

**‘Height of a tower? No, she can jump me’: The feline presence in  
Ulysses**

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A paper given at the Beastly Modernisms Conference,  
University of Glasgow, Glasgow, 12 – 13 September 2019.

In his ten-hour address to the 1997 Cerisy conference on the subject of ‘the autobiographical animal’, Jacques Derrida poses the following question: ‘Since so long ago, can we say that the animal has been looking at us?’ (Derrida, 2008, 3).<sup>1</sup> The ambiguity of the animal’s gaze disturbs the anthropocentric conscience of the human, since the Western philosophical tradition founds the animal-human dichotomy on an ontological distinction that deprives the animals of a point of view. This philosophical tradition repudiates the animal to produce the human, begetting the cosmogony that places the animal outside of the human, mute and objectified. James Joyce frequently jeopardises this dichotomy in *Ulysses* (1922) through pursuing the trace of the animals on 16 June 1904. In the interior monologue of the characters and in the domestic and public spaces of the Dublin metropolis, the ‘insistent gaze of the animal’ (Derrida, 2008, 4) stalks the human,

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<sup>1</sup> David Willis notes how Derrida plays on the double sense of *regarder* (“to look at” and “to concern”) in the phrase ‘*que l’animal nous regarde*’. This can also be translated as ‘that the animal has been our concern’.

precipitating a concern for the animal in the consciousness of the characters.<sup>2</sup> In this paper, I will trace the place of the domestic feline in relation to the human in *Ulysses* to discuss Joyce's treatment of this domestic pet. The cat is our concern in the novel through being an ambiguous possession in the social context of Ireland in 1904, compromising the integrity of domestication and tracing the boundary between human and animal. This develops into a reading of the parallels between the Bloom's dead son Rudy and the cat, which indicate a complex relation between the human and pet cat in Leopold Bloom's psyche. I will then consider the cat's vocalisations with recourse to the science of anthrozoology and the arguments of Maud Ellmann to offer a reading that explores the semiotics of the cat's meow. The paper will borrow insights from animal philosophy, anthrozoology, and literary criticism to consider this cat that cohabits 7 Eccles Street with Leopold Bloom in a multifaceted, episodic argument, punctuated by quotations from these disciplines to frame the argument.

'domestic felines continued to have one paw in the wild' (Bradshaw, 2017, 54).

Leopold Bloom enters the narrative in the presence of a cat, for which he has considerable sympathy while acknowledging her feline wildness. The reader follows his interior monologue as he bends down towards her: 'Cruel. Her

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<sup>2</sup> 'Concern' is used in the double sense ("to refer or relate to; to be about" and "anxiety; worry") in this essay (*OED*).

nature. Curious mice never squeal. Seem to like it. Wonder what I look like to her?’ (Joyce, 45.27-9, 1986). Critics such as Hugh Kenner have engaged with the displacement of Bloom’s masochistic desires onto the mice here, but the undermining of the human through the proximity of the cat has received little attention (see Kenner, 1987, 45; see also, Rando, 2009, 536). Bloom is able to consider the point of view of the cat: her gaze is his concern, placing him as the object of her ‘cruel’ nature. Derrida, considering the gaze of his own feminine cat, states that this ‘gaze called “animal” offers to my sight the abyssal limit of the human’ (Derrida, 2008, 12). The cat’s gaze precipitates an anxiety in Bloom through addressing him from a bottomless alterity, uninterpretable through its ambiguity: ‘Height of a tower? No, she can jump me’ (Joyce, 45.28-9, 1986). The implication here is that although the biblical and philosophical traditions that produce the human are premised on ‘dominion over’ the animals, the recognition of the animal’s gaze jeopardises the supremacy of the human: the abyssal limit offered by the gaze is unreadable, throwing the human gaze back to reflexively consider itself as destabilized. To be ‘seen seen’ (Derrida, 2008, 13-4) by this pet cat therefore subverts the positions of power: the cat is able to encroach on the human through her potential to position Bloom as her inscrutable concern.

There has been little critical engagement with the indication that Bloom has seen the cat hunting for mice within the domestic space. John Bradshaw notes that the divide between domestic animals kept as companions and those kept for

utilitarian purposes began to sharpen during the Victorian era (Bradshaw, 2017, 52). Bloom's relation to the cat therefore retains the trace of a dynamic bifurcation of domestic animals in modern urban society, a bifurcation brought about by a social shift in the position of the domestic animal in relation to the human. He acknowledges the useful potential of the cat, withholding food to harness her hunting potential: 'Give her too much meat she won't mouse' (Joyce, 51.276, 1986). The fact that he encourages this wild, hunting instinct in her suggests that the wildness of the animal is sublimated in the domestic space through her utilitarian function.

However, despite this sublimation, the cat retains the trace of her wild ancestry within the domestic sphere, evinced in the imprint this leaves on the lexical choices: 'stalks' (Joyce, 45.19, 1986), 'dark eyeslits narrowing' (Joyce, 45.34-5, 1986), 'sniff in her shift' (Joyce, 307.1024, 1986), 'claws' (Joyce, 629.936, 1986) 'staring' (Joyce, 629.938, 1986). These lexical choices in the interior monologues of Leopold and Molly Bloom attest to the otherness, the wildness that is retained in the cat, threatening the domestic from within. This undermines the discursive construct that sought to inscribe human dominion over the animals in the first definition of the 'domestic animal' within UK law in 1911. It states that a domestic animal is one that is 'tame or which has been or is being sufficiently tamed to serve some purpose for the use of man' (*Protection of Animals Act*, 1911). This definition obfuscates the deconstructive potential of the wildness retained in domestic animals, which threatens to disrupt this relation

from within. Furthermore, it inscribes the dichotomy between the human and animal which I have shown is threatened in the self-reflexive gaze precipitated by the incomprehensible gaze of the animal.

Despite this wildness, Bloom has an affectionate relationship with the cat, a relation that is ostensibly reciprocal. Bloom's companionship with the domestic animal is evidenced in his consideration of the cat's perspective when he 'wonder[s] what I look like to her' (Joyce, 45.28-9, 1986) and in Molly's thoughts of his 'play with the cat' (Joyce, 628.934, 1986). The cat also occupies intimate spaces in the home: she bounds upstairs to 'curl up in a ball on the bed' (Joyce, 55.469, 1986) and likes to 'sniff in [Molly's] shift on the bed' (Joyce, 307.1024, 1986). This relationship with the cat is suggestive of kinship and humanity: she prowls the borderline between family and nonfamily, animal and nonanimal (Shell, 137, 1986).<sup>3</sup> Bloom sublimates his own desire to curl up next to Molly on the bed and to sniff her undergarments – 'her high notes and her low notes' (Joyce, 306.1011, 1986) – through allowing the cat to occupy intimate spaces, thus vicariously realising these sexually imbued desires. Furthermore, Bloom displaces a paternal affection onto the cat, talking and playing with her. The cat thus vacillates between wild and domestic, animal and human. The conjunction of this subversive wildness, utilitarian function, and domestic

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<sup>3</sup> Shell writes: 'the family pet stands both at the borderline between family and nonfamily (i.e., at the borderline between those beings with whom it would be incest to have sexual intercourse and those with whom it would not be incest) and at the borderline between animal and nonanimal or between man and non-man (i.e., at the borderline between those beings which may be eaten and those which may not). Pets stand at the intersection of kin and kind' (p.137).

companionship therefore points to a nexus of relations to domestic animals that had begun to disentangle over the nineteenth century, and continued to do so through the twentieth century to the point where Derrida can posit the question: ‘What does this bottomless gaze offer to my sight?’ (Derrida, 2008, 12).

‘only in death do the two parallel lines converge...’ (Berger, 2007, 253)

John Berger argues that an animal’s life can be seen to run parallel to the human’s (Berger, 2007, 253-3). The intersubjectivity of human language means that a common communicative system bridges the gap between the human gaze and consciousness, whereas the animal’s gaze does not confirm the human. The animal’s ‘lack of common language, its silence’, Berger states, ‘guarantees its distance, its distinctness, its exclusion from and of man’, and therefore its parallel life to the human (Berger, 2007, 253). In her interior monologue, Molly asks, ‘what was the good in going into mourning for what was neither one thing nor the other’ (Joyce, 637.1307-8, 1986), in reference to the death of her son Rudy shortly after birth. David Rando notes that Rudy was speechless when he died, unable to traverse the communicative space that separates him from his parents (Rando, 2009, 540). The implication is that Rudy was neither human nor animal, a life deprived of language and reason, though able to gaze from a consciousness that is uninterpretable. His short life was akin to the animals and thus parallel to the human.

‘[H]e insisted hed go into mourning for the cat’ (Joyce, 637.1309-10, 1986): Molly states that Bloom would mourn the cat after death, which implies that he has displaced a paternal affection and unresolved grief onto the cat. There is no trace of the cat in Bloom’s memories prior to living at 7 Eccles Street, so the Blooms must have acquired the cat subsequent to Rudy’s death. Marc Shell notes that pets can ‘help people to deal with the loss by death of a friend or relative’, and the fact that Bloom would mourn the cat suggests he has not thoroughly mourned the death of Rudy, the cat therefore helping him to deal with this loss as a substitute object (Shell, 1986, 121). Molly states that she is ‘not going to think [her]self into the glooms about’ the death of Rudy anymore (Joyce, 640.1450-1, 1986), but Bloom’s thoughts throughout the day notably come back to Rudy, and he ruminates over a sense of guilt and shame regarding his son’s death: ‘If it’s healthy it’s from the mother. If not from the man. Better luck next time’ (Joyce, 79.329-30, 1986). Rando notes that Bloom traces the cause of Rudy’s death back to a fault in him, implicating himself in the pathology that inflicted the child (Rando, 2009, 538). The implication here is that he is unable to mourn the death of his son due to its ambiguity and suddenness, instead agonising over the death and the impact it has had on his sexual intimacy with Molly: ‘When we left Lombard street west something changed. Could never like it again after Rudy’ (Joyce, 137.609-10, 1986).

The ‘Circe’ episode in *Ulysses* depicts a phantasmagoric staging of Stephen and Bloom’s inner thoughts, culminating in visions of their lost relatives. Bloom

has a vision of Rudy at the age of eleven, which ends with his son returning his gaze: 'RUDY. (*Gazes, unseeing, into Bloom's eyes and goes on reading, kissing, smiling.*)' (Joyce, 497.4964, 1986). The image of his son, as Jeri Johnson points out, is a projection of interior memory and fantasy that is exteriorised into an objective reality (Joyce, 1993, 922). The thoughts of Rudy that frequently manifest within Bloom's interior monologue are here objectified in a fantasy of his son as an Eton schoolboy with decadent dress reading a Hebrew text (Joyce, 497.4956-60, 1986). This transformation of interior thoughts into objective reality reinforces the argument that Bloom has not properly mourned Rudy: he is unable to abandon the confusion and guilt of having lost his son, thus giving this the psychological structure of melancholy that is exteriorised in 'Circe'. Sigmund Freud notes of melancholy that it is 'like an open wound', as some aspect of the lost object is withdrawn from consciousness and the subject is unable to fully process this; hence there is a cathexis (the psychoanalytic term meaning 'the concentration or accumulation of mental energy in a particular channel') of the lost object with psychological energy, as the subject fixates on their loss (Freud, 2006, 319-20). I would therefore argue that the manifestation of Rudy as a phantasmagoric object is a result of this cathexis: its intense fixation on the lost object exteriorises Rudy, whom Bloom has been unable to mourn properly. He is 'unseeing' in this manifestation, as Bloom cannot interpret what seeing would entail for this mute being; thus, Bloom is ultimately unable to properly mourn what was 'neither one thing nor the other'.



Berger states that the parallels between the ontologies of animals and humans only converge after death, hence the 'widespread belief in the transmigration of souls' (Berger 2007, 253). Arguably, the parallels between the cat and Rudy that begin and end Part II of the text are due to a convergence in Bloom's mind between them. The cat and Rudy are deprived of language, their gaze uninterpretable and both precipitate a malaise in Bloom; the 'white button under the butt' of the cat's tail (Joyce, 45.22, 1986) is paralleled by Rudy's 'diamond and ruby buttons' (Joyce, 497. 4964-5, 1986); and, the first utterance of Bloom in Part II is 'O, there you are' (Joyce, 45.17, 1986) addressed to the cat, with the last being an inaudible cry, 'Rudy!' (Joyce, 497.4962, 1986). The displacing of affection and mourning onto the cat is therefore a way to complete the process of grieving young Rudy: a metempsychosis in which the soul is displaced from Rudy to the cat in Bloom's psyche.

The animal can 'address them from down there...' (Derrida, 2008, 13)

Frank Budgen writes in his 'Further Recollections of James Joyce' (1955) that Joyce 'had a considerable sympathy for the cat with its persuasive manners and its compact self-sufficiencies' (Budgen, 1972, 357). He kept and observed cats while in Trieste, Zurich, and Paris, with a photograph of 1913 showing Giorgio and Lucia at the window of their Trieste flat, a cat embraced in Lucia's arms (Ellmann, 1982, plate xxi). The attentiveness to feline behavior is therefore

from Joyce's own admiration and observations of this animal (see also Ellmann, 1982, 418; 462; 495; 691).

In *Ulysses*, Bloom is attentive to the differences in feline vocalisations; the narrative distinguishes between 'Mkgnao!', 'Mrkgnao!', 'Mrkrgrnao!', and 'Gurrhr!' (Joyce, 45-6.16; 25; 32; 38, 1986). Rando attributes this adept ability to hear differences in the repetition of meows to the 'veterinary gaze': the perception of the bodies and behaviors of animals through the language of rationality, brought about by a shift in the nineteenth-century attempt to understand animals through veterinary science (Rando, 2009, 535). However, I would argue that the social context of an increase in domestic animals is also integral to these distinctions: the shift in the knowledge of the animal's place in society to a companion animal brought about the increased presence of animals in the home within bourgeois society, allowing citizens to become knowledgeable about individual animals and their behaviors (Bradshaw, 2017, 42). After all, Bloom is not engaged with the discourses of veterinary science, but he does live in close proximity to an individual animal with which he has become familiar.

Anthrozoology, a science established in the 1980s, could further help literary critics to understand these different vocalisations of the cat that are transliterated in *Ulysses*. Anthrozoology studies the human-animal bond and has found that in domesticated cats two vocalisations can be distinguished: those vocalised when a cat is actively seeking food ("solicitation"), and those vocalised when a cat is content ("non-solicitation") (Ellis, Swindell and Burman, 2015,

626). The authors of a study carried out to determine the purpose of these vocalisations write that solicitation purrs ‘have been shown to contain higher-frequency voiced components’ and that ‘these high-frequency voiced peaks occur at approximately the same frequency as human infant cries’ (Ibid.). The use of feline utterances signified with the initial bilabial ‘m’ phoneme therefore enacts a sound-symbolism: the cat’s solicitation for food is transliterated into a phoneme that has the primary signification across many cultures of repletion, especially with reference to the infant and milk (Connor, 2014, 72). The indication that Bloom is responding to these solicitation purrs by pouring ‘warmbubbled milk on a saucer’ (Joyce, 46.37, 1986) indicates the feminised aspects of his character, responding to a cry for milk from an animal associated in the nineteenth century with women and effeminate men (Rogers, 2006, 133). Moreover, the finding that this vocalisation occurs at the same frequency as the human infant’s cry relates to the previous argument that Bloom is subconsciously responding to the cat as a parallel to Rudy. It also deconstructs the notion that animals cannot address the human; the cat is here subtly manipulating the human in order to solicit food through appealing to a mammalian instinct (Ellis, Swindell and Burman, 2015, 626).

Despite reading this solicitation into the initial bilabial ‘m’ that Joyce uses, the animal’s address cannot transfer a stable meaning, despite the suggestion that it is soliciting food. The sound of the cat’s vocalisation is transliterated arguably to release - in Maud Ellmann’s term - the ‘semiotic underside’ of language in *Ulysses*,

through proliferating multiple significations of the written letter: isolated, the utterances cannot be identified as feline purrs, but require context to stabilise meaning (Ellmann, 2006, 77). The letter, therefore, cannot represent the feline utterances directly – its representational capacity does not include pure sound anterior to language - despite the attempt to trash the letter and release its semiotic potential: ‘The letter! The litter! And the soother the bitther!’, Joyce writes in *Finnegans Wake* (Joyce, 2012, 93). Through trashing the letter to litter in this trans-litter-ation of the cat’s meow, Joyce prefigures the punning, proliferating meanings of *Finnegans Wake*.<sup>4</sup> This is evinced not only in the cat’s meow, but also in the sounds that encroach on the sense of words in *Ulysses*: the ‘seesoo, hrss, rsseiss, ooos’ (Joyce, 41.457, 1986) of Stephen attempting to capture the sound of the waves in ‘Proteus’, the ‘sllt...sllt...sllt’ (Joyce, 100.174-177, 1986) of the newspaper press in ‘Aeolus’, and the ‘frseeeeeeeefronnng’ (Joyce, 621.596, 1986) of the train in ‘Penelope’. Moreover, Maud Ellmann notes that ‘speech is fashioned out of an acoustic substrate that we share with animals, as well as with machinery and waves’ (Ellmann, 2006, 77). ‘Mrkgnao!’ therefore upsets the anthropomorphic conscious that would attempt to impose a stable meaning on this utterance; it is

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<sup>4</sup> Etymologically, the second morpheme is from the Latin *littera*, ‘letter’. ‘Litter’ is not etymologically related to ‘letter’, instead finding its etymological root in Latin *lectus*, ‘bed’, which went through a number of historical transformations before taking on the primary meaning it has today as ‘rubbish’ or ‘waste’. Joyce puns on the homophony of ‘litter’ and ‘letter’, which I have done here, but I also draw on the meaning of ‘a number of young animals born to an animal at one time’ to suggest the proliferation of semiotic offspring through the transliteration of the cat’s meow. *OED*.

an unknowable utterance, uninterpretable for a singular meaning, instead trashing the letter to represent the proliferation of meaning in sound or, paradoxically, the collapse of meaning in sound. This brings us to the limits of the human.

‘The animal looks at us, and we are naked before it. Thinking perhaps begins there’, philosophises Derrida (Derrida, 2008, 29). The animals of *Ulysses* become our concern when the human stands naked before them in infancy or destabilised. This paper has shown that the individual feline presence, as an enigmatic domestic animal, concerns Bloom in the novel. The cat may be his cat, but the destabilisation of the terms on which this claim is made undermines the notion of the pet as a possession; in other words, the cat’s presence in 7 Eccles Street deconstructs the very presuppositions on which the ownership of animals is founded. Its domestication and co-opting into the family retains the trace of the wild; its gaze is the gaze of Rudy, ‘neither one thing nor the other’; and, its vocalisations exploit the human as mammal and destabilise the human letter. ‘—Mrkgnao! the cat cried’ (Joyce, 45.25, 1986). *Finnegans Wake* perhaps begins there.

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