

JOYCE, SPINOZA, AND ANTISEMITISM: PROPHETIC DEFIANCE IN *ULYSSES*

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Abstract

Despite Spinoza's prominence in Joyce's *Ulysses*, almost nothing in the Joyce Industry's hundred years has been written about him. My first section reviews three exceptions to this trend, which view the character Leopold Bloom as modeled on Spinoza's (1) life, (2) redefinition of prophecy, and (3) the "attribute" of thought thinking thought. My second section follows a fourth Joycean to the Marxist Antonio Negri's essay on Spinozist freedom and Joyce, from which I derive a fourth figure of Bloom as (4) a liberating prosthesis for infinite democracy. And my final section applies my previous interpretation of Spinoza's "intuition" as poetry to *Ulysses*, interpreted as an epic prose poem where Joyce as a Spinozist God poly-conjugationally persecutes a poly-subjugated Bloom, including with pervasive antisemitism, thus making *Ulysses* more satirical *Inferno* than happy *Divine Comedy*. However, strategically channeling Spinoza and his philosophy more powerfully into Bloom renders him an ethically-politically Stoic hero, defiantly prophesizing a democratization of Joycean conjugation, from persecuting poly-subjugated Others to joyful self-conjugating in search of radical democracy and just peace.

Keywords: James Joyce; Baruch Spinoza; antisemitism; prophecy; *Ulysses*; poetry

In the context of the recent centennial of James Joyce's *Ulysses*, I propose a return to the beginning of the book's reception. Before a century of the Joyce Industry had erected a seemingly unsurmountable wall of presupposition that the work is a masterpiece, and its author a genius to be worshipped and approached only with reverential trepidation. Though my angle of approach is just one of infinitely many to this sprawling and polysemous text, at a deeper level it is perhaps the only approach that synoptically capture the work as a whole. Because it is equally concerned with infinity, namely the Enlightenment-era philosophy of Baruch Spinoza (1632-1677). Critiquing and synthesizing the few existing applications of Spinoza to Joyce, I will conclude that *Ulysses* is an epic prose poem where Joyce aspires to be the sole Spinozist God/Nature/Substance, who with his "poly-conjugating" (multi-playing-with) experiments with

linguistic stylistic polyglossia, antisemitically persecutes Leopold Bloom, thus truncating his aspiring modern *Divine Comedy* to a self-enclosed *Inferno*.

The objective of this investigation, therefore, is to move beyond the bourgeois compromise of escape (the flight of wealthier whiter people away from working-class neighborhoods and jobs) by listening to the voices of the “poly-subjugated.” By this term, I mean a combination of “subjection” (as in oppression) and “subjectivation” (as in Foucault’s sense of coercive subject-formation) that refers to those who endure oppression along multiple axes of embodiment/position. In Joyce’s *Ulysses* this poly-subjugation of the Bloom corresponds to Joyce’s bourgeois-escapist conjugation of Bloom and the languages that continually reshape and express him. And in real life, Spinoza was persecuted for his Iberian regional origin, Jewish ethno-race, religious exile, and manual laborer status. And by channeling the philosophy and political motivated by the latter more powerfully into *Ulysses*, Spinoza-Bloom emerges as an ethically-politically Stoic hero, defiantly prophesying a radical democratization of Joycean conjugation. From poly-conjugal persecution, of poly-subjugated Others, to a world where we can all “self-conjugate” joyfully together, in pursuit of radical democracy and just peace.

1. Four Spinozist Joyceans on Bloom

In this section, I will briefly survey the only four exceptions I could find to the general silence on Spinoza in *Ulysses*. For clarity and ease of comparison, I will organize my analyses around short statements of how they conceptualize Spinoza and Bloom. The oldest application of Spinoza to Bloom is John Henry Raleigh’s (1977) essay, “Bloom as a Modern Epic Hero” (Raleigh 1977), which is almost exclusively concerned with Spinoza’s life (not his writings) and with the subject of ethics/morality (not with his metaphysics or politics). *First for Raleigh,*

Spinoza is above all a real-life ethical hero. “In his personal life Spinoza appears to have been an extraordinarily attractive man,” Raleigh writes, “the true saint of the great philosophers or, as I like to call him, ‘everybody's favorite philosopher’” (Raleigh 1977, 586).

Second for Raleigh, Bloom is Spinoza. More generally, as is clear from the title, Raleigh’s Bloom is a modern epic hero, as modeled in part on the Greek Odysseus and the English Robinson Crusoe. “But Joyce did not want his hero to be either Greek or English: he wanted him to be Jewish,” as Raleigh puts it. “To that end, a third archetype, and an actual historical person, comes in: Baruch (or Benedictus) Spinoza” (ibid., 585). Raleigh then summarizes Spinoza’s virtuous life as follows:

Spinoza came from a family of Portuguese crypto-Jews, that is, Jews who had been forced to embrace Catholicism by the Inquisition but who in reality remained faithful to Judaism... Very well educated in traditional Hebraic scholarship and lore, in secular humanistic studies and also, apparently, in the new sciences, he became successively more skeptical of Judaism itself, so much so that at the age of twenty-four he was formally excommunicated, with all due and deliberate verbal violence, from his synagogue. He had evidently studied optics and was able thus to become a lens grinder to support himself, about which he was very resolute (he even gave up a family legacy) (ibid.,585-586).

Commenting further on Spinoza’s life, Raleigh notes that he was “temperate but not ascetic, enjoying an occasional glass wine and a pipe of tobacco,” believing that “life should be cheerful, merry, and agreeable,” and that on two separate occasions “he exhibited considerable courage in the face of a possible assault by a furious mob” (ibid.,586-587). From this portrait, Raleigh

derives a Spinozist heroism for Bloom characterized by intellectual curiosity, polymorphic imagination, stoic resilience, and liberal compassion.

For biographical evidence of Joyce's familiarity with this heroic philosopher, Raleigh notes that "Joyce himself was acquainted with Spinoza from fairly early on in his career." First, in "1903 he mentioned him twice in a review of J. Lewis McIntyre's *Giordano Bruno*." Second, "Also in 1903 Joyce met Synge in Paris, and the two argued about art," and when "Synge finally told Joyce, who was at this time forging his ironclad esthetic in Aristotelian or Thomistic terms, that he had a mind like Spinoza," it was "a remark that Joyce passed on, presumably with some pride, to his mother and his brother" (*ibid.*,585). And for textual evidence from Joyce's oeuvre, Raleigh observes that "Spinoza is Bloom's philosopher, and in *Ulysses* as a whole Spinoza plays a greater role than any other philosopher, including Aristotle and St. Thomas who appear, surprisingly, rarely and always, with one exception, in the Stephen Dedalus context" (585). Moreover, "Spinoza ('spinooze') is also a presence in *Finnegans Wake*" (*ibid.*,585).

Though I share Raleigh's interpretation *Ulysses* as a modern epic (specifically a modern epic prose poem), for me this is a strategic interpretation, against the grain of Joyce/*Ulysses*, because I view the text as primarily satirical and antisemitic, following notable Jewish Joyce scholar Erwin Steinberg (cf. Steinberg 1999).¹ More specifically, Steinberg claims that, "despite the fact that he had many Jewish friends, like many of his contemporaries, Joyce harbored many anti-semitic ideas, which he displayed in *Ulysses*" (*ibid.*, 64). For starters, "Joyce grew up in a culture that for centuries spoke meanly of both women and Jews—and often equated them" (*ibid.*, 67). Moreover, "The Jewish other and the sexual other were thus frequently placed in vibrant contiguity in the literary traditions of the West well before sexologists or psychologists or race theorists codified that relation" (*ibid.*, 72). Thirdly, whereas "in real life, the Irish James

¹ For two of the strongest counterarguments, see Duffy (1994) and Nolan (2014).

Joyce wallows in the misery of possible sexual betrayal by his wife,” Steinberg notes, “In *Ulysses*, Joyce not only visits that ignominy on ‘a Jew’—indeed, builds a significant aspect of the plot of the novel on it—but in a depiction of Bloom's unconscious (the ‘Circe’ episode), has him enjoy it” (ibid., 74). Steinberg puts “Jew” in quotes, in part, because he insists that Bloom would not objectively qualify for Jewish identity, because his mother was not Jewish, he is uncircumcised, and he does not obey Jewish commandments (called *mitzvot*).²

In further support of Steinberg’s critique, consider the following hypothetical analogue: a white male author from Alabama writes a long text that mocks the white South and its aspirations to political sovereignty (a la the Confederacy) using a Black protagonist infused with every anti-Black racist stereotype imaginable, onto whom he rains endless discrimination from white Southerners, against which alone he has any hope of appearing serious and heroic (being otherwise comically pathetic). What critics today would not call this racist? And if any (especially white) critics tried to defend the author/text, would it help their case to observe that the Black character is also heroic, in a way, by virtue of being patient, long-suffering, and having an effeminately sweet disposition? Or would it instead make things even worse? If so, then we need to follow Steinberg’s brave example and call out the antisemitic of Joyce’s *Ulysses* as well.

Second in relation to Raleigh, I also agree that Bloom can be productively identified with Spinoza qua hero, but I argue that this was not intentional for Joyce. Nevertheless, if one strategically interprets Spinoza as an extra-textual, extra-authorial hero, this provides greater resources for defying its profound antisemitism and other prejudices. In short, Spinoza-Bloom become a freedom fighter against Joyce’s authorial tyranny. A real-life precedent for an external, real-life Jewish hero (Spinoza) who might be able to save Joyce can be found in an anecdote

² Challenging this claim, Neil R. Davison (2002) argues that Bloom is merely a figment of Joyce’s imagination (“neither Jewish nor unjewish”), but this claim is challenged by Davison’s own new (2022) monograph, which posits a new real-life historical model for Bloom in the Irish-Jewish merchant Albert L. Altman.

from his own turbulent life. To wit, an older Dublin man, whom Joyce erroneously believed to be Jewish, once helped saved his life after he got mixed up in a public fight. Mark Scroggins relates this story as follows:

on the night of June 22, 1904 - six days after the first Bloomsday, a young James Joyce, having been severely beaten in a rather disreputable fracas, was helped out “in orthodox Samaritan fashion” by one Alfred Hunter, a Dubliner widely believed to be both a cuckold and a Jew. Hunter, it turns out, wasn't Jewish at all, but that's beside the point: at the time, Joyce believed he was. As Davison argues, “It may well be that when Joyce coupled his impression of a kindly Dublin Jew with the themes of marginality and paralysis in *Dubliners*, the short story of ‘Ulysses’ was born” (Scroggins, 77).³

That short story, of course, was later expanded into the full *Ulysses*. And if it took one real-life ambiguously Jewish man (Hunter) to inspire the creation of *Ulysses*, it may require a second real-life ambiguously Jewish man (Spinoza) to redeem it from its lingering prejudices.

The next-oldest Spinozist Joyce interpretation is Elizabeth Anker's (2007) “Where Was Moses When the Candle Went Out?: Infinity, Prophecy, and Ethics in Spinoza and ‘Ithaca’.” Though Anker goes beyond Raleigh in exploring Spinoza's writings along with his life, she focuses primarily on his *Theological-Political Treatise (TPT)*, which prevents an application of Spinoza's more nuanced and sophisticated metaphysics (in his *Ethics*) to *Ulysses*. Additionally, Anker does not engage with any of Spinoza's own philosophical concepts from *TPT*, but only with an historical figure or image (the prophet), which he is primarily concerned to delegitimize in favor of rational philosophy.

³ See Scroggins (2000), 74-81, Davison (1996).

First for Anker, Spinoza is a Stoic hero. As for Raleigh, therefore, for Anker too Spinoza is heroic, and in ethical way, but she adds one new specification or emphasis thereto. Her most concise summary of this view is found in the following passage:

Bloom's non-combativeness, his avoidance of aggression or antagonism, parallels Spinoza's version of stoicism. As is the case with Bloom, Spinoza describes this disposition not as a type of passivity but as an active receptivity, requiring that the individual "follow[s] the common order of nature, and obeys it, and accommodates himself to it as far as the nature of things demands" (~~*Ethics*~~ Spinoza 2001, 157). Spinoza attributes the need for such a posture to various features of existence: the fragmentary nature of human knowledge, our captivity to the emotions, the lack of purpose or teleology in nature, and the absence of an entirely autonomous human will (Anker 2007, 662).

Put differently, the best a person can do in the cold rational machine of Spinoza's cosmos is to be what Einstein called a "militant pacifist." This is where, for Anker, prophecy enters the picture.

Second for Anker, Bloom is a Spinozist prophet. The latter figure is deeply counterintuitive, especially for those raised in the implicitly Christianized secular West. It is therefore worth briefly unpacking here. The first chapter of Spinoza's *TPT* is devoted to "Prophecy," and the second chapter, to "Prophets." Spinoza begins the former by claiming that "prophecy really includes ordinary knowledge; for the knowledge which we acquire by our natural faculties depends on knowledge of God and His eternal laws; but ordinary knowledge is common to all men as men" (Chapter 1, paragraph 5, abbreviated I: 5). More precisely, and surprisingly, "the power of prophecy implies not a peculiarly perfect mind, but a peculiarly vivid imagination" (I: Spinoza 2001, 52). In sum, "the prophets only perceived God's revelation by the

aid of imagination, that is, by words and figures either real or imaginary” (ibid., 112). This provides, finally, “a clue to the fact that the prophets perceived nearly everything in parables and allegories, and clothed spiritual truths in bodily forms, for such is the usual method of imagination” (ibid., 122). Put simply, a prophet is simply an extremely imaginative person, seeing nothing but the natural world, but creatively reimagined. As for Chapter 2, its most important addition concerns “the certitude of prophecy,” which I would parse as the “truth” or “virtue” of the prophecy. A prophet is true, “chiefly,” when “the mind of the prophet was given wholly, to what was right and good” (H, Spinoza 2001, 25). Adding this to Chapter 1, all prophets are hyper-imaginative, but the most virtuous ones express the most truth.

As with Raleigh, I agree with Anker overall and in spirit, but with two major caveats. First, though I agree that Bloom is a Spinozist Stoic, I would expand this beyond the exclusively ethical way that Anker interprets Stoicism (referring to “active reception,” “piety, endurance, and devoted care,” and “self-resignation”), to include also an actively political sense of Stoicism (662, 666). In short, less present-day self-help stoicism, and more the Stoicism of Roman civic virtue (as exemplified by philosopher-Seneca and Marcus Aurelius). Secondly, though I find the figuration of Bloom as a Spinozist prophet fascinating and promising, and Anker rightly stresses the imagination and virtue (and not necessarily intellect) of Spinoza’s prophets, she seems to completely divorce prophecy from its political and historical contexts. Simply put, the Hebrew prophets were the political leaders of the historical people of Israel. Admittedly, Spinoza was more interested in *TPT* in cutting the prophets down to human size, deflating them from supernatural wise men to artful saints. But this does not preclude a different, equally politically engaged reinterpretation today, as mounted, for example, in the context of South American

indigenous shaman-prophets (Clastres 2013). Or, as in the present investigation, a fire-fighting-fire revolt of the Spinozist prophet Bloom against the antisemitic torments of his creator Joyce.

Turning to my third Spinozist Joycean, Anthony Uhlmann's *Thinking in Literature: Joyce, Woolf, Nabokov* (Uhlmann 2011), there is surprisingly almost no space allotted to Spinoza, and only marginally more on Joyce. *First, for Uhlmann, Spinoza is a Deleuzian literary theorist.* Uhlmann follows Deleuze in seeing in Spinoza a way of thinking about thought which implies the power of literature to engage not only in thought, but also in thought *about* thought (what philosophers call "meta-cognition"), and just as powerfully as philosophy. "My contention," Uhlmann writes, "is that rather than being understood to offer an analogue of consciousness, literature should be understood as attempting to develop an analogue of thought itself," which in turn "involves representations of minds in dialogue, which exceed the representation of consciousness" (ibid., 18, 19).

In addition to his concept of "exceeding" being central to my own interpretation of Spinoza below (via its rarer cognate "exceedance," as an approximation of Negri's "excedence"), Uhlmann also anticipates my claim that Spinoza's "third kind of knowledge" (or "intuition") is of central importance in connection his philosophy to literature, including *Ulysses*. Speaking of the latter, Uhlmann's interpretation barely engages with the character of Bloom (which is understandable given the focus on meta-cognition), preferring instead the more formally educated and abstractive Stephen Dedalus (as most academic philosophers tend to do). This I take to be further evidence of the Deleuzian basis of Uhlmann's text, for better and for worse. One can, nevertheless, derive a logical implication regarding Bloom from Uhlmann's thesis.

Second for Uhlmann, Bloom is a reflection of/on the Spinozist "attribute" of thought. For Spinoza, there are infinite "attributes" of only one "substance" (which he also calls "God, or

Nature,” and which I will synthesize hereafter as “Divine/Nature”). Humans, however, can only perceive two of these infinite attributes, namely “thought” and “extension,” and every being that we can experience (including our own thoughts and bodies) are what Spinoza calls “modes” of these attributes of substance. Finally, by “modes,” he means basically modifications, variations, or forms, of attributed being. Returning to Uhlmann, Bloom for him is primarily Bloom-thoughts, which are largely meta-cognitions. Put simply, Bloom mostly just thinks, and thinks about what he thinks, and about how he thinks, and about what that entails for thought itself.

With Uhlmann, I affirm the relevance and productivity of a postmodern approach to Spinoza and Joyce, and the formative influence of Deleuze. I also applaud, in part as myself a poet, Uhlmann’s recognition of literature’s philosophy-equal power to think about thought. However, I would insist that any act of thought for Spinoza is the thought of a given embodied consciousness, which means no reflection on thought which is not also a reflection by consciousness. In *Ulysses*, this point implies that Joyce’s poly-conjugating stylistic experiments (and “poly-conjugal,” given the Freudian “polymorphous perversity” of Leopold and Molly), including what he calls the stream-of-consciousness “initial style”) always presuppose multiple (corresponding) consciousnesses.

Examples of this poly-consciousness from Joycean scholarship include Hugh Kenner’s “Uncle Charles Principle” (UCP) and David Hyman’s “arranger” (Kenner 1982). The former denotes the way that Joycean narrators blend their own expressive style with the expressive style of their subjects (as when Stephen describes his Uncle Charles going to the outhouse using language that sounds like Uncle Charles is co-narrating). And the “arranger” refers to the quasi-persona or narrative voice that becomes increasingly evident and bold as *Ulysses* progresses, making its first vivid appearance in the newspaper-like headlines of the “Aeolus” episode. In

both examples, the narrative voice is neither simply Joyce, nor an omniscient narrator, nor a first-person narrator, but rather a much more sophisticated poly-conjugation of various voices and perspectives.

Concluding my first section with an abbreviated fourth Spinozist Joycean, Patrick McGee seems to avoid directly connecting the two writers. Instead, he begins with the present-day French Marxist philosopher Alain Badiou (whose writings on Spinoza are minimal, and primarily dismissive), then blends that with Antonio Negri's reading of Spinoza, adds a pinch of Deleuze for good measure, and concludes by applying that mix to William Blake, Victor Hugo, and James Joyce (McGee 2016). Disarmingly, McGee begins by admitting that his reading of Spinoza is probably inaccurate, and concedes that "The present work no doubt has become what it describes, a political monster" (ibid., 37, 227). And overall, there is not enough Spinoza here (and not much Joyce, either) to merit a detailed consideration here. However, McGee is still helpful in two ways.⁴ First, he connects Uhlmann's postmodernist Spinozist Joyce back to politics. Secondly, he spotlights Negri's long engagement with Spinoza, including a (2017) collection of essays, one of which applies Spinoza to Joyce and *Ulysses*.

2. A Joycean Spinozist on Laughter Liberation

Negri has long been a philosophical and political hero of mine, from my first exposure to his superstar authorship with U.S. political scientist Michael Hardt of the book *Empire*, which I have explored elsewhere via my reinterpretation of Virgil's epic poem.⁵ Later, I discovered his painstaking historical reconstruction of a "counter-modernity," formulated as the rebel sequence Machiavelli-Spinoza-Marx (against the dominant modernity of Hobbes-Descartes-Hegel). And

⁴ Uhlmann (2017) also observes this lack of Joyce (181).

⁵ See Hall (2020).

finally, through the sympathetic yet critical work of the anonymous militant communizing collective Tiqqun, I learned of Negri's heroic career of direct action (Tiqqun 2011).⁶ As Negri's translator, Ed Emery, summarizes, "On 7 April 1979, along with many other Italian revolutionary leftists, Negri was arrested on charges of association with the Red Brigade," and "A period of combined imprisonment and exile, during which he produced many of his major writings, finally ended in 2003" (Negri 2017, 47). Negri thus manifests much of the same Stoic virtue of Spinoza and Bloom. This is not to say, however, that I do not share Tiqqun's critique of Negri as well.⁷

Before my close reading of his essay "Spinoza, Necessity, and Freedom: Some Interpretational Alternatives," I briefly summarize Negri's interpretations of Spinoza and Joyce, for ease of comparison with the Spinozist Joyceans in the previous section. *First for Negri, Spinoza is a laughing heretic of ontology-exceeding imagination.* By this, I mean that Spinoza uses laughter to heretically challenge superstitious orthodoxy and its unjust institutionalization, which involves the imaginative work of sociopolitical collectives ("singularities"), which directly causes the creation of new Being. Elaborating on the heretic part of this formula, Negri writes (in another essay in the collection) that "Spinozist monism is nourished by divine *potenza*," which refers to the power of each body (singular or collective) in the cosmos ((Negri 2017, 40). "Is it not perhaps this claim," Negri asks, "– this process of making divinity *productive*," which "renders the Amsterdam Jew a 'heretic'?" (ibid. 40). In a third essay in the collection, Negri defines a heretic as "an intellectual who moves from a specific, particular point of view, which is not that of the totality but that of rupture, which therefore assumes knowledge

⁶ For more on Tiqqun in relation to Negri, see Hall (2023).

⁷ For example, Tiqqun claim that *Autonomia*, a left-wing movement closely associated with Negri and his Italian workerism, "is not the affirmation of 'new subjects'"—as most famously Negri's Spinozist multitude—but rather "their violent, practical, active desubjectivation" (Tiqqun 2011, 55).

as *situated knowledge* and acting as being conditioned by a common project of resistance and struggle” (Negri 2017 *ibid.*, 132). In other words, a heretic like Spinoza does not try to speak for the whole world, or from a god’s-eye (omniscient narrator) point of view; instead, he deliberately occupies a strategically resistant location in the unjust system, and speaks from that situated embeddedness.

Second for Negri, Bloom is a liberating prosthesis for infinite democratic revolution. The context for this claim, in Negri’s philosophy, is his view that when (1) virtuously-rational individuals (such as heretical philosophers and critics) (2) freely associate into even more powerful virtuously-rational collectives (such as philosophy clubs, faculty reading groups, academically independent universities, graduate student trade unions, etc.), they (3) create new knowledges, technologies, and machines (such as social media collectives), which (4) achieve anarcho-communist objectives (such as the Arab Spring revolutions), which (5) continuously adds to what is in the world, the world itself, and what it might yet become. Returning the formula above, I am claiming that for Negri, Joyce’s *Ulysses* is one such tool/machine, and Bloom one of many tools/machines with that mega-tool/machine.

With these two summarizing claims in mind, I now turn directly to my close reading of Negri’s essay on Spinozist freedom and Joyce’s *Ulysses*. Although, in traditional terms, Spinoza would qualify as a “determinist” (a philosopher who believes that no human act is truly free), Negri’s entire essay is devoted to a series of increasingly powerful arguments that complicate this determinist appearance. In the first such, Negri observes that when a human seeks true knowledge, that means that, for the duration of that active pursuit, the human’s will and intellect are one. And that means, in turn, “that the will establishes itself again, on that ontological fabric from which the illusion of free will had expelled it,” by “taking away from the intellect” the

latter's "privileged position of being the destroyer of illusion" (ibid., 74). That is, whereas the rational intellect had formerly (earlier in the *Ethics*) disabused the human will from its delusion of freedom, now (later in the *Ethics*) the will achieves a degree of freedom by deliberately directed the intellect to pursue further illusion-destroying knowledge. Now "it is will itself that overturns the illusion of freedom; it is will itself that feeds on the eternal" (ibid., 74). In conclusion, "if God is the production of being and truth consists in the recognition of this production, will (and true freedom) will now be placed on that terrain of production of being that divinity had shown us," and thereby, "will reveals itself as a machine of truth" (ibid.74). Thus, the first lacuna for human freedom lies in willing rational inquiry, which channels the Divine/Natural power of ontological exceedance, making the human an ontogenetic worker, a builder of existential prosthetics.

Turning to Negri's second argument for freedom in Spinoza, he observes that in Part III of the *Ethics*, "will and freedom are transformed into each other, to the extent that *cupiditas* [passion, desire], moving from *appetitus* [longing], grows (increases, strengthens) into *amor* [love]" (ibid.). Negri is referring here to a metaphysical and temporal sequence he finds/creates in the *Ethics*, from (1) what Spinoza calls "conatus" (meaning "perseverance in being"), which belongs to all beings; to (2) physiological appetite, which belongs to all animal beings; to (3) imaginative yearning, which belongs to all human animal beings; to (4) the rational experience of the poly-conjugating self-love of the divine, which belongs to all virtuously-rational human animal beings. In this way, ontological exceedance terminates in the rational human's freely experienced love of Divine/Nature.

Proceeding to Negri's third argument for Spinozist freedom, he observes that, "at the very heart of Parts IV and V – we have the definition of the free person as the one whose

cupiditas, born as it is of reason, will never have excess, since it is given [unqualifiedly]" (ibid., 75). In other words, the truly free are those whose imaginations are fueled by reason, which is a consummate "renewable resource" that can never overflow (which one might compare to a solar panel, as contrasted with a gas tank, which can spill over from excess). Here, Negri infers, "the determinist picture is strongly shaken," since "ontological constitution is paradoxically arranged by reason and love, which is almost to say by freedom" (75 ibid.). Put differently, rational inquiry, inspired and guided by love of Divine/Nature, literally extends and expands that which exists (as for example with machines and technology), and for those engaged in this loving inquiry, the experience is one of maximum freedom. In Negri's words, "from physical *conatus* [striving] to human *cupiditas*, and then to divine *amor*... Ethics constitutes the physical world, before interpreting (acting) the human world and reading (revealing itself in) the divine world" (ibid., 76).

To his credit, Negri admits that none of these three arguments for freedom is yet satisfying, for they are not yet true freedom. Fortunately, "it is nevertheless possible to define another point of view or, better, to effect a different entry into the problematic (materialist) field of Spinozist freedom" (ibid., 77). This back door, if the reader will forgive a Joycean scatological double entendre, is found "where Spinoza speaks of 'laughter' [*ridere*]" (ibid., 78). Of laughter's "various functions" in Spinoza, Negri writes, the first is "the rhetorical one that shows it to be a fundamental weapon of freedom," which "allows us to oppose superstition by mocking it and to free ourselves of the fear that is the source, the nutriment and the scheme of superstition" (78). This brings Spinoza even closer to Joyce via the latter's lifelong mockery of Catholicism (among many other things), which empowered him to free himself to a considerable degree from such superstitions.

The second liberating function of laughter, Negri continues, is much more important, amounting to “the true ontological function of laughter, since it disposes both the body and the mind and urges them radically toward that very high state of virtue that is *laetitia* (or joy)” (ibid., 78-79). Negri’s account of how this works in Spinoza is too detailed and complex to justify its reproduction here, but his conclusion is that Spinoza elevates laughter above a particular “joy of mind and body” that he calls “pleasure” or “cheerfulness” (ibid., 79). This superiority of laughter to pleasurable cheerfulness is based on the claim that, “unlike” the latter, “which is partial,” laughter “involves *all* parts of the body homogeneously” (79 ibid.). Because of this full-bodied nature, Negri concludes that “laughter appears to us – or, better, it *is* – a passion constitutive of being and that places itself at the intersection of the parallel lines that run through the substance [Divine/Nature], and it determines a powerful equilibrium of substance” (79 ibid.). That is, Negri elaborates, “when we laugh, we inhabit that point from which reality is produced,” which makes laughter “perfection in body and soul,” wherein lies “its capacity to develop freedom” (79). More precisely, freedom “is in fact liberation from all the baleful passions that block the creativity of being – from hatred, mockery, contempt,” as well as “fear and hope,” “indignation,” and even, counterintuitively, “humility” and “repentance” (ibid., 80). “Blessed Spinoza!” Negri exclaims, punning on Spinoza’s first name (Latin for “blessed”), marveling at his (Joycean) “capacity to overturn every preconceived reading of his thought” (80 ibid.).

Anticipating the objection that this derivation of freedom from laughter is too much of a stretch, Negri observes that, throughout the *Ethics*, “there is a constant pressure to find ways of subjectivation – which means to reconstruct the order of the world starting from the bottom of the *potenza* of ethical action (singular, individual, or collective)” (80). Negri then names two reasons for this. First, “the concept of democracy and, in general, the progress in the area of an

‘absolutely’ democratic politics constitute the highest distinction of metaphysics (when to talk about politics is to talk about freedom)” (ibid., 81). This means that, at the deepest level of reality for Spinoza, on Negri’s reading, is a movement toward continuous democratization, at the individual and collective levels. Second, and more importantly, “Freedom must be discovered as a constituent force; liberation must be built as *potenza*₂ [potentiality]; the production of subjectivity must be recognized as an ontological machine” (81 ibid.,). Put differently, this constant creation of democracy and its subjects is a direct production of Divine/Natural Being itself.

As for how, precisely, Negri gets from laughter to freedom, he starts with *Ethics* Part IV, Proposition 61, which claims that “a desire that arises from reason...cannot be excessive” (82). It cannot be excessive, Negri explains, because “it has no ‘external,’” which means (he infers) that such rational desire is “autonomous” (ibid., 82). The question, though, is whether this autonomy is, in Negri’s following alternative:

a purely “affirmative” experience (in other words, a self-declaration of essence) or a “constitutive” experience (that is, expressive, innovative). In short, does “not having excess” mean that *cupiditas* and desire are related to a natural, static, and essential dimension? Or does this “not having excess” mean, on the contrary, an “excedence,” autonomous and constitutive, of *cupiditas* – a “*potenza* of desire”? (82 ibid.,).

The latter alternative, in short, means that humans’ rational desire is/creates novelty at the ontological level. On the one hand, humans naturally possess the characteristic of being rationally excessive; but on the other hand, so is being per se; thus, this human characteristic is a virtue rather than a vice.

From this conclusion (which he admits pushes Spinoza to his limit, if not beyond), Negri derives two implications. First, “Nature, far from being a model, is a product of freedom” (83). And second, nature’s eternity is “a consequence of the productivity” of “the freedom of the minds that produce and constitute being” (ibid., 83). To keep this essential embodiment in mind, Negri immediately quotes Spinoza’s claim that “‘he who has a body capable of a great many things has a mind whose greatest part is eternal’ (Part V, Proposition 39)” (ibid.83). This note of eternity recalls the claim, noted by McGee (and others) that Bloom, “according to Joyce, passes into eternity” (ibid., 171). And it is here, perhaps for that reason, that Negri sets the stage for Joyce’s entrance.

“In Spinoza,” Negri exults, “joy fuses with origin – and what an origin!” (83) More precisely, liberation “is a game, says, Spinoza, in which the fact of wishing ‘acutely’ implants itself whole on our intellect, and sustains it in its openness to the absolute” (ibid., 83). Negri then compares Spinoza to two other writers on this subject of games. First is a negative contrast with the Austrian-English philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951), who famously analyzes language in terms of “language games” (*Sprachspiel*), but for whom “too often, the game is sad: a sad passion” (ibid., 83). This sets up the second, positive comparison. “There is, however, a humourist, an ironic hero,” Negri observes, “who transforms Wittgenstein’s analytic hieroglyphs into biopolitical prose; and we know him” (ibid., 84).

Note that, in the precise wording of Negri’s indirect introduction of Joyce here, the hero in question is not the character Bloom, but rather the author Joyce himself. Negri then quotes a “well-known passage from Chapter 3 of *Ulysses*” (the “Proteus” episode), where Stephen Dedalus (originally Joyce’s penname) wanders Dublin’s Sandymount Strand, observing a dog with whom he prepares for the possibility of a violent encounter (84). Negri’s commentary on

this episode mentions, in passing, “the nightmare of the death of Joyce’s mother,” which Negri describes as “a great trauma of imagination (and freedom)” (84). And this, in turn, Negri writes, “brings us right back to Spinoza – where, within a necessity that comes from afar and envelops everything, in the fact of danger, the choice of freedom arises as an untimely [*intempestivo*] act” (84 *ibid.*). In the case of Stephen/Joyce and the dog, Negri ventriloquizes Stephen/Joyce as follows:

I arm myself with sticks, to defend myself from the bad dog that is approaching – I respect your freedom but I defend my own. So says Joycean irony. So is freedom a stick? Continue ... In Spinoza’s philosophy it was. Here, in the place of *hilaritas* [cheerfulness], around the effort of the coupling of mind and body – a coupling that is productive of being – it is still, as resistance, as the capacity to respond to danger; but it is not [today] any longer so (on the other hand, this transformation takes place even in political philosophy, in different times and forms) because *this* resistance, untimely, is now excedence over causality, the effect that triumphs over the cause, innovating the necessary rhythm of production of the world (*ibid.*, 84-85).

Let us unpack. First, Negri is interpreting Stephen/Joyce as a model for how a Marxist revolutionary like himself should approach the Other—a model whose reasonableness is articulated by Spinoza. Second, this model involves a cheerful acceptance of the Other and their freedom, while simultaneously preparing to fight for one’s own freedom, but only if necessary (and without resentment, malice, or ill will). Third, this cheerful preparedness unites mind and body in one concerted effort. And finally, though historically this phenomenon of cheerful resistance has manifested in physical warfare (as, for example, on Bastille Day in the French

Revolution), today it manifests primarily as metaphysical warfare, in an ontological yes-saying to the cosmos. In short, we are increasingly the self-conscious cutting edge of being's creation.

Thus, an armed Stephen/Joyce becomes one partial figure of Negri's Spinozist hero—but only a partial one—because the whole picture is less weaponized, and more machinic. “Give me a lever and I will move the world”; Negri writes; “give me a stick and I shall reshape Hobbesian fear; give me a game and I shall destroy every fiction; give me a tool and I shall reinvent being” (ibid., 123). Scientific technology, armed resistance to the Leviathan tyranny, a philosophy game of laughing down superstition, the reconstructing of the world, respectively.

Finally from Negri, the following passage from his essay's penultimate paragraph is where I locate the figure of Leopold Bloom in Negri's interpretation of Joyce.

In other words, let us build a prosthesis of the body and of the mind that forces the world, from lack of being to excedence of being. Or let us build freedom as ontological excess. Spinoza defined freedom as innovation, innovation as freedom, and freedom and innovation as an excedent ontological constitution (ibid., 85).

That is, for Negri, Bloom is a tool-within-the-tool of *Ulysses*, one of its mind-body prosthetics, an unforgettably richly fleshed out character, intended to help Joyce “to forge in my soul the uncreated conscience of my race” (to quote *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*).

Ultimately, however, I would argue that Joyce was less successful for his own race (if by this one understands the Irish people) than for the liberal bourgeoisie who remain locked, as tightly now as in Joyce's era, in the capitalist rat race. And perhaps the most important feature of Bloom that is too fleshed out or belabored is his Jewishness. On this critical note, I will now summarize my concordances/discordances with Negri.

First, I agree with Negri that Spinoza is crucially a heretic, but I would specify his heresy, when channeled into Bloom, would be more reasonably directed against not only English colonizers and Irish xenophobes, but also and more importantly the European liberal bourgeoisie, its academic branch in the Joyce Industry, and the apotheosized author whom they still serve. Second, and relatedly, I agree with Negri that Bloom and *Ulysses* can be helpfully understood as an ontological prosthesis. But I differ as to the ethical charge of this prosthesis, countering that the primary function of this tool-within-a-tool (or machine-within-a-machine), for both Joyce as author and Joyceans as critics, is an economically petit-bourgeois (and culturally aristocratic) escape from the mega-machine of late capitalism. Moreover, Joyce uses antisemitic humor to (in Gen Z's parlance) "punch down" at perhaps the only kind of person who could make the poor Irish pariah Joyce, or many alienated Euro/American academic Joyceans, feel better about themselves. One can imagine, in this context, what might motivate them to namedrop Spinoza, rather than digging deeper into him and his radicalism. So let us dig deeper.

3. Poetic Exceedance as Prophetic Defiance

Having plumbed the surprising depths of just the tiny corner of the Joyce Industry devoted to Spinoza, I now turn to the philosopher himself, applying the same formula as above to my own foray into *Ulysses*' centenary. *First for the present author, Spinoza is a philosopher of poetic exceedance.* That is, the ontological "excedence" (Negri's translator's neologism) that he attributes to Spinoza via imagination in general, I specify as manifesting in the imaginative genre of poetry specifically. Previously I have explored this in relation to the verse of Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844–1889), and here I will apply those result to the prose poetry of Joyce, which is at least as innovative and muscular as Hopkins' poetry, though admittedly much uglier and coarser

than his. But in case this attribution of poetry to Joyce seems unwarranted, especially for readers unfamiliar with his broader oeuvre, I will add some context.

First, Joyce began his literary career as a poet, and his first publication was a collection of poems, entitled *Chamber Music*, coordinated by no less a figure than Ireland's greatest poet W. B. Yeats. Some critics suggest that it is the large and dark shadow cast by Yeats, and the rest of the Irish Literary Revival that the poet helped lead, which prompted Joyce to switch from poetry to fiction. Second, even in Joyce's fiction, almost all the passages that are most frequently quoted are highly poetic. Consider for example the penultimate "Ithaca" episode's description of the starry night that Bloom and Stephen regard (while literally pissing on Ireland) as "The heaventree of stars hung with humid nightblue fruit" (XVII:1039).⁸ The Joyce Project calls this "the most rapturously lyrical sentence in all of *Ulysses*," and keep in mind that "lyrical" derives from "lyric poetry."⁹ And finally, though most of the language of *Ulysses* is much rougher and coarser than traditional poetry, and often simply ugly and frankly disgusting, it is not for that reason any less powerful, intense, or meticulously constructed. On the contrary, and in the Spinozist spirit, it is even stronger, more vital, striking, and doggedly deliberate.

Second for the present author, Bloom is the prophetic defiance of Ulysses as (epic prose poem). In intertextual terms, *Ulysses* on its own terms is not a happily full *Divine Comedy*, but instead an abortive, standalone *Inferno* of poly-subjugating persecution.¹⁰ But when the life and philosophy of the real-life Jewish heretic, blessed Spinoza, is strategically channeled more

⁸ I am indebted for this micturition point to a conversation with the poet and novelist Amos Jasper Wright IV, perhaps inspired in part by his own prose poetic fiction, for example in *Petrochemical Nocturne* (Wright 2023).

⁹ See "Heaventree," *The Joyce Project* at: <http://m.joyceproject.com/notes/170024heaventree.html>.

¹⁰ In support of this influence, Mary Trackett Reynolds claims that "'Joyce's imagination was more saturated with Dante' and that he 'was probably engaged with Dante more broadly and deeply than he was with any other author except Shakespeare and Homer'" (Reynolds 1981, 3, quoted in DeVein 2022).

powerfully into *Ulysses*, Spinoza-Bloom defiantly prophesizes a resistant to this antisemitic persecution. I will now explain the proposed source of this revolutionary power.

In my previous article on Spinoza, I reinterpret his “intuition” as exemplified by poetry, utilizing the case of Gerard Manley Hopkins. In the *Ethics* (Part II, Proposition 40), Spinoza writes that intuition “proceeds from an adequate idea of the formal essence of some of the attributes of God to an adequate knowledge of the essence of things.” (Spinoza 2001, page) In other words, one arrives at a rational conception of the *conatus* of a being (that is, its desire to persevere in being) by means of a rational concept of the attributes of thought or extension. In short, if you understand thought or extension, you can infer the essence of a particular being. Spinoza compares intuition to the intuitive grasp of a mathematical formula by considering the relationship among specific numbers plugged into the formula, as opposed to calculating the problem using variables. Incidentally, as Uhlmann notes, “Joyce too claimed his own work was mathematical in nature” (Uhlmann 2011, 73).

From this interpretation, I infer that intuition combines the specificity and concreteness of Spinoza’s first kind of knowledge (“understanding”) with the accuracy and generality of the second kind of knowledge (“imagination”). In short, universal and particular are understood through each other. And nothing more effectively affirms the generality-specificity relationship than language, which is also the conceptual bridge between intuition and poetry. Via its connection to thinking, language is an attribute of thought; and via its connection to speech, language is manifested as extension. Language is thus distinctly capable of affirming, at an intuitive level, Spinoza’s central claim that thought and extension are merely two different ways of representing the same substance of Divine/Nature. Further, whenever language is used to denote particulars, it brings its nature as a universal medium to bear on those particulars, and

thereby affirms the resonance between generality (rationality) and specificity (imagination) of phenomena. The art of poetry, in turn, is arguably the most effective genre for this evoking of generality through particulars, insofar as it both utilizes language to describe particular situations, thoughts, feelings, observations, etc., and also manifests language qua language.

More concretely, in thinking about poetry, perhaps while reading silently, one is made aware not only of what the poem is describing about the world, but also of the activity of the attribute of thought, of thought taking place. And in scanning poetry with one's eyes, one is aware not only of how the words match up with things in the world, but also of language as itself an extended thing made of ink, a physical spread of words on a page. Similarly, when one reads poetry aloud, one is made aware not only of the things in the world that the sounds evoke, but also of language as itself a physically extended phenomenon, namely sound waves spun from vibrating vocal cords and inhabiting the surrounding air.

Though the poet whom Spinoza refers to most often in the *Ethics* is Ovid, I propose Gerard Manley Hopkins as a fitting posthumous exemplar, and for several reasons which align as well with Joyce. For one thing, not only Hopkins' poetry, but also his prose theoretical writings, resonate with Spinoza's concept of intuition, and especially his three neologist concepts of "instress," "inscape," and "sprung rhythm," all of which have distinct parallels in Spinoza's philosophy. First, instress, according to the Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry, is a more precise term for "liveliness," or "the power that holds inscape together, like the force that binds the atom," comparable to Spinoza's "conatus." Second, inscape is the interior landscape of a being (its internal geography); and because it is actively shaped by a being's instress, inscape is comparable to Spinoza's similarly dynamic "essence." Finally, sprung rhythm is an application to poetic meter of Hopkins' "counterpoint" (a jazz-like syncopation where stressed and

unstressed syllables' positions are switched, thus reversing and countering the dominant metrical pattern), whose focus on strength and power is comparable to Spinoza's entire philosophy and politics (Norton 1988). This last point also connects to Negri's reading of Spinoza, because twentieth-century African American novelist and essayist Ralph Ellison argues that jazz syncopation in music and dance is an exemplar of and template for radical democracy.¹¹

I will now relate these Spinoza/Hopkins resonances back to Joyce. First, instress is like the felt force of both the "initial style" of stream-of-consciousness, and also the polyglot voices of the "arranger" (of "Aeolus"), the "Nameless One" (of "Cyclops") and the other experimental stylistic narrative voices. Second, inscape suggests the fact that the shifting and metamorphizing essences of all the characters of *Ulysses* is directly caused by the instress of this polyglossia, which reaches its peak in Bloom as *Odysseus polytropos*, the "much-wandering," "multi-turning," and (in my own coinage) "maxi-wily" one. That is, Bloom is so flexible, adaptive, creative, imaginative, etc., that he becomes a significantly different figure in each episode, resourcefully contorting himself around each challenging narrative voice, and each demanding fellow Irish interlocutor. Finally, sprung rhythm is highly suggestive of Joyce's pervasive fragments, aborted sentences, and jagged and serrated grammar, diction, and language. Though grammatically incorrect, and often psychologically jarring, this technique has a way of "cutting through the bullshit" and to the heart of a character and situation, with all the rough edges of thought that linguistic conventions' niceties artificially smooth out, hiding uncomfortable truths.

This segues into a second resonance between Joyce and Hopkins' poetry, as the latter also consistently experiments with language, especially by (1) a love of neologisms (including "heavengravel," "wolfsnow," "deathgush," "gaygear," and "earl-stars"); (2) adopting various

¹¹ See Hall (2013).

dialect words from Welsh and other linguistic sources (including “voel” for “hill,” “degged” for “sprinkled,” and “fashed” for “troubled”); and (3) seeking out archaic English words (such as “sillion” for “furrow,” and “rivelled” for “wrinkled,” the last of which, Hopkins scholar J. R. Watson notes, the poet took from *The Tempest*, by Shakespeare, a fellow poet “whose coinages Hopkins admired greatly”) (Watson 1989, 34). Joyce, too, is justifiably famous for his neologisms and multilingual blending and fusions.

On this note of literary heroic models, I will now conclude by situating *Ulysses* in relation to another of its literary models. Though Joyce presumably intended to capture all three parts of the *Divine Comedy*'s triptych into *Ulysses*, I would argue that the latter corresponds exclusively to the *Inferno*, making it a kind of “monoptych.” Since the suffix “-ptych” means “folded,” this may sound self-contradictory, but I would argue that part of what can make *Ulysses* so hellish for readers, and so politically problematic for radical democracy, is its being somehow both unified and yet also folding itself in on itself, infinitely, much like Spinoza's Divine/Nature on Deleuze's interpretation. But in Joyce's case, this world is a microcosm whose ambition is to fully incorporate the macrocosm (as in Joyce's famous ambition to make *Ulysses* so detailed that one could reconstruct from it a destroyed Dublin), much like late capitalism with its similarly delusional ambition to include all of history and the planet.

In other words, whereas Dante bravely sends himself to Hell for self-deconstruction, then to Purgatory for an education in human virtue, and then finally to Heaven for a transhuman transformation (which I elsewhere call his “self-angelizing”), Joyce sends a poly-subjugated Other marked as Jewish to the hell of 1904 Dublin, laughing at Bloom's persecution from the god-like safe distance of his voluntary exile in continental Europe. But because this persecution led Joyce to try to incorporate Spinoza into his *Inferno*, we have the power to channel Spinoza's

life and philosophy more powerfully into the figure of Bloom, to transfigure him into an ethically and politically Stoic hero, prophetically defying the slings and arrows of his creator.

In this way, Spinoza-Bloom foreshadows various maxi-wily strategies for Jewish and non-Jewish survivors of the late-capitalist kleptocracy of multinational corporate oligarchs, which Negri calls “Empire.” One such prophetic strategy, in light of the present investigation, is to hear in the voices of our “poly-subjugated” prophets today—such as Black Marxist prison abolitionist Angela Davis, South Asian ecofeminist Vandana Shiva, and Chicana queer theorist Gloria Anzaldúa—a radical democratization of Joycean conjugation whereby we can all self-conjugate together, in pursuit of radical democracy and just peace.

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