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Spinoza's Sun, Bloom's Spinoza: Monism and Ideology in James Joyce's *Ulysses*

Yeonsik Jung

On Leopold Bloom's bedroom bookshelf sits *Thoughts from Spinoza*, the book his father Rudolf Virag left him (17.1372). Bloom read it avidly and tried to explain "what Spinoza says in that book of poor papa's" to his wife Molly (11.1058), and although not "hypnotized" at all while listening to it as her husband claims, Molly remembers him "talking about Spinoza and his soul that's dead I suppose millions of years ago" (18.1115–16). Bloom's enthusiasm for Baruch Spinoza no doubt reflects James Joyce's interest in this Dutch philosopher. Through a close friendship with J. F. Byrne who explored "several aspects of secular Jewish culture, not the least of which was the life and writings of Baruch Spinoza," Joyce became interested in Spinoza's philosophy during his years at University College Dublin and later made Spinoza Bloom's favorite philosopher in *Ulysses* (Davison 77–78). Indeed, according to Anthony Uhlmann, Joyce's quotation of Spinoza's rarely cited original Latin sentence, albeit in a slightly different form, in his notes to the play, *Exiles*, reveals his "good knowledge of Spinoza's *Ethics*" (54). John Henry Raleigh similarly views Joyce's comments on Spinoza in a 1903 review of J. Lewis McIntyre's *Giordano Bruno* and his 9 March 1903 letter quoting John Synge's claim on the similarity between Joyce and Spinoza as the "published evidence of a connection between Spinoza and Joyce" (585). Built on these biographical and archival researches on the link between Joyce and Spinoza, critics like Elizabeth S. Anker and Patrick McGee explore the ways in which Bloom's character and thoughts work as literary expression to Spinoza's philosophy: Anker connects Bloom's character to Spinoza's concept of the prophet in *Theological-Political Treatise* and McGee uses Spinoza's ideas about sexual desire to discuss Bloom's perversity and his sterile sexual relationship with Molly (196–203). This essay, in a similar vein, attempts to identify the influence of Spinoza's philosophy on *Ulysses*, particularly his monism about the mind-body/matter relationship and his emphasis on affect which trigger some of Bloom's wandering reveries.

Revising Cartesian dualism of body and mind, Spinoza notes in (the Scholium to Proposition 21 of) *Ethics* that they are not two separate entities but "one and the same individual, which is conceived now under the attribute of thought, now under the attribute of extension" (II, P21, 48). The mind, for Spinoza, to borrow Stephan Schmid's phrasing, is "not a genuine substance that *has* certain acts of thinking but simply *is* a bundle of such acts" (257; italics original). The ideas occurring in a mind are not produced by this mind but caused by other ideas lying inside or outside a mind. Hence Spinoza maintains that "a circle existing in Nature and the idea of the existing circle, which is also in God, are one and the same thing, which is explained through different attributes" (II, P7, 35). He elaborates his version of monism through the example of a person who imagines (substituting the sun for a circle) the sun to be two hundred feet away.

when we look at the sun, we imagine it as about two hundred feet away from us, an error which does not consist simply in this imagining, but in the fact that while we imagine it in this way, we are ignorant of its true distance and of the cause of this imagining. For even if we later come to know that it is more than six hundred diameters of the earth away from us, we nevertheless imagine it as near. For we imagine the sun so near not because we do not know its true distance, but because an affection of our body involves the essence of the sun insofar as our body is affected by the sun. (II, P35, 53–54)

While looking at the sun, “our body is affected by the sun.” The process in which “an affection of our body involves the essence of the sun” is visceral, nonsignifying, and autonomic one that takes place “below the threshold of conscious awareness and meaning” (Leys 437). Spinoza’s emphasis on affect, “our corporeal-affective dispositions play[ing] in thinking, reasoning, and reflection,” constitutes the kernel of his monism, which consequently sees the image of the sun not as a mere false consciousness (Leys 436).¹ The two suns located and imagined at two different distances are the same yet taking different attributes: “thought” for the imagined and “extension” for the real. No wonder Louis Althusser 2005, in his essay “Marxism and Humanism” in *For Marx*, borrowed this example, now substituting the moon for the sun, to support his claim on the materiality of ideology, which defines ideology “*not at all as a form of consciousness, but as an object of their ‘world’ – as their ‘world’ itself*” (233; italics original).

For Bloom, Spinoza is no other than a Jewish philosopher. Living in Dublin, a place not free from racist anti-Semitism despite its long subjection to Anglo-Saxon oppression, the Jewish Bloom encounters anti-Semitic slurs from his fellow Dubliners – for example, the Citizen and Joseph Hynes who, at Barney Kiernan’s pub in the “Cyclops” episode, call him “whiteeyed kaffir” and “bloody dark horse” (12.1552, 1558). Defending against their petty prejudices Bloom improvises the list of influential Jews that includes Spinoza: “Mendelssohn was a jew and Karl Marx and Mercadante and Spinoza. And the Saviour was a jew and his father was a jew. Your God” (12.1804–5). Talking about the Jews with Stephen Dedalus, Bloom also places Spinoza in the list of “anapocryphal illustrious sons of the law and children of a selected or rejected race” (17.720–21).

His interest in Spinoza, however, might stem not just from the philosopher’s Jewishness, but more from the fact that the twenty-three-year-old Spinoza, a Sephardi Jew with Portuguese origin, was excommunicated (*cherem*) from the Jewish community for his lax conformity to orthodox religious beliefs and behaviors. Because Spinoza had neither published anything at the time of excommunication, nor commented on this event in his extant letters, we do not know exactly the nature of his “evil opinions and acts,” “abominable heresies,” and “monstrous deeds” condemned by the congregation that had nurtured him (Nadler 7). Yet his later writings such as *Ethics* and *Theological-Political Treatise* which seek “to liberate the minds of individuals from superstition and the lives of citizens from ecclesiastic authority” hint at young Spinoza’s “heresy” that threatened orthodox Jews in Amsterdam (Nadler 32). Spinoza’s life and philosophy, as Neil R. Davison points out, would allow Joyce to reflect on “the ambiguities of his own Catholicism and ‘Irishness’” (78). Likewise, the Jewish philosopher’s excommunication from Judaism would work as a mirror through which Bloom reflects on his marginal in-between identity as an Irish Jew with Hungarian origin and his struggle as a Jew in Roman Catholic and nationalist Dublin.

Bloom, although a victim of anti-Semitism, expresses a sort of racial self-hatred by participating in Jewish stereotyping, for example, when he jokes about Reuben J. Dodd’s “Jewish” stinginess (6.262–90). Against his Renanian “voluntarist” belief on nation which defines it as “the same people living in the same place . . . [or] in different places” who share the same “love” for their nation (12.1422–23, 1485), he alleges ironically that the Irish “Home Rule” nationalist Joseph Patrick Nannetti’s “real country” is Italy, not Ireland, only because the politician is the son of an Italian sculptor (7.87).² “Self-hatred,” according to Sander Gilman, “results from outsiders’ acceptance of the mirage of themselves generated by their reference group – that group in society which they see as defining them – as a reality” (2). Bloom’s Jewish self-hatred and racial nationalism embody a dynamics of ideology in which people internalize beliefs and stereotypes (including those working against their interests) that perceive themselves as “different” and, as a consequence, cause them to reproduce the same prejudices toward other unprivileged people. Being subordinated to ideological manipulation, in other words, Bloom refuses to see the ontological rupture between the ideas occurring in a mind and the matter – that is, between the imaginary relationship of individuals and their real conditions of existence. I argue that Bloom seeks an excuse for his ideological submission – which Anker calls his “non-combateness, his avoidance of aggression or antagonism” (662) – from Spinoza’s monism, as shown in his recurring fragmented meditations on the sun.

Throughout the day the thought of Molly's affair with Blazes Boylan haunts Bloom. When it arises, Bloom's imagination grows and expands, from which many of his reveries take shape. In "Lestrygonians" Bloom's fleeting thoughts about a quack doctor and an advertisement of the pill on urinals trigger his suspicion that Boylan may have venereal disease and infect Molly (8.96–107). Encounter with Mrs. Breen, née Josephine Powell, a neighbor, with whom Bloom has had a flirtation in his bachelor days also prompts him to reminisce about his happy days with Molly when their daughter "Milly was a kiddy" (8.163). No doubt these memories are spurred and intensified by the marital anxieties that torment him. In order to transport his thought away from Molly's imminent infidelity, Bloom needs something that requires determined concentration. His interest in astronomy, as hinted by Robert Ball's book, *The Story of the Heaven* (1886), that sits alongside *Thoughts from Spinoza* in his bedroom library, fits this need. Bloom indulges frequently in scientific or pseudo-scientific meditations on astronomical subjects like parallax, sunspots, and the timeball on the ballast office and tries a little experiment by stretching his arm and blotting out the sun with the tip of his little finger.³

This lids came down on the lower rims of his irides. Can't see it. If you imagine it's there you can almost see it. Can't see it. He faced about and, standing between the awnings, held out his right hand at arm's length towards the sun. Wanted to try that often. Yes: completely. The tip of his little finger blotted out the sun's disk. Must be the focus where rays cross. If I had black glasses. Interesting. There was a lot of talk about those sunspots when we were in Lombard street west. Looking up from the back garden. Terrific explosions they are. There will be a total eclipse this year: autumn some time. (8.562–68)

Bloom's abrupt immersion in the sun reflects, in a way, his interest in Spinoza's philosophy, as well as astronomy, both of which used the image of the sun to illustrate their theories. His optical experiment is simply to confirm that any object of any size, no matter how small, can completely cover the sun when put at a certain distance from the observer, but it demonstrates Bloom's knowledge about the astronomical debate on the sun's distance, as suggested by frequent notes on solar parallax (8.110, 578, 15.1656, 2334, 17.1052). The image of "the tip of his little finger blotted out the sun's disk" echoes as well Bloom's fascination with Spinoza's monism, an idea that rejects the clear-cut distinction between mind (the image of the sun blotted out by his finger) and matter (the sun) and, therefore, induces him to imagine "almost see[ing]" the sun with eyes closed. Just as the Druids connected the act of blotting out the sun with the finger with man's divinatory power (Lewis 173), so Bloom might perform this gesture in acknowledgment of Spinoza's monism, considering the fingertip-upon-the-sun image as representing the ways in which "our body is affected by the sun."

Bloom's contemplation on (Spinoza's) sun repeats in "Nausicaa" after he masturbates watching the teenage girl Gerty MacDowell on the beach at Sandymount Strand. Thoughts of Molly and Boylan also keep torturing Bloom in this episode, even leading him to assume that his "watch stopped at half past four" alludes to the time of their sexual consummation: "Was that just when, he, she? O, he did. Into her. She did. Done. Ah!" (13.847, 848–50). Like his erotic correspondence with the pen pal Martha Clifford, Bloom's perverse voyeurism can be explained as a cuckolded husband's effort to relieve his sexual frustration as well as to turn away his face from a wife's adultery. Yet, following the scene of masturbation, Bloom catches a glimpse of the Bailey lighthouse on Howth hill, a place where Molly accepted his marriage proposal sixteen years ago, which sets him off on another bout of reminiscence (13.1068). He again tries to distract himself from it by musing about sunlight, a topic sparked undoubtedly by the lighthouse, yet still resonating with the painful and irresistible remembrance of the marriage proposal during which he whispers, "the sun shines for you today," as recollected by Molly in "Penelope" (18.1578).

Colours depend on the light you see. Stare the sun for example like the eagle then look at a shoe see a blotch blob yellowish. Wants to stamp his trademark on everything. Instance, that cat this morning on the staircase. Colour of brown turf. Say you never see them with three colours. Not true. That half tabbywhite tortoiseshell in the City Arms with the letter em on her forehead. Body fifty different colours. Howth a while ago amethyst. (13.1132–38)

Enumerating the colors of the spectrum, “red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, violet,” Bloom thinks that the color of sunlight determines the color of an object we observe (13.1075–76). Given that Spinoza used the sun to clarify his monistic materialism, the process in which the sun “stamp[s] his trademark on everything” dramatizes the way “an affection of our body involves the essence of the sun.” Bloom’s examples of a shoe with a yellow blotch, a cat with fifty colors, and amethyst Howth hill, in this sense, suggest his acknowledgment of affects as pre-subjective forces that influence our thinking and, in turn, of the materiality of ideology which sees such (ideological) images not just as the subjective ideas of the world distorted by sunlight (or political prejudices) but as the objective world itself. Seeing Spinoza’s monism as the theory concerned with the ways that Jews deal with political ideologies like anti-Semitism and Orthodox Judaism, Bloom appropriates it to his own purpose, that is, to justify his ideological submission that leads to the self-abnegating and self-effacing feelings of Jewish self-hatred and racial nationalism.

Notes

1. Baruch Spinoza (via Gilles Deleuze’s re-reading) inspired recent scholars in the humanities and social sciences to be fascinated by the idea of affect, as Ruth Leys succinctly notes, which “must be viewed as independent of, and in an important sense prior to, ideology – that is, prior to intentions, meanings, reasons, and beliefs . . .” (437).
2. In his lecture “What is a Nation?”, Ernest Renan claims that to consider race as the most important factor constituting a nation is “a very great error, which, if it [race] were to become dominant, would destroy European civilization” because “the primordial right of races is as narrow and as perilous for genuine progress as the national principle is just and legitimate” (13) Renan further maintains that “there is no pure race and that to make politics depend upon ethnographic analysis is to surrender it to a chimera” (14). Seeing “[a] nation” as “a soul, a spiritual principle” (19), he concludes that “a large aggregate of men, healthy in mind and warm of heart creates the kind of moral conscience which we call a nation” (20).
3. For Leopold Bloom’s (and James Joyce’s) interest in astronomy and Robert Ball’s *The Story of the Heaven*, see O’Connell.

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