrative. In Joyce’s hierarchy of voices, Stephen is at the top; he is set apart from the other characters, privileging us with more internal knowledge, fulfilling the role of the center in the reader’s mind (Coyle 89). His primary role is strengthened also by Joyce’s attention to voice, the language and vocabularies used to separate the narrator from the characters. Whether the conversation in “Telemachus” appears objective, as it does in the beginning, or whether it is partly sifted by Stephen, as his thoughts become qualifying, the language itself is neutral, without use of “archaisms” or a particularly “literary vocabulary” (Levenston 271). The neutrality is achieved, Levenston contends, by the absence of certain structures. There are no qualifying clauses. In the beginning, the narrator gives himself no opportunity “to comment on the import of his narrating” (Levenston 265). He never explains, never offers a “because” or “although” clause, never gives a hypothetical “if.” The narrator remains objectively omniscient while viewing Stephen’s world (Levenston 265). The ability of the author to narrate apart from the characters and to let the characters sustain their own voices allows them to be something other than a “mouthpiece for the author” (Dettmar 32). In Portrait, Stephen seems little more than a mouthpiece for Joyce, using similar vocabulary and holding similar beliefs to the Joyce of the comparable age. In Ulysses, Joyce sought to move beyond that narrative correspondence of narrator with character, to differentiate between himself as the narrator and the primary character as the episodes progress.

Between “Telemachus” and “Sirens,” the techniques set up in
the novel’s opening begin to disintegrate; the treatment of characters as centers, the use of grammatical structures that confirm the center, the narrative technique, and the use of language all change. Between the first episode and the twelfth, Stephen is replaced as the primary character. After three episodes centering on Stephen, Leopold Bloom is introduced and the narration follows him intimately, perhaps more intimately than Stephen was ever followed. As Bloom rises, Stephen sinks. As Bloom spots Stephen on a few occasions in the streets, Stephen is demoted. Instead of a hero-artist, Stephen is seen as a young man who is naive, poor, and nearly pitiable. His strangeness to the world is made evident in the way Dublin regards him. Bloom, older and wiser, rises as the voice to trust. By the advent of the “Sirens” episode, both Stephen and Bloom have been leveled.

Before these two characters are leveled, however, they are elevated by Joyce’s attention to individual voice. Each voice is distinct. The objective narrator and the interior monologues of individual characters are carefully differentiated from one another, both when Joyce concentrates on Stephen and later when he introduces Leopold Bloom. Many scholars contend that Stephen’s voice and Joyce’s are nearly one. Stephen’s voice has grown in intelligence and vocabulary since the beginning of Portrait and in Ulysses comes closest to Joyce’s language. Hugh Kenner insists Stephen exists “in a zone of interference between ‘his’ habits of words and the practices of James Joyce” (Ulysses 68). Levenston contends that the narrator of “Telemachus” is not Stephen or even or even like Stephen. Stephen is sleepy; the narrator is not. The narrator uses no foggy or rambling language as Stephen does. Thus the narrative remains objective, clean, and uncluttered. (Levenston 265).

Hugh Kenner, however, recognizes Joyce’s ability to widen the gap as Leopold Bloom is introduced in the “Calypso” episode. The distinction between the narrator’s language and Bloom’s is evident not only through structure but also in vocabulary. For instance, as Bloom prepares breakfast and talks to the cat, the description is recognizably the narrator’s and not Bloom’s because of the particularly Joycean vocabulary. Bloom, a simpler man, would not describe a cat as walking
"with tail on high" (qtd. in Kenner 30) as the narrator does nor would he think so linguistically as to see the cat's sound spell "Mkgnoa" (qtd in Kenner 30). Bloom announces the cat's arrival with a simple "O there you are" and would probably vocalize the cat's sound with the more conventional "meow" (Kenner 30). Kenner proves how consciously Joyce presents characters with their own voices that are not usurped by the narrator's voice and that do not exist as a continual reflection of the author. Bloom is a large success; he is not an academic, a gentile, nor has he been raised Catholic; he is not an intentional artist or writer as Joyce is. Finally, in Ulysses, Joyce successfully puts us in the heads of other characters unlike himself, even women characters. This separation between the writer's consciousness and the character's consciousness is imperative and the distinctions sustain individuality and separation from objective narrative.

The success of independent and multiple voices defines Joyce's text, in Bakhtin's terms, as polyphonic. The move from hetroglossia to polyphony begins between "Telemachus" and "Sirens," one of the many changes that consummate the switch out of modern into a postmodern discourse. Joyce uses the carefully perpetuated distinction of voices purposely to build a hierarchy and to establish first Stephan and then Bloom as the center. Just as purposely, he lets the device collapse in "Sirens." In fact, his entire narrative technique changes, letting the devices that characterize the earlier style dissolve to create a more extensive polyphony and something beyond.

In "Sirens," a polyphonic text, the distinction of speech, thought, description, and action is blurred. The grammar changes; clean clear sentences operating around a clearly defined subject disintegrate into multiple clauses that ruin the possibility of clarity and distinction that we grew accustomed to in "Telemachus" (Levenston 265). The language now consists of conglomerations of words uncharacteristic of either Bloom's or Stephen's interior monologues, or even the narrator's description. Some of the words derive from Joycean vocabulary but the style and arrangement are not characteristic of the narrative voice. An origin or author of the words is not discernible, unless we assume that it
is Bloom, the voice we have been trained to revere at the top of the hierarchy between the two pivotal episodes. From the outset of "Sirens," we presume to follow and trust the voice of Bloom; however, three and half pages into the episode, Bloom returns his tea tray and leaves the Ormand Bar, and we are subjected to the barmaids and customers in his long absence. The distinction of voices and their hierarchy has collapsed; the reality that "Telemachus" presented is disappearing.

Also recognizable is the change in narration, particularly the pattern of objective narrative, interior monologue, and sometimes unfiltered first person narrative. We are no longer presented with the thoughts of only Bloom or Stephen as we were before. Other characters and situations do not exist only in relation to either; neither Stephen nor Bloom is the cause or the center. Each fades to the periphery as other people and things are pushed to the forefront of the discourse. Before Bloom leaves the bar and after he returns, the interior monologue still occurs, but it is often indecipherable as such until after multiple readings. Even when Bloom is physically present, he is often withdrawn both from the surrounding conversation and the reader. The previously discernible distinction of voices was attained through Joyce's masterful use of structure and vocabulary. In "Sirens," this and other distinctions dissolve to blur the once-objective narration; narration intertwines with Bloom’s and all others’ thoughts. Because no hierarchy or distinction of character’s voices exists, voices melt together, creating an "overall blunting of perception" (Levenston 261).

We cannot trust even the narrator as the filtering voice because we are not sure which words are narration, just as we are not sure which words constitute speech. The smallest examples come with Joyce’s way of presenting dialogue. Because he does not use quotation marks, but rather dashes, and those only in the beginning, we cannot always be sure when the dialogue stops: "–That was exceeding naughty of you, Mr Dedalus told her and pressed her hand indulgently. Tempting poor simple males" (Joyce 335). Is Simon Dedalus saying or thinking this last line? Or is the line the narrator’s or even the barmaid’s? Perhaps the thing that is most confusing is that distinctions within the narration
and privileged interior monologues are not completely gone. When distin-
tinctions are clearly made, the lack of clarity at other times is less ex-
pected and more frustrating. For instance, the objective narrative voice,
although not always easily discernible as such, rises every now and then
in the discourse as a shock. Certain information can be known only by
an omniscient narrator, but we forget the narrator’s existence in the
midst of the polyphony, the collage of voices and thoughts speaking for
themselves. Here, Joyce has succeeded in displacing the narrator. Nei-
ther any character’s nor the narrator’s voice is privileged; they are often
indistinguishable in the muddle of language. The hierarchy is destroyed
because all voices are given equal standing. Here, with “Sirens” as the
heralding episode, havoc begins and reigns.

When Joyce displaces the tyranny of the center and the narrator
through changes in narrative technique and loss of the distinction of
voices, he is achieving and reflecting a few different things, including
the postmodern disdain of hierarchies. Hierarchies are valued in mod-
ern literature to present what is inherently valuable and trustworthy;
however, the concept of inherent value and meaning does not exist in the
language of postmodernity (Natoli 37). Also, Joyce employs the
postmodern staple of collage, the “dramatic juxtaposition of disparate
materials without a commitment to explicit syntactical relations between
elements” (Bove 48). Joyce borrows from works of the huge literary
tradition as well from conversations with people he interacted with on a
daily basis (Booker 10). His ability to juxtapose and integrate such
materials into his collage is the subject of books, but the importance
here is the mere occurrence of the collage technique. This nonhierarchi-
cal collage could not have existed in Joyce’s limited initial style because of
the narrative techniques that cemented Stephen as center.

Because either Stephen Dedalus or Leopold Bloom has oper-
ated as the center through which to view and evaluate Dublin life and all
around them, their disappearances in “Sirens” yields confusion. The
expectation and confusion are both part of Joyce’s plan; he expects us
desperately to search for Bloom in order to understand the viewpoint of
what is happening inside the bar when he leaves. He slips out so subtly
that we may assume he’s still there for a long time. Joyce expects this dependency and gives the narrative tease, “But Bloom?” (Joyce 333) to echo his reader’s probable question. Finally, in this episode in the middle of the text, we are painfully weaned; we must understand that neither Stephen nor Bloom functions as the center.

In “Wandering Rocks,” the episode prior to “Sirens,” Joyce begins the process of weaning ever so subtly. As the chapter weaves between Stephen and Bloom while they wander the city streets, the narrator lets other voices sift the information of the city for us; Father Conmee is even given a lengthy interior monologue (Joyce 280). This episode shows the multiplicity of centers as we see the same recurring sights such as a coin tossed to a beggar or a young woman crossing the street through the eyes of different Dublin characters. The center changes multiple times, yet a character, well defined and named, is still functioning as the center. In “Sirens,” however, Joyce is not content just to give us another character or more characters as center; he weans us completely from characters and, as suggested by Colin MacCabe, makes the subject of “Sirens” the language itself. This is Joyce’s siren; the ambiguity of language traps us.

“Sirens” is described by MacCabe as the episode where “all positions are constantly threatened with dissolution into the play of language” (14). In the collapse of the hierarchy of voices and the dissolution into a veritable Babel, we cannot even be sure whose voices we are hearing because of Joyce’s “masterful use of ‘it’” (MacCabe 96). MacCabe talks of the “necessary interchangeability of pronouns” (102) and how this ambiguity is one device that allows the destruction of hierarchy. In “Sirens,” much of what is written “refuses the possibility of any origin and therefore narrative falls back into discourse as the text refuses to give us a fixed set of rules for substitution” (MacCabe 96).

The unexpected lack of referents linking words and thoughts to characters creates what seems like mass confusion. The narrative distinctions have disappeared, discouraging us from attaching trust to one filtering voice above others. Whereas Stephen or Bloom used to be
privileged, the hierarchy now has crumbled. Throughout “Sirens,” Bloom is alternately not present or indistinguishable in the language. For instance, a passage records dialogue between barmaids and after an assigned line of dialogue, the next paragraph reads:

By Cantwell’s office roved Greasabloom, by Ceppi’s virgins, bright of their oils. Nanetti’s father hawked those things about, wheedling at doors as I. Religion pays. Must see him about Keyes par. Eat first. I want. Not yet. At four, she said. (Joyce 335)

Distinction is not easily made between the interior monologue and narration at any given time, as this excerpt demonstrates. “Greasabloom” is a name earlier assigned to Bloom in the barmaids’ conversation, either by the barmaids or the narrator (that too is debatable) on account of his greasy nose, so the repetition of the name might be a continuation of the barmaid’s conversation, especially since the most recently assigned line of dialogue comes from Miss Douce. But the given locations rips us from the bar to an outside location, Cantwell’s office. Once we as readers have followed the fast switch to understanding (if we do at all) that the narrator is speaking, not the barmaids, we continue reading under that assumption. Then suddenly, we encounter that “I.” When we encounter the reference to Keyes, we can then understand the thoughts as Bloom’s because we may remember his job assignment. The mention of “she” therefore can be understood as referring to Molly if we remember her appointment with Boylan is at four. In the next immediate sentence, the pronoun “I” ceases; we cannot know when Bloom’s thoughts end and the narration begins, if it does at all. Then, just as suddenly, Simon Dedalus is announced as entering “their bar.” To whom does the “their” refer, and who is announcing the arrival? What we are subjected to is almost the equivalent of a narrator’s stream of consciousness. Unfortunately, it is not that simple; our narrator is not one consciousness nor always predictably employed in the absence of referents.

By applying Levenston’s view that grammatical structure helps
to confirm centers as heroes and applying it to “Sirens,” we find, besides less structured sentences, that the nouns, personal and proper, have often been eschewed. MacCabe’s view of the “necessary interchangeability of the pronouns” (102) in this episode means that the many voices and perspectives need to lose their referential subject of origin. The first few pages which begin “Sirens” show Joyce’s intention to deny subjects of origin: here, the entire episode is summarized in language that purposely gives no origin in its plot line, which has no plot and is not linear. It consists of a language without referents, themes, or characters. Proper names are evoked but even they are simply mentioned, never linked to a verb or descriptive.

In the first three pages that chart the essence of the episode, only eighteen of the phrases with end punctuation are complete sentences, even if they consist solely of a noun/verb combination such as “Coin rang” or Clock clanged” (Joyce 329). The rest of the structures are unfinished sentences missing either object, noun, or verb. Many sentences consist of one word. The sentences substantiate no character as the subject or center. Sentences do not operate around the grammatical structure of noun and verb, let alone around a subject character and a verb followed by an object. As the episode continues, the grammatically correct complete sentence returns, but the noun and pronoun of origin often remain vague or in lapse. For instance, a line of dialogue which reads “Those things only bring out a rash” (Joyce 333) is followed by two verbs: “replied, resented” (Joyce 333). No noun or even a vague pronoun is given as a referent. Sentences like this are hidden among others and we falsely trust assumptions for subject identities, hardly noticing when we are not given the necessary information. After pages of assuming, we eventually realize that we have no clue what is going on; we realize we have insinuated incorrectly enough times too many to be officially lost and confused. But this condition is gradual in its realization; we inevitably go too far before we know we must reread.

The voices and perspectives have lost nothing inherently; rather, they simply exist apart from the source. The personal noun as subject has lost its place. Whereas virtually every sentence in “Telemachus”
confirmed a character, usually Stephen, as the center, the grammar in “Sirens” confirms no one as center because we are often not sure who is speaking or thinking or narrating.

Derrida talks of the moment when we realize that the center is not really the center at all and, in fact, was “never a presence itself, which has always already been transported outside itself” (232). The center is not a “fixed locus, but a function . . . In the absence of a center or origin, everything became discourse” (232). MacCabe echoes Derrida’s thoughts in his description of what Joyce accomplishes in turning *Ulysses* from a story into a discourse.

“Telemachus” gives us the beginning of a story. As an example of a hierarchy existing in and through heteroglossia, this episode rests comfortably as a modern text. When heteroglossia incorporates the . . . “diversity of speech types” (Dettmar 30) existing in the structure of a text and wrestles the characters free form the narrative voice, “in Bakhtin’s terms that text becomes . . . ‘polyphonic’” (Dettmar 30). Bakhtin also gives us the term “carnivalesque.” The carnivalesque goes beyond conversation and offers continual “others” and possibilities. “For Bakhtin, the novel. [defined as the cutting edge of literary word] and the carnivalesque are almost synonymous. Just as the carnivalesque celebrates the gay relativity of all life, so the novel proclaims the relativity of all ‘truth,’ and the inherent fallibility of all discourse” (Dettmar 28). The carnival aspect is not present in the first episode of *Ulysses*; the reader still believes in a truth, a reality, a personality that exists somewhere between Stephen’s words and thoughts and the words of others. This belief is perpetuated by the narrative techniques, language, and grammatical structures; all seem to set up the promise of a truth or reality. Also, we trust the “story.” While heteroglossia occurs, we trust the words used to describe the surrounding and the people because we have no reason not to. This trust is broken in “Sirens.”

The necessary switch to non-hierarchical discourse in “Sirens” succeeds only by breaking down all expectations for the opposite. Many scholars, including MacCabe and Ellman, conclude that Joyce’s intended
center is language itself because "he does not write to represent, express or describe anything" (Coyle 103). He wants us to have the experience with language itself. The intention is for readers to experience language "through a destruction of representation" (Coyle 91) rather than to understand experience through representative language. Joyce purposely moves away from representation in order to focus on language and the importance of sound as he desires us to commune with words, not a mere story plot. To experience the language itself, to pay it primary attention, we must first let go of expectations and ties to plot; we must have already let go of the idea of a center character because it impedes the attention to language. As Derrida asserts, the "absence of a transcendental signified extends the domain and the interplay of signification" (232). No character in "Sirens" functions as this "transcendental signified." Therefore the work, and we as readers, can experience the play of language.

The "play of language" spoken of by MacCabe is one of the terms used to describe what contributes to the breakdown of a single view of reality in the beginning of the "Sirens" episode. MacCabe relies on Julia Kristeva's work on different concepts of truth to define what he means by the "play of language." Kristeva talks of the symbol, the one-to-one correspondence between word and thing, a correspondence that is guaranteed; i.e., that when Joyce writes "chair" this spelled word is inherently referring to the chair in his mind and that we as readers of the word see it referring to exactly the same one named. Kristeva defines the sign as something in a world where there is a basic discontinuity between the signifier and the signified. The play of language is the play between these two concepts of language. Sometimes we read a section of "Sirens" and feel comfortable in linking Joyce's words to object and ideas we believe we can understand, just long enough to trust that we know where we are and what is happening. He alternate the uses of language we can rely on in our conventional perceptions with that which makes our preconceptions fall apart. Sometimes Joyce employs "little triumphs of linguistic virtuosity" (Kenner 30) to create the illusion that things are being named exactly. He creates the illusion of a predictable reality just so he can uncover the illusion by employing language in a
way that deconstructs the expectations readers have. As Joseph Natoli has explained in identifying key concepts of postmodernity, language is not "transparent" or "universal" (68). Joyce reveals this truth, after easily wooing readers into a comfortable relationship of trust with language at the outset of Ulysses.

In "Telemachus," we are led to rely on language as a system of trustworthy symbols. The language is not playful; words uttered by characters can be connected to objects described around them. The standard usage and meaning of words work in this standard narrative as Stephen reigns in the land of the subject. If we rely on our trust that every word directly corresponds with something real, exactly as named, we run into few problems. We can read "Telemachus" without confusion or doubt because Joyce is constructing the illusion purposely, just as purposely as he deconstructs the illusion in "Sirens."

As we attempt to accompany Bloom in "Sirens," we fall into the play of language where words cannot always be connected to visual imagery or related to the situation without a lot of inference. Because the language used to describe the setting, situations, and characters is in play, we cannot be sure of much. The largest clue in deciphering ideas and objects referred to would the identification of the speaker or the thinker because then we could at least infer knowledge by what we know is important to that particular character. However, as already identified, the narrative technique and dissolution of a hierarchy of voices often disallows such certainties. The one-to-one correspondence of "Telemachus" has left us.

One of Joyce's articulated goals in writing "Sirens" was to create the effect of music through the written word because music happens to be the least representational art form (Yee 57). MacCabe says the musicality "destroys the possibility of a text representing some exterior reality and, equally, it refuses the text any origin in such a reality" (Coyle 98). This breaking down of an exterior reality creates the danger in the carnivalesque; it can be subversive. However, this undermining is necessary to achieve the decentering. Whenever the function of words is
primarily for their qualities of sound, this functions leads words away form any single reality (Yee 57).

Joyce succeeds in not only making *Ulysses* carnival through style, voices, narrative techniques—accomplishments most scholars recognize—but he also illustrates Bakhtin’s idea of the carnivalesque at the sentence and word level, a move beyond the modern accomplishment. The decentering, combination of style and discourse, risk of subversion, juxtaposition and collage are taken to the individual and independent word.

In “Sirens,” Joyce first decenters the noun from its empire and uses words to fill less than standard parts of speech. Joyce became fascinated with Ernest Fenellona’s material concerning the Chinese language, an influence that is seen more obviously in *Finnegan’s Wake*, but he first experiments in the “Sirens” episode (Yee 85). In the Mandarin language, a word does not attempt to be an inherent reflection of a thing, Joyce understood. A word in Chinese also does not have a systematic grammatical function. One word performs the functions of noun, verb, adjective, etc., all at one time. This combination, Joyce believes, allows a word to embody more of the essence of what it represented than words in English. In “Sirens” we see his use of non-grammatical word functions. Even when he, grammatically, in the context of a sentence structure, provides nouns (such as the two barmaids), they are named by adjectives joined by a preposition, as in “bronze-by-gold,” (331) or conflated adjectives, “bronzegold” (334). To Joyce, this visually descriptive nomer was closer to the essence he wanted us to understand than were their separate given names of Miss and Miss Kennedy. Blazes Boylan, Moll’s lover, is named by various combinations of the words jingle and jaunty. When names are introduced by adjectives and verbs, the tyranny of the subject is destroyed in name. The reader is obliged to see the words in themselves before coming to understand the words as a character name. When they are understood as a character’s name, the descriptive words characterize the person in a significant identity, the essence of description containing more importance than a mere nomer.
Some names Joyce gives are birthed from the mixture of two seemingly separate identities. For instance, Simon, Stephen’s father, is united with Leopold in the one-word name Siopold and Lydlydiawell is a combination of a barmaid and a flirting customer. The destruction of one-to-one correspondence for characters echoes the possibility of overlap. One person can have more than one name and one name can have more than one person, just as a text can have more than one origin, as words can have more than one source. For instance, many phrases that are hard to attribute to a character or narrator could be read as from multiple sources. Many repeated phrases grace this episode, for instance “God’s curse on bitch’s bastard” (Joyce 338); this phrase appears after a conversation between a barmaid and Simon as well as in many other places where its assignation is nearly impossible; the often vague context offers little help. This and other phrases echo through the atmosphere of “Sirens,” unidentified voices repeating each others’ words, often to mean different things, making the meaning relative to the speaker—a speaker who may ultimately be unidentifiable or at least variable.

Joyce’s combination, collage, and juxtaposition in names extends to other words and even whole sentences. Some words are conflated, expanded, unfinished, and made interchangeable. Joyce takes liberties such as ‘goodgod henev erheard inall” (Joyce 329) and “Blmstup” (Bloom stood up). Characters’ proper names are tampered with in the very opening of “Sirens.” One line read: “True Men. Lid Ker Cow De and Doll” (Joyce 330). In this very beginning, everything is as sparse as possible to sum up the unrevealed flow of the episode where we can later learn that some of the characters’ names are Lidwell, Kernan, Cowley, Dedalus, and Dollard. Joyce’s art is collage; his medium is the alphabet. Words are abstracted, reduced to their essences; words and letters are deleted and lifted to combine directly with unexpected others. Thus he achieves decentering at the word and sentence level, as well as at the plot level.

Essentially, what Joyce destroys through his play of language is an easily discernible context. We as readers pay dearly when we
assume anything; only close hard reading, multiple times, can lead to understanding context and plot. Is Joyce just mean, exhibiting as Hugh Kenner humorously suggests, the snobbish Dublin personality “capable of malice, . . . a spirit which does not mind if we misunderstand wholly and never know it?” (Ulysses 66). Or is he bringing to our attention the postmodern conviction of the fallibility of language and representing Bakhtin’s idea of the carnivalesque: “the relativity of all truth” and the “inherent fallibility of all discourse?” (Dettmar 28).

Joyce’s decentering is an end in and of itself. But it can have other purposes. Some think Joyce wanted us to grasp language, giving us a text impossible to deal with on plot level until we found ourselves frustrated enough in that goal to pay attention carefully to the very elements of the language. In decentering, Joyce is not eradicating a center; he simply denies us characters that fulfill the function and makes multiple centers possible through the play of language. Also, he does not destroy plot. Once we have gotten frustrated and been forced to pay attention to the language, having been trapped by Joyce’s sirens, we can then trace the threads of Bloom’s thoughts on his job and jealousy; we can find Boylan making his way by bicycle to Molly’s house and bed; we can become involved with the men in the Ormand Bar as they drink and sing and hear the barmaids gossip and flirt. We can trace the repeated and unassigned line “All is lost” to refer to Bloom’s fears of Molly’s adulterous act and hear him utter Martha’s name and write her a letter signed with his pseudonym, Henry Flower, as he copes with his knowledge of infidelity.

Joyce’s writing does not deny us the possibility of a center, a negativity even Derrida defines as “unthinkable” (232); but one cannot determine a center until one has seen what Joyce wants us to see—the multiplicity of center, one being the language itself. Hard work or someone else’s annotated notes can construct a plot out of Joyce’s puzzle pieces, but is that what Joyce intended? A given and understood context allows us to simply consume all the assumed signifieds instead of reading the signifiers, the word (Coyle 95). When we think we know what is going on, we do not depend on every single word as much and even skip
some, racing hastily through a text because its use of language is predictable. Joyce begins leading us away from this habit with "Sirens."

This is the Joyce of postmodernism. He leads us to look past the observable context by refusing to give us an easily attained one. Facilitated by the necessary decentering of characters and narrator, he lets all—context, characters, narration, voices words, letters—dissolve into the play of language, creating a carnival.
Works Cited


