

Desiring the Metropolis: The Anti-Aesthetic and Semicolonial Modernism

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Literature, inasmuch as it is a quest for readerly affect, remains forever locked in a struggle against the deadly sin of banality, as its affective success depends on the measure of interest, animation, innovation and originality it is able to represent—all the very antipodes of the banal and the boring. My subject in this essay is the aestheticization of these significant anti-aesthetic tropes as much as their politicization in certain colonial contexts. The crucial challenge might be read as follows: how does one read the constitution of the aesthetic with its diametric opposites, the banal and the boring?

This particular constitution of literature with anti-literary constituents is by no means *sui generis*. The tradition includes the existentialist concern with “ennui,” which is boredom aggrandized, as Patricia Meyer Spacks argues.¹ Even as I accord the grandeur of existentialist ennui its pride of place in the bleak human condition, as etched by Kafka, Camus, and company, my own reading of what I call “semi-colonial” modernism remains more concerned with the earthier, prosier, more boring “boredom.” The force behind ennui—a force which is rather a lack of force – soars high into universal human plights; the humbler agents of boredom stay closer to the ground, locating themselves in more immediate material registers. Beyond modernism and existentialism, the journey of the “anti-aesthetic” continues into the several modernist and postmodernist traditions that have variously challenged some of our central aesthetic and epistemological centers—truth, reason, subjectivity—creating the anti-narrative, the anti-novel, the literature of trash, refuge, waste, and other “anti-aesthetic” tropes and motifs.

The prosier registers within which banality and boredom might be located include the matrices of economic and political relationships. The etymology of the word “banal” is revealing in this respect. According to the *OED*, the earliest recorded use of the term was in 1753, when it indicated obligatory feudal service. While its contemporary meanings include “trite, feeble, commonplace,” the *OED* notes its original sense was of something “‘compulsory,’ hence common to all.” The history of the word therefore charts a narrative of transference, from the occupations of the politically and economically disenfranchised, to a measure of value—

¹ “Ennui implies a judgment of the universe,” Spacks writes, “boredom, a response to the immediate” (12).

or of its lack. At the same time, it is interesting that the earliest recorded use of the word “bore,” in the sense I use it here, is also from the eighteenth century. The *OED* is unable to date a precise year, as it is unable to throw more light on its origins, which are said to be “unknown.” Playing the amateur literary philologist, I would venture to say that it is not entirely coincidental that these terms, so crucial to aesthetic value and affect, do emerge amidst the Enlightenment culture that to a great degree shapes modern Western notions of art.

While the idea of boredom, or of the bore as a person, clearly had currency in an eighteenth-century upper-class England that placed considerable capital on the attribute of “interest” in social milieus, it is the transference within the etymology of the word “banal” that is of particular interest to me as a reader of modernism. Literary-critical and literary-historical contexts demonstrate that this transference is not a philological coincidence either. The relationship between banality as a value and the characterization of ordinary, de-privileged, or peripheralized persons or populations begins to attain substantial literary significance in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century British and Western European traditions. Through such traditions, the twinned sites of the ordinary—as it were, the thematic and the demographic—begin to move from the fringes towards the center with greater visibility than ever before. Cultural anthropology and historical analysis have thrown considerable light on the interrelation between the literary production of banality and the burgeoning destabilization of power structures embedded in colonialism, race, gender, and class. A significant example that captures a sense of the larger intellectual climate that produced British and European modernism is traceable within disciplinary changes in contemporary anthropological discourse. While modernism’s debt to James Frazer is well documented through T.S. Eliot’s acknowledgements, a relatively neglected fact is that the crucial year 1922 saw the publication of *Argonauts*, Bronislaw Malinowski’s ethnographic account of the Western Pacific islands, along with James Joyce’s *Ulysses* and Eliot’s *The Waste Land*. As Marc Marganaro has argued, *Argonauts* ushered in a crucial change of direction in cultural anthropology. It began to move away from the hierarchical, value-laden model of Frazerian anthropology to Malinowski’s more empirical ethnography, which focused on the most banal of details in studied cultures—the “imponderebalia of everyday life,” as Malinowski called them.

The act of ethnographic knowledge production in the Malinowskian model is, in fact, the reconfiguration of elements that appear exotic to the external gaze into banal components of everyday life within the context of a given culture. Just as a shared anthropological interest in myth bridges Jesse Weston and T.S. Eliot, the ethnographic interest in the plenitude of those marginal referential details of quotidian life is shared by *Argonauts* and *Ulysses*. Going so far as to call *Ulysses* “a masterwork of ethnography,” Manganaro argues that both Joyce’s artist and Malinowski’s ethnographer “sculpt out of sundry quotidian experience

triumphant distantiation in the form of exquisitely wrought moments of vocational omnipotence, in which any ordinary event, person, or object can become filled with revelatory possibility” (136). In the foregrounding in Joyce’s fiction of ordinary objects—think of dust and clay in *Dubliners*, clocks and plates of onions in *Stephen Hero*, soaps, pincushions, and keys in *Ulysses*, or unwashed laundry and Shem the Penman’s eggshells and curried notes in *Finnegans Wake*—they become epiphanic, just as in ethnographies they contribute to the shape of definable cultures. In literature as in cultural anthropology, such foregrounding of the banal deconstructs the binary between the “superior” and the “inferior” with regard to cultures and civilizations as much as corresponding hierarchies vis-à-vis subjects of representation, encouraging a triumph of the cultural “margins,” as it were, over the privileged, canonized centers. The subversion of the Frazerian hierarchy of global cultures was already implicit in Malinowskian ethnography; even *within* a given culture (that of turn-of-the-century Dublin, in this case), the order of importance to ethnographic apprehension of objects/practices/phenomena is subverted, as is the ordering of such objects or processes in terms of their aesthetic richness and significance. Here, aesthetic value shows a close but never predictable set of historically evolving relationships with political value, and often, as I suggest below, with economic power structures.

Similarly, boredom, which might be considered the affective cousin of banality, has not only a troubled aesthetic status but also an equally critical political significance when foregrounded within narrative parameters. It is worth turning here to the work of Patricia Meyer Spacks, who has argued that the intensity and continuity of demands for excitement, pleasure and satisfaction in modern human society—ranging from nineteenth-century Utilitarianism to late twentieth-century postmodern consumer culture—consistently leads to boredom, in such a way that demands are raised only to be frustrated. While Spacks primarily has post-industrial “first world” societies in mind, my interest in this line of thinking hinges on the way similar desires take on discrete and identifiable shapes in the context of colonial and postcolonial cultures.

My interest in “semi-colonial” modernism, as such, is at once rooted in my awareness of the centrality of the formal motifs of banality and boredom in Western modernist aesthetics and in the cultural contexts of those modernists who were also writing from within colonial backgrounds. My focus in this essay on James Joyce is therefore significantly connected to the simultaneity of his elevated status within the modernist canon, and his location within colonial contexts that help us examine in a political light motifs that have otherwise almost exclusively been read as aesthetic or existential categories. As is often argued, along with other modernists like Katherine Mansfield, Virginia Woolf, Gertrude Stein, Williams Carlos Williams, and T.S. Eliot, Joyce variously foregrounded the banal and the boring, the ennui-tormented, and the ordinary quotidian everyday as subjects of literary valorization. In this he belongs to the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century tradition that

came to focus increasingly on the banal and the boring as a literary subject. Joyce's specific focus on banality and boredom, however, is not only a component of this modernist worldview, but also a specific concretization of the realities of the colonial condition that this worldview has so often hinged on.

Along with his Irish contemporaries, and other colonials like Katherine Mansfield, Joyce exemplifies what has recently been described as white postcoloniality, a phenomenon that I believe merits greater attention than it has yet received.² Postcolonial studies is so often conceptualized as a critique of European or Eurocentric knowledge systems or material structures that it is sometimes forgotten that several national communities that are either European or of European racial origin have historically existed within colonial conditions. In most parts of the British Commonwealth, as in Canada, South Africa, and Australia, for example, white postcoloniality is synonymous with settler colonialism. Ireland is not the same kind of settler colony, but if we emphasize the aspect of British and Irish Protestant landlord domination in colonial Ireland, it does begin to share some features with the settler colony. It is the interstitial location of such phases of colonialism, not to mention Joyce's integration into the metropolitan canons of European modernism, that have led critics to call him "semi-colonial," a description that also draws attention to his temporal, spatial, and cultural relation to the metropolitan colonial powers and the cultural capital that has accrued to them.³ Such a model of white postcoloniality – or semi-colonialism, which happen to coincide here—becomes crucial in a political reading of British modernism, especially given the skeptical distance postcolonial studies has kept from it, as it has continued to suspect modernism as a predominantly Eurocentric construct of elitist bourgeois subjectivity complicit with the imperialist project. Irish modernists like Joyce, Yeats, Synge, and Samuel Beckett—many of them writing from within colonial conditions—become crucial in bridging the distance between these two significant domains of literary studies today.⁴

Life is elsewhere: perpetuation of deferral in colonial Ireland
It is as a gesture of this correspondence between modernist and postcolonial studies that I seek to show here the continuation of the relation between the normative and political articulations of banality and boredom in Joyce's work. The production and representation of boredom becomes especially important in literature from colonial contexts, and this necessarily reflects the material and psycho-social consequences of colonialism. In an essay on Joyce's *Ulysses*, Frederic Jameson has argued

² "White Postcolonials," MLA Session 540, Philadelphia, PA, December 29, 2004. Organizer Linda Seidel.

³ See Attridge and Howes.

⁴ In the last decade or so, postcolonial readers of Irish literature have aptly demonstrated this. See Duffy, Nolan, and Cheng.

that boredom is an essential experience in colonial Dublin due to, among other things, the insistent appearance of lack, and the incomplete nature of the colony that always gives the impression of having its political, economic and cultural center located in an “elsewhere.” This “elsewhere” was, of course, the metropolitan center of the empire that held the colony in a subordinated, fragmented, and perpetually unfulfilled relation with itself. As Bhabha, Fanon, and others have argued, a major site of colonial domination was therefore the desire of the colony for the empire’s center, a desire destined never to be fulfilled. The perpetuation of this desire for satisfaction leads to the pervasive sense of boredom that defines the colonized’s sense of their own inadequacy. In colonial contexts boredom is a fragmented narrative of un-fulfillment that often carries on well past decolonization, due at once to the persistence of the colonial hangover and to the newer desires constructed by the neo-colonial processes of globalization.

In Joyce’s fiction, the lives of the boys in the first three stories of *Dubliners*—Jimmy in *After the Race*, Little Chandler in *A Little Cloud*, and Farrington in *Counterparts*—inscribe narratives of desire and its continued un-fulfillment that are shadowed to various degrees by colonial domination. Jimmy sees the excitement of cosmopolitan life located in continental Europe, as does his father, who “had modified his views early,” from being a Nationalist to becoming a successful businessman with admiring eyes on England and the continent (24). For Little Chandler, the inadequacy, dullness and barren tedium of his own life form a glaring contrast with the life of his well-traveled friend, Gallaher, who puts on a snazzy performance of cultural cosmopolitanism that draws great admiration from Chandler, and also a little skepticism. The site of boredom is often the bureaucratic institutions and the lifestyles they shape, as Farrington’s life demonstrates, full as it is of the mind-numbing exercise of figures he has to copy *ad infinitum*. The tedium of bureaucracy, moreover, indicates a transitional stage of capitalist development that defined the colony socio-economically. Colonial bureaucracy is constituted by a fragmented relationship with the more fully developed imperial capitalism, and the consequent play of desire and boredom materializes within inscribed colonial lifestyles as an index of this power relation. Seen in this light, the banal, the trivial, and the boring constitute a fatal trinity within Joyce’s celebrated “Irish paralysis”; these form a vicious cycle with the desire of cloistered Dubliners for the metropolitan center of cultural, economic, and political power, a desire that only perpetuates this paralysis with the endless deferral of its fulfillment.

Notwithstanding the incipient landscape of urban modernity and the rise of consumer capitalism, recall that turn of the century Dublin was also, in some ways, inexplicably “premodern.” Frederic Jameson has suggested that due to the apparent familiarity between all the male bourgeois and petit-bourgeois scroungers of Joyce’s Dublin, the city has the appearance of a “classical city,” or of a medieval conclave of burghers

and guilds, more than of a modern Western metropolis.⁵ The smallness and the accessible familiarity also indicate the lacunae of the incomplete nature of the colony, which has part of its economic and political significance located in the imperial center, thereby accentuating the formal fragmentations and destabilizations that are innate in Joycean modernism.⁶ The appearance of this partial and incomplete nature defines the historical location of the city and the nature of its interaction with consumer-capitalism. But this lack is also the consequence of such interactions when the desires evoked by colonialism and capitalism are frustrated, deepening the production of banality and boredom. These are also the psycho-social spaces where the colony's vulnerability to imperial capitalism is most immediately enacted through its doomed but persistent desire for the metropolitan center. This preoccupation with boredom is of course not Joyce's alone. As Seamus Deane has argued in his essay on the relationship of boredom and apocalypse in Irish life, it figures notably in later Irish writers, significantly in Flan O'Brien's *The Third Policeman* as it depicts deadening bureaucratic work in the Dublin Custom house.⁷

The relation between the metropolis and the periphery is perhaps most immediately enacted through the excitement and desire evoked by the urban consumerist culture which, according to Enda Duffy, is linked to colonialism. The production of boredom, partially a result of the continued frustration of such desires, is not only an indication of colonial Ireland's developing but fractured and unfulfilled relation to consumer-capitalism, but also of its subaltern relation to the British Empire. To use Michel de Certeau's phrase, in this sense the most banal practices of everyday life, such as walking in the city, become indicative of the colony's political and economic relation to the empire.⁸ For Duffy, the *flanerie* of Leopold

⁵ See "Ulysses in History."

⁶ See "Modernism and Imperialism."

⁷ Deane, however, doesn't see the boredom in Irish life as a function of its economic subalternity. For him it is more a concern of literary representation, and is very much a feature of the advanced industrial world, as Spacks also argues in her chapter on postmodern consumer culture. Deane writes:

It [boredom] is a feature of the advanced industrial world, where the monotony of work, the vacuousness of leisure, the atomization of traditional communities and practices are all routine experiences that make the representation of boredom inescapable, whether in poetry or in fiction. (168)

It is at such a moment of awareness of the ubiquity of boredom in modern literature that we need to pay special attention to the distinction Spacks makes between trivial, everyday moments of boredom, and the aggrandized existential "ennui." The latter has received its pride of place in literature and theory but the former hardly so.

⁸ De Certeau highlights the "Rhetoric of Walking" and the metaphoric/metonymic significance of such non-linguistic modalities as urban space, architecture and pedestrian movement, to the point where such modalities construct an independent discourse: "The long poem of walking manipulates spatial organizations, no matter how panoptic they may be [...]. It creates shadows and ambiguities within them. It inserts its multitudinous

Bloom is unlike that found in Baudelaire and Woolf, as *flanerie* in a colonial city like Dublin is a consumption that is always overshadowed by exploitation. This exploitation takes place through the trappings and processes of consumer-capitalism, of which the ad-canvasser Bloom is both an architect and a subject. His subjective involvement in the culture of consumerism is articulated, for instance, during his window-shopping in the Lestrygonians episode, or in the various moments in the day when his mind idiosyncratically fixates on an eclectic range of commodities, including Plumtree's Potted Meat, Pears soap, pornographic books, and pincushions on display. This evocation of consumerist desire is both a personal idiosyncrasy of Bloom's and an embodiment of the collective social psychology of urban Ireland in its emergent state of industrial capitalism. Consumerism excites desires that are arguably never likely to be fully satisfied anywhere, and in this sense the perceived fulfillment within the metropolis is but a colonial illusion. But from within the ideology of inadequacy interpellated within the subjectivity of the colonized, the miasmic hatred of the overarching conditions of one's own existence is intensified many times over. Boredom is but an inescapable consequence of this sense of inadequacy, often remaining unnoticed if only due to its very pervasiveness.

Paralysis of triviality, triviality of paralysis: the geopolitics and historiography of banality

Issues of cosmopolitanism and provincialism, the homegrown and the foreign, are not only crucial to the dynamic between what might be naively perceived as the "banal" spaces of the familiar homeland and the "exotic" spaces of foreign climes; they also take on additional meaning with respect to an exiled artist like Joyce. Walter Benjamin's distinction between the traveling and the local storyteller becomes resonant here:

"When someone goes on a trip, he has something to tell about," goes the German saying, and people imagine the storyteller as someone who has come from afar. But they enjoy no less listening to the man who has stayed at home, making an honest living, and who knows the local tales and traditions. If one wants to picture these two groups through their archaic representatives, one is embodied in the resident tiller of the soil, and the other in the trading seaman. Indeed, each sphere of life has, as it were, produced its own tribe of storytellers. (85)

Such a taxonomy becomes especially meaningful with respect to the "narrative locations" of the works of some of the giants of modernist fiction. It is possible to argue that the respective high-paradigms of traveling and local storytelling are Joseph Conrad and James Joyce. While the first, a hardened seaman traveling around the world till the age of forty, had his masterpieces set halfway around the globe, the troubled Irish expatriate, with his cosmopolitan genius and antipathy for the provincial and oppressive atmosphere of his native land, wrote of nothing but

references and citations into them (social models, cultural mores, personal factors) [...]. These diverse aspects provide the basis of a rhetoric" (101).

Ireland, giving Dublin pride of place.⁹ One suspects that an entire *oeuvre* set in Ireland and Ireland only, and within a limited community therein—or for that matter, a six-hundred page novel set within a single day of the life of a provincial city—gives the author the opportunity of exploiting an endless encyclopedia of variously banal and exciting ethnographic details. The hybrid effects of fetishization, hyper-realization, and derealization, whether alternately or simultaneously present, would hardly be likely if the plenitude of ethnographic trivia was not constructed around a single homegrown location, and a small and a provincial one at that, albeit with a troubled history. In this again, the investments of literary and ethnographic knowledge production run on remarkably parallel tracks. From an anthropological point of view, Manganaro points out, the smallness, the provinciality, the ordinariness of life in Dublin make it a more desirable object of study, as “a smaller civic unit—a provincial city on the margins of Europe—is much more appropriately considered as ‘culture’ because it is more readily discernible, mappable, recognizable, than its more complex and heterogeneous neighbors (Paris, London)” (*Critical Heritage* 1:265; qtd. in Manganaro 105).

To return to the traveling storyteller, neither Conrad’s Patusan, or Congo basin, or fictional Latin American nation in *Nostromo*, aspire to such dimensions of epic trivia that its sheer range and proliferating detail can create a haunting aesthetic of the margins, one that variously contributes to concreteness and abstraction, to the presence of the past and the immediacy of the present. One should not be so short-sighted as to equate the banal with the domestic, and perceptions of exoticism with views of distant cultures, and yet one has to admit that paradigms of the banal are in part a matter of cultural relativism—as indeed would be one of the first lessons of cultural anthropology. That which is banal and everyday in one cultural milieu might seem “exotic” and estranging to one from another culture. Being something of a model of the Benjaminian “local” storyteller, however ambivalent, cosmopolitan, and troubled, Joyce is surely at an advantage in foregrounding the banal, the everyday, the drably commercial, and the distressingly provincial of his own time and place in a way that is rarely possible for the “traveling” storyteller. The fact that he chooses to do so, notwithstanding his own cosmopolitanism and international experience, transforming such mundanities into the very stuff of a pioneering modernist aesthetic, is indicative not only of his peculiar artistic genius but also of a championing of the marginal and the unnoticed, an innate ability to confer centrality to the “subaltern fragments” of life and art. Unlike the Malinowskian ethnographer who seeks to understand the “Other” culture through a sense of its banality, Joyce inhabits the very banalities of his own culture to inscribe its “othering” potential as much as its “othered” location, to create art that is rich in political and historical ambivalence.

⁹ The sole exception to this in Joyce’s fiction would be *Giacomo Joyce*, which is set in Trieste.

A sense of the sameness of a close community, of the iteration and iterability of motifs, of the boredom consequent upon such repetition and the familiarity of the locale – all these are features Benjamin sees as essential to the art of storytelling. They are, for him, fast disappearing from the fabric of modern life. Boredom is the secret of new experience:

Boredom is the dream bird that hatches the egg of experience. A rustling in the leaves drives him away. His nesting places – the activities that are intimately associated with boredom—are already extinct in the cities and are declining in the country as well.
(91)

This has been true for Joyce's artist-hero, Stephen Dedalus, long before it could find a mellower, more mature articulation in Leopold Bloom's more ambivalent sensibility. In *Stephen Hero*, the utter banality of the subject of epiphanies is seen as deriving from the "paralysis" of Irish provincial society, which, as Benjamin's above comment suggests, is in a critically transitional phase:

A young lady was standing on the steps of one of the brown brick houses which seem the very incarnation of Irish paralysis. A young gentleman was leaning on the rusty railings of the area. Stephen as he passed on his quest heard the following fragment of colloquy out of which he received an impression keen enough to afflict his sensitiveness very severely.

The Young Lady— (drawling discreetly)...O, yes...I was...at the...cha...pel...
The Young Gentleman— (inaudibly)...I...(again inaudibly)...I...
The Young Lady—(softly)...O...but you're...ve...ry...wick...ed
This triviality made him think of collecting many such moments together in a book of epiphanies. (211)

The production of triviality is here historicized and inscribed within a certain geopolitical context. As the stories in *Dubliners* exemplify, much of the spiritual, political, or economic "lack" (both spurious and real) variously created within the fabric of Irish life – the very "lack" Jameson sees as making up the partial existence of the colonial periphery itself – was doubtless the result of British colonialism acting in tandem with the dominance of the Catholic Church.

The fact that the banal and the trivial in Joyce is often the site of epiphany, moreover, links it to a critique of imperialist historicism. Garry Leonard has argued that the epiphany's foregrounding of the ephemera, the perpetually vanishing present of historical time, is a striking critique of the grandeur of the historicist narratives of imperialism. Joyce's fiction, he argues, "consistently presents what is beneath notice as that which is most noticeable" ("The History of Now" 14).¹⁰ Drawing on various examples of

¹⁰ In a more recent essay Leonard argues that "In the 20th century commodified objects begin to replace the subject as a guarantor of 'inner being' as the rise of commodity culture paralleled the decline of the 'Imperial Subject'" ("Hystericising Modernism" 183). Recent Joycean studies of the object have mostly tended to see it as a commodity, in relation to consumer-capitalism. See also Wicke, and the special issue of the *James Joyce Quarterly* guest-edited by Leonard and Wicke.

the insignificant and the ephemeral in *Ulysses* as well as from *Dubliners*—like “the odour of dusty cretonne” in one’s nostrils in “Eveline” and Maria’s purse in “Clay”—Leonard shows how “throwaway” objects are heightened in their short-lived intensity, leading to a privileging of the non-historized “now.” This “now” is opposed to the imperial historicism valorized by hegemonic figures such as Deasy in *Ulysses*, with his unrelentingly Hegelian notion of historical progress, or, more significantly, by the college president in *Stephen Hero*, whom Stephen bewilders by his radical divorce of sublimity and spiritual sanctification from Thomist aesthetics, such that the latter would apply to “a Dutch painter’s representation of a plate of onions” (95).

During their exchange before the Saturday Stephen is to read aloud his controversial paper on Ibsen, what the president finds most baffling is Stephen’s interpretation of Thomism:

- Pulcra sunt quae visa placent. He seems to regard the beautiful as that which satisfies the esthetic appetite and nothing more – that the mere apprehension of which pleases...
- But he means the sublime – that which leads man upwards.
- His remark would apply to a Dutch painter’s representation of a plate of onions.
- No, no; that which pleases the soul in a state of sanctification, the soul seeking its spiritual good.
- Aquinas’ definition of the good is an unsafe basis of operations: it is very wide. He seems to me almost ironical in his treatment of the “appetites.” (95)

At this crucial juncture of aesthetic-epistemological rebellion against a dominant ideology of beauty upheld by Catholic theology, already incipient in Stephen’s wide-ranging definition of the beautiful are challenges to notions of uplift and spiritual enrichment, there being no place for “instruction” or “elevation” in his allegiance to the Thomist trinity of “Integritas, consonantia, claritas” (*SH* 96). The shocking egalitarianism and open-endedness of his aesthetic theory—that does not look down upon the representation of a plate of onions—disrupts the ideology that characterizes one of Stephen’s two masters (the Catholic Church, the other being the British Crown), paving the way for the foregrounding of the banal and the everyday as fit subjects for art. And in this a degree of identification between Stephen Dedalus and Joyce the writer is clearly valid, as both within the parameters of his fiction and in other contexts Joyce has repeatedly theorized the significance of the banal. Take for instance the following confidence made to his brother Stanislaus:

Do you see that man who has just skipped out of the way of the tram? Consider, if he had been run over, how significant every act of his would at once become. I don’t mean for the police inspector. I mean for anybody who knew him. And his thoughts, for anybody that could know them. It is my idea of the significance of trivial things that I want to give the two or three unfortunate wretches who may eventually read me. (qtd. in Ellmann 163)

Inasmuch as such trivial and marginal objects and situations form the subject of the epiphany, the ephemeral revelation constitutes not only a disruption of imperial historicism but also of dominant Catholic ideology. The moment of the epiphany is therefore one of the most significant sites where Joyce's modernist and anti-colonialist projects come together. It is striking how the ephemera celebrated in Joyce's fiction resonates with the projects of contemporary postcolonial and especially subaltern historiography, notably in Dipesh Chakrabarty's discussion of "subaltern pasts," which resist rational theorization on the planes of anthropological or historical knowledge-production, upsetting notions of the easy progress of time (101). Over and above the philosophical and ethical power modernity infuses into the banal object, in Joyce's fiction the very production of banality becomes a historically rooted political gesture. By linking banality and triviality with what he has famously called the "Irish paralysis," Joyce turns them into potent critiques of Stephen's twin masters, the British state and the Roman Catholic Church. The very banality and the provincialism of the locale, which make it a privileged field of anthropological enquiry, also become in Joyce's deeply problematic text a modality of radical alterity, and finally a powerful if indirect index of the political and economic "othering" to which the locale and its history have been subjected.

Suddenly, Joyce's Dublin looks very much like Benjamin's dream locale for storytelling, even though it might only be situated at an unwieldy intersection between that past and the present it is being rapidly precipitated into—in that tangled "time-knot," in fact. Even if we cannot do justice to the debate about whether *Ulysses*, a paradigm for the modernist novel, is really a masterful achievement of storytelling or of the craft of novel-writing, it is clear that the boring, the banal, and the trivial—all that is truly peripheral to traditional aesthetic imagination and epistemic systems—is the very stuff of Joyce's radical aesthetic. In this he pioneers a strand of modernist aesthetics that constitutes a revolutionary response to the claims of an "otherness" rarely heard before. The foregrounding of the banal and the provincial, the incomplete and the paralyzed, successfully marks his anti-colonial subversion, but it goes far beyond that. The site of banality is inscribed by a large compass of historical, economic, political, and ethical significances: the triumph of earthy trivia over the grand abstractions of the Enlightenment and Platonism and the subsequent critique of the excesses of human subjectivity; the elision of imperialist historicism; and in its most immediate capacity, a radical critique of colonialism and consumer capital, in their ponderous presence as much as their fragmented absence from the civic life of the colonized city.

Ethical trails, political meanings

While critical approaches to twentieth century literature, and especially modernism, have often read the literary concern with banality, boredom,

the ordinary, and the quotidian as a formal innovation and an existential category, they have, on the whole, neglected to examine its significance with regard to political relations and economic production, much less read them in relationship to the socio-cultural productions of colonial domination. Even so, it is interesting that in the few significant instances when studies of twentieth-century history and culture have focused on the motif of banality, they have usually foregrounded negative or even reprehensible materializations of the banal in macro-political terms. Probably the two most famous examples of this approach come from the work of Hannah Arendt and Achille Mbembe, authors whose readings of banality, connecting it to the oppressive execution of power and authority, resonate with each other more than one might expect given that Nazi Germany and the Sub-Saharan African “postcolony” constitute their respective subjects. In *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, Arendt brings out the chilling “banality of evil,” demonstrating the cold, clichéd, heart-stopping banalization of the genocidal bureaucracy under Nazi Germany, the matter-of-fact nature of its mechanized red tapes. For Mbembe, “banality of power” in the “postcolony” not only implies the repetitive and predictable nature of postcolonial bureaucracy, but also the Bakhtinian components of the “grotesque” and the “obscene”; these operate in the system of domination and control in the “non-official” culture of resistance as much as in the official or institutional enactment of authority in the public life of decolonized nation states (102).

I opened this essay discussing the aura of the negative around the banal and the boring with respect to the purported goals of literary aesthetics. Arendt and Mbembe each present more chillingly unattractive and dangerous evaluations of banality operative in the context of material politics and power relations. The pervasive sense of banality and boredom in the colony is also something of a deprecatory phenomenon, inasmuch as an index of success of the ideology of colonial domination is its internalization by the colonized, consequently subjected to perpetually unfulfilled colonial desire. While I would not celebrate banality and boredom to the point of contradicting the very disturbing insights variously offered by Arendt and Mbembe, as a reader of literary narratives I would make the more modest claim that the banal and the boring, when played out within narrative paradigms, often defy their own conventional value – or lack of it – within aesthetic parameters. Joyce’s epiphanization of the banal fragment is as political as it is aesthetic, or “anti-aesthetic,” as the college President might have it. While subverting grander narrative teleologies, it simultaneously makes possible radical new ones that resonate as much with literary aesthetics as with the critique of dominant power-structures.

In fine, within the framework of colonial and postcolonial literary narratives—especially those that variously claim the legacies of the modernist worldview—one can afford a fresh perspective on the question whether boredom necessarily defies the possibility of narrative. As my reading of these ostensibly “anti-aesthetic” tropes reveal, I am not so sure

of this defiance. The key question with which I opened this essay hopefully stands at least partially answered. “Semi-colonial” modernists like Joyce show that the banal and the boring need not be the cardinal sin in literary aesthetics; in fact they can be as aesthetically enriching as they are politically revealing. When my undergraduate students occasionally complain of boredom while reading modernist literature, usually I try to show ways in which such literature leads to “Anacedia,” the Hellenic neologism for the “unboring” John Bishop coined during our panel in the centennial Bloomsday symposium in 2004. These days though, I more often find myself saying: “You’re right. There’s a lot of boredom here. But are you sure this boredom kills the story? Doesn’t it tell new ones too?”

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