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Adventures in Error: Social Science in the Sherlock Holmes Stories and *Ulysses*

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Abstract

This paper reads Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories beside James Joyce's "Ithaca" chapter of *Ulysses*. I argue that both authors critique the social sciences as practiced by demographers like Charles Booth. For Doyle and Joyce, knowledge about people is unreliable, the knower is always implicated in the production of the known, and the "facts" are prone to cultural distortions. They engage the "culture versus science" debates of Matthew Arnold and T. H. Huxley and suggest that these two modes of knowledge production, the scientific and the cultural, are interrelated or even inseparable. The high modernist literary experimentalism of the 1920s has, in this respect, an antecedent in popular detective fiction. Both genres parody social science's claims to encyclopedic knowledge of people and imply that human beings defy stable categorization.

Keywords

James Joyce, *Ulysses*, Arthur Conan Doyle, Sherlock Holmes, Victorian social science

It is generally acknowledged that during the Victorian period social inquiry adopted the epistemological techniques of the physical sciences, emphasizing objective observation, experimentation, and the careful analysis of demonstrable evidence (Moran 60). This emphasis on method and empiricism has led many, like Clarice Swisher, to view the Victorian era as a period of “faith in . . . scientifically discerned facts” (9). But just how confident in scientific methods and objective empiricism were the Victorians? After completing an exhaustive statistical analysis of London’s poor and working classes, the social statistician Charles Booth acknowledged that there are different “ways of looking even at mere figures” and that “very different impressions may be produced by the same facts” (1: 177). Booth’s emphasis on the malleability of data indicates his awareness that the knower plays a role in the constitution of knowledge and that facts, understood in the context of their interpretation, are created as much as discovered. That such doubts about scientific certainty should originate from a member of The Royal Society suggests that to talk of Victorianism’s “faith” in scientific discernment is to underestimate the complexity of the period’s apprehensions about the sciences, their methods, and claims to objective knowledge.¹

More particularly, the ambivalence toward *social* science during this period can be traced in literary artifacts that exhibit a lineage of parody linking the experimental literature of modernity to the popular fiction of the late Victorian era. The parodies of social science that occur in Arthur Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes stories inform similar slants on social science in the “Ithaca” chapter of James Joyce’s *Ulysses*. In both texts science, when it attempts to classify *social* behavior, runs amok of narrative methods for producing knowledge. The observer of social phenomena is not objectively but culturally situated, and facts are inflected by interpretive practices. These stories engage the Huxley-Arnold debate that pitted scientific against cultural means of knowledge production and suggest that the argument is asinine: for science is culture.

What emerges from the study of *Ulysses* and the Sherlock Holmes series in relation to late Victorian social research is a shared interest in the performative power of speech in the sciences. Long before John Austin crystallized issues of speech act theory in his Harvard lectures (1955), Booth was concerned that even social statistics reports composed of numerical figures undergo substantial distortion in the process of descriptive analysis, a concern that is central to Doyle’s fiction as well as Joyce’s. In his first Harvard lecture, Austin opposes performative to constative or descriptive

¹ For an informative study of Victorian awareness of the role of hermeneutics in knowledge production, see Anger.

speech acts, but he later disowns this opposition and concludes that every genuine speech act is constative as well as performative. Drawing on Austin's re-examinations of descriptive speech, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick argues that performativity is a "property or aspect common to all utterances" (4):

Austinian performativity is about how language constructs or affects reality rather than merely describing it. This directly *productive* aspect of language is most telling, for antiessentialist projects, when the utterances in question are closest to claiming a simply descriptive relation to some freestanding, ostensibly extradiscursive reality. . . . That language itself can be productive of reality is a primary ground for antiessentialist inquiry. (5)

The idea that description acts upon and alters the meaning of that which is being described informs the social research of late Victorianism as well as fiction as varied as the Sherlock Holmes stories and *Ulysses*. These texts' similar inquiries into the discursive production of knowledge suggest that the separation of modernist from commercial literature, a separation with its own history of discursive production originating from modernist criticism, is somewhat tenuous: in many ways, in its inquiries into the limitations of social research and the performative power of speech, *Ulysses* is not so much breaking from as taking up a conversation that was ongoing in Victorian social research and Doyle's fiction.

Nevertheless, criticism has often asserted the opposite: that unlike modernist literary projects, classic detective fiction has a great deal of faith in the sciences, and Victorian science itself has a great deal of confidence in the infallibility of its methods. According to such analyses, Holmes embodies complete knowledge of social relations and spaces and is able to apply that perfect knowledge to the proper management of both. Glenn W. Most, for example, argues that the classic detective is "an unsurpassed expert in all the tiniest details of the big city: he knows its streets and neighborhoods, its rules and exceptions, its language and customs; give him an address, and he can tell you exactly where it is—but also exactly what kind of people live there, how they earn their money, and what their most secret dreams and vices are" (68). For Most, the classic detective comprehends and can exert order on the terrific puzzle of the city, offering the reader "solace" and "reassurance" that urban chaos can be recorded, organized, regulated, and controlled (68). Such readings reinforce the idea that the classic detective represents the apotheosis of the social sciences and realizes the aspiration of social research to perfect knowledge derived

from perfect surveillance. From his position in the center of the city the detective sees all, knows all, and can therefore impose order on the urban sphere.

However, the classic detective is neither as all-seeing nor as all-powerful as such readings suggest. The classic detective often misreads the city and its system of signs. A useful theoretical framework for conceptualizing this detective's position in regard to dense social space comes from Michel de Certeau, for whom the urban sphere resists panoptic surveillance:

. . . [T]he city is subjected to contradictory movements that offset each other and interact outside the purview of panoptic power. The city becomes the dominant theme of political epic but it is no longer a theatre for programmed, controlled operations. Beneath the discourses ideologizing it, there is a proliferation of tricks and fusions of power that are devoid of legible identity, that lack any perceptible access and that are without rational clarity—impossible to manage. (128)

For de Certeau, those who are immersed in the city are incorporated into its system of signs and lack the distance and distinction needed to read them. From within urban disorder, comprehensive knowledge and understanding of social relations is improbable; the city is too much in flux, too prone to movement and change, and the urban researcher occupies not the fixed position of an isolated observer but the unsteady position of a participant who cannot transcend the systems he or she studies. De Certeau's theory thus illumines the fallibility of the classic detective. He is immersed in his urban environment, and it is precisely because he functions *within* the urban system he investigates that he is prone to misread or lose control of social phenomena in the city. He uses some elements of the city to study others, and because the urban means of inquiry change as irregularly as the urban object of inquiry, his methods of information-gathering are unreliable.

A case in point: at the opening of "The Man with the Twisted Lip," Holmes has failed to detect (for some time, apparently, and despite his best efforts) the double life of Hugh Boone, a middle-class journalist and family man named Neville St. Clair who disguises himself as a beggar because it proves more lucrative than journalism. Although Holmes reports that Boone's face "is familiar to every man who goes much to the city," and although he has "watched the fellow more than once" (235),² the detective has failed to penetrate the disguise of the mendicant. Here Holmes fails as a demographer: the long-undetected double life of Boone suggests that Holmes's

² All references to Sherlock Holmes stories are taken from *The Complete Sherlock Holmes*.

knowledge of Londoners, “how they earn their money, and what their most secret dreams and vices are” (Most 68), is imperfect. Holmes studies the man, takes note of his clothes, features, manner, and speech, remarks the nook he uses for begging and the East End room he rents (Doyle 235), yet he finds nothing spurious in any of this, nothing to prevent him from erroneously adding an inhabitant to the population of London.

An error of technique is also implied. Holmes famously employs a homeless network of spies, a gang of street youths who can “go everywhere and hear everything” (*A Study in Scarlet* 35); but in this case, it is a homeless man who eludes him. Holmes’s very method of obtaining information—through homeless informants—has become superabundant with the addition of Boone, suggesting an inherent flaw in the detective’s methodology. The homeless population that Holmes uses to gather information is itself unknown, and although he is confident that he can introduce “organization” to the ranks of the homeless (*A Study in Scarlet* 35), the case of Boone suggests otherwise. The homeless Hugh Boones of London (and the ostensible Neville St. Clairs, for that matter) defy the investigator.

In other words, Doyle’s story addresses what demographers of his day knew very well: that certain knowledge of a population is unattainable. Sociologists, like Doyle’s contemporary Booth, underscored the wide margin of error that arises when collecting data on people. Booth, whose *Life and Labour of the People in London* (1886-1903) coincided with the birth and rise of Doyle’s famous detective, undertook what at the time may well have been the most ambitious attempt to map London demographically. His final product amounted to seventeen volumes, providing statistics and analysis on London’s poor and working classes, their conditions of living, occupations, and relationships with social institutions like schools, churches, and the police force. The project includes comments and inventories on everything from the size of families and the numbers of rooms per household to rates of alcoholism, the condition or absence of furniture, and the types of food consumed by the poor, complete with a weekly expenditure.

Despite Booth’s meticulous attention to detail and his monumental acquisition of data, in the fourth volume of his third and final series (*Religious Influences*) the demographer expresses doubts concerning the reliability of his information. Even as he asserts that he “may be able to set forth the bare facts” about living conditions in London, he owns that such an attempt is in some measure quixotic (4: 101). After all, the boundaries separating one district from another are “very vague,” as are the definitions determining class, and even “if we succeed in eliminating these sources of misunderstanding, and know just what portion of the people or what districts are

referred to, other and very subtle possibilities of misconception may be found, according to the way in which the facts are regarded” (4: 97-98). In other words, Booth acknowledges that data consists of interpretable signs, that the absolute meaning of social statistics is impossible to come by, and that differences of opinion will arise given one’s perception of and position in relation to an individual or population. The person who studies people is never merely an observer; the sociologist is always already in the exchange of signification with the object he studies, and by studying, interprets, alters.

As if to illustrate the point that the descriptive analysis of data from social research alters the understanding of that data, Booth himself uses narrative means to explain, or explain away, some of his figures. When he takes an inventory of marriage rates among homeless men in central London, the majority self-report as “single” or “widowed.” Booth imposes his own interpretation onto this information in a way that also effaces it. Acknowledging that self-reports are known to be unreliable, he asserts that the marriage rates must be higher, that it is “too much to suppose that these figures are correct” (1: 225). Then he does his best to conceive of why these men would misreport their marital status and concludes that “married men in trouble [for they are homeless] will very often deny wife and children for the time” (1: 225). Booth collects information and calls it inauthentic, but rather than merely casting doubt on the self-reports, he contrives explanations for the suspected inaccuracy.

Booth’s information is made to conform to an interpretation of the information, its meaning changed by its discursive framing. This tendency to impose a narrative onto a set of social data is parodied in Doyle’s “The Yellow Face,” a story that suggests the Holmes series was as prepared to complicate epistemological processes as sociologists like Booth were. Here, again, the mystery hinges on a newcomer to the community. Holmes’s client Grant Munro has new neighbors whom his wife Effie is visiting in secret. Effie is a widow from a previous marriage in America. She behaves suspiciously, pleads with her husband not to visit the neighbors, one of whom has an abnormal face and appears to be sickly, and she asks her husband for money, which she transfers to the neighbors. From these spare facts (italicized in the passage below) Holmes spins an intricate tale, telling Watson that his theory is provisional:

“But I shall be surprised if it does not turn out to be correct. This woman’s first husband is in that cottage [the cottage of the new neighbors].”

“Why do you think so?”

“How else can we explain her frenzied anxiety that her second one should not enter it? The facts, as I read them, are something like this: *This woman was married in America*. Her husband developed some hateful qualities, or shall we say he contracted some loathsome disease and became a leper or an imbecile? She flies from him at last, *returns to England*, changes her name, and starts her life, as she thinks, afresh. *She has been married three years* and believes that her position is quite secure, having shown her husband the death certificate of some man whose name she has assumed, when suddenly her whereabouts is discovered by her first husband, or, we may suppose, by some unscrupulous woman who has attached herself to the invalid. They write to the wife and threaten to come and expose her. *She asks for a hundred pounds* and endeavours to buy them off. They come in spite of it, and when the husband mentions casually to the wife that there are newcomers in the cottage, she knows in some way that they are her pursuers. She waits until her husband is asleep, and then she rushes down to endeavor to persuade them to leave her in peace.” (359; emphasis added)

The facts in this passage are minimal, the fictions numerous. Notice how quickly Holmes departs from the evidence to entertain his own embellishments. He sets out to establish the “facts as . . . [he reads] them,” states one fact (“this woman was married in America”), and then swiftly builds one assumption from another (“her husband developed some hateful qualities, or shall we say he contracted some loathsome disease and became a leper or an imbecile?”). Like the good student of sensation fiction that he is, the detective even creates an “accomplice” for the first husband, some “unscrupulous woman who has attached herself” to the “invalid.” This loathsome, diseased villain and his vamp are the stock stuff of popular crime fiction. Holmes’s renowned capacity for deduction is here no more than an inclination to view the world through the distorted lens of popular fiction, pointing up the possibility that knowledge is generated through cultural, rather than objective, means.

Further, Holmes’s speculations parody knowledge mediated by discourse even as they suggest that all knowledge is, to some degree, the product of discursive practices. What passes for knowledge is reified through repetition. The original husband who begins conditionally (“shall we say”) as a “leper or an imbecile” quickly becomes unquestionably “the invalid,” his illness a given based on nothing more than the earlier conditional assertion, as though each speech act were indeed a

performative utterance and the man could be made to exist, and to exist as an invalid, simply by saying as much. This parody of knowledge production through narrative speaks to a distrust of discourses claiming detached observation and reaches its apotheosis when all of Holmes's hunches turn out to be wrong.

The case is solved (not by Holmes's famous deduction but by breaking and entering) when the men storm the house, burst into the neighbor's bedroom, and ascertain the truth. In the end, we learn that Munro's wife Effie adored her first husband, with whom she had a daughter. The "yellow-faced" neighbor is that daughter (wearing a mask). Effie's first husband is deceased. He was of African descent, and that is the secret she has been trying to hide. Holmes's inability to detect populations marginalized according to race, class, and gender is compounded by his proclivity for reading too far into the information he has. The story stages Booth's acknowledgment that social phenomena cannot be studied in isolation. The investigator is always implicated in the final analysis, the items that he proposes as "facts" glossed and subject to resignification.

Far from regulating social meaning, the detective himself becomes an object of scrutiny. As Watson walks down Baker Street in "A Scandal in Bohemia," he gazes up at Holmes's windows and observes that

His rooms were brilliantly lit, and, even as I looked up, I saw his tall, spare figure pass twice in a dark silhouette against the blind. He was pacing the room swiftly, eagerly, with his head sunk upon his chest and his hands clasped behind him. To me, who knew his every mood and habit, his attitude and manner told their own story. He was at work again. He had risen out of his drug-created dreams and was hot upon the scent of some new problem. (161-62)

Here the usual roles are reversed and it is the observer, Holmes, who is the object of study, surveillance, and discourse. The scene dramatizes de Certeau's statement that "the city is subjected to contradictory movements that offset each other and interact outside the purview of panoptic power" (128). The classic detective story complicates the idea that social space is reducible to a perfect sphere of control through central surveillance. Holmes the researcher is framed literally and discursively within the social spaces he studies, his silhouette yielding the "story" of his manner and movements. That that "story" contains its own sensational details (the drug-induced dreams) and diction ("hot upon the scent") reminds us that at each remove of observation (here, observing the observer) we remain not in the presence of plain

facts but in the presence of “facts” that signal the processes of mediation by which they come into being.

As Watson’s methods of circumscribing his friend become increasingly scientific, they also become increasingly vulnerable to narrative methods of manufacturing knowledge. In his attempts to quantify Holmes’s qualities, Watson uses the tool of the social scientist: the inventory. Following the cue of those great lovers of lists—social statisticians like Booth—Watson enumerates Holmes’s strengths and weaknesses and even organizes his inventory under a title claiming total delineation:

Sherlock Holmes—his limits

1. Knowledge of Literature.—Nil.
2. Philosophy.—Nil.
3. Astronomy.—Nil.
4. Politics.—Feeble.
5. Botany.—Variable. Well up in belladonna, opium, and poisons generally. Knows nothing of practical gardening.
6. Geology.—Practical, but limited. Tells at a glance different soils from each other. After walks has shown me splashes upon his trousers, and told me by their colour and consistence in what part of London he had received them.
7. Chemistry.—Profound.
8. Anatomy.—Accurate, but unsystematic.
9. Sensational Literature.—Immense. He appears to know every detail of every horror perpetrated in the century.
10. Plays the violin well.
11. Is an expert singlestick player, boxer, and swordsman.
12. Has a good practical knowledge of British law. (*A Study in Scarlet* 11)

Taken alone, this inventory of Holmes’s know-how would appear to support the idea that social data is precise and stable. But the Holmes stories parody the social scientist’s claims to statistical precision when, in “The Five Orange Pips,” Watson repeats and significantly distorts the inventory, saying that it was “a singular document. Philosophy, astronomy, and politics were marked at zero, I remember. Botany variable, geology profound as regards the mud-stains from any region within fifty miles of town, chemistry eccentric, anatomy unsystematic, sensational literature

and crime records unique, violin-player, boxer, swordsman, lawyer and self-poisoner by cocaine and tobacco” (25).

Taken together, the two lists burlesque the belief that social categories are stable and individuals’ traits containable in catalogs. There are some significant changes from one list to the next. For one, the second inventory is not just an inventory: it is *an account* of an inventory, related in dialogue. In other words, the second list performs a reconstruction of social data. What happens as this data is reconstructed? In “The Five Orange Pips,” “Holmes grinned at the last item” (“self-poisoner by cocaine and tobacco”) (25). Perhaps Holmes recognizes that Watson’s list, which is related in the exact order in which it was first recorded, contains this one addition about “self-poisoning.” The point? Lists are unstable. They change, lose, and accumulate data. The addition of a drug habit is, moreover, immaterial in a list concerning Holmes’s knowledge and skills. The information is extraneous, suggesting that social categories have weak boundaries and can be made to admit foreign items. The inventory also becomes more sensational in the retelling. The category of “literature” is dropped from the first list. “Sensational Literature” is repeated. And we get the sensational addition of Holmes’s self-poisoning. The second list presents sensation literature as the only kind of literature, and it enacts its own sensational gesture by adding the irrelevant detail of drug use.

Doyle’s parodies of sociology prefigure Joyce’s farcical exercises in the discipline in the “Ithaca” chapter of *Ulysses*. Readers such as Andrew Gibson and Brian Cosgrove³ have pointed out the pitfalls of the *physical* sciences and their methodologies in “Ithaca.” But there has been little treatment of the chapter’s relationship to Holmes, the social sciences, or the imposition of culture and narrative on sociological methods of research. Yet Holmes’s presence in the novel cues us to read in “Ithaca” the very epistemological hitches that we find in Doyle’s slant on sociology.

With its nods to Doyle, *Ulysses* offers several hints that the reader should see in Bloom a pastiche of the Baker Street legend. In “Circe,” Bloom enters the scene like a detective, tails Stephen Dedalus through Dublin’s red-light district, and his face contracts “to resemble many historical personages,” among them “Sherlock Holmes”

³ Gibson thoroughly reads scientific errors in “Ithaca” in order to argue that “Ithacan science is erratic, untrustworthy, delusive. If the rigor of scientific discourse is sedulously maintained, it is also gleefully corrupted” (244). Cosgrove argues that in “Ithaca,” the quasi-scientific over-accumulation of facts and over-precision of language results in a “surfeit of knowledge” that distances rather than brings one closer to an intimate knowledge of the subjects of study (148).

(ch. 15, 1844-49).⁴ In “Eumaeus,” Bloom meets a mendacious seaman and takes “stock of the individual . . . [by] Sherlockholmesing him up” (ch. 16, 830-31). Doyle’s “Adventure of the Blue Carbuncle” is referenced in “Ithaca” (1679-87), and Bloom’s bookshelf holds another work by Doyle, *The Stark Munro Letters* (1375). Yet few critical works have addressed Holmes’s presence in *Ulysses*. Among the few that have, the most rigorous and well-known is Hugh Kenner’s argument that Joyce’s mode of narration is a send-up of the mental powerhouse represented by Holmesian ratiocination. For Kenner, *Ulysses*’s narrator represents Holmes’s omniscience without Holmes’s reason. The narrator is incapable of deduction and merely records information without registering it in any meaningful way. But like many readers, Kenner disregards the presence of parody in the Holmes stories. Ithacan detection and social science is not deriding the Holmes stories but building upon their own parodies of the ambitions of social research for an encyclopedic knowledge of people.

Reading for the chapter’s parodies of the social sciences complements the body of compelling scholarship that reads it as a satire of Christian catechism, rote learning, and taxonomy. As A. Walton Litz and Robert Hampson have demonstrated, “Ithaca” draws heavily on Richmal Mangnall’s *Historical and Miscellaneous Questions*, a nineteenth-century collection of questions and answers that adapts the catechistical mode for education in the schoolroom. But while, as R. A. Copland and G. W. Turner argue, the chapter mocks schoolroom methods of memorization, it also parodies the discourses of Victorian science more broadly. Indeed, Litz and Hampson each observe that the chapter’s parodies of Christian and schoolroom methods of catechism are not limited to the Church and the schoolroom alone but target other institutions and fields of knowledge as well. As an expansion of Litz’s acknowledgment that “Bloom’s thoughts and actions are cast in the self-confident language of Victorian science” (395), Hampson carefully draws attention to the collision of discourses that undermine each other’s authority: “Joyce brings together religious catechism and the catechistical method used in Mangnall and makes them interfere with each other. But the pedagogical use of catechism, in turn, explains the emphasis on the schoolroom in ‘Ithaca’ and allows other kinds of schoolroom questioning to add to the discursive contest” (243). In fact, the chapter’s proliferating discourses are so numerous that Karen R. Lawrence argues that “it is the idea of a taxonomic system itself, not any particular system, which is parodied” in “Ithaca” (569). Of course, such taxonomic systems are the tool of nineteenth-century social

⁴ All references to *Ulysses* are to chapter 17 unless otherwise noted. The references indicate line numbers.

statistics. Combined with the clear emphasis on population management in “Ithaca,” the social sciences are among the epistemological systems that the chapter parodies.

Plot-wise, the chapter is simple. After spending the day on the streets of Dublin, Bloom returns home with Stephen, the two chat, have some cocoa for a nightcap, urinate in the garden, then Stephen leaves, and Bloom joins his wife in their bed. But this noncomplex diegesis is woven into an intricate series of questions and answers concerning everything from meditations on the cosmos to urban plumbing and the men’s dissimilar arcs of urine, all broken down with such a semblance of categorical precision that, as Joyce himself said, the reader will feel that the chapter’s excess of information has rendered Bloom’s world in full.⁵

The overreaching taxonomies of “Ithaca” often originate from a focalization on Bloom as a man of science. Such categorical knowledge would appeal to Bloom and his “scientific” temperament (Joyce, *Ulysses* 560). Moreover, his mind tends toward “applied, rather than towards pure, science,” and he is most interested in applying his science to “an improved scheme for kindergarten” (561-62, 569-71). He is, then, a *social* scientist and positivist. Like Booth and Holmes, Bloom wants to apply scientific methods to problems of social welfare. But his conceptions of community service are reduced to a comedy as he imagines himself, like Holmes, discussing “unsolved” “criminal problems” in the “tepid security” of some future estate and advancing from armchair detective to superman of security (1599-1600). He conceives of himself as a pillar of his projected community (“Bloomville”), where he will serve as a “magistrate or justice of the peace,” maintaining “public order,” redressing wrongs and “abuses,” and “upholding . . . the letter of the law” (1623-27). His plans and methods of social development are full of misinformation, the misapplication of facts, the influence of bias, and disorganization. He plans to apply “venville rights”—grazing rights geographically linked to Dartmoor Forest in the south of England—to policies of twig-gathering outside Dublin (1627-30, 1514-18). And although he proposes to embody an unbiased form of justice, his projected “strict maintenance of public order” takes on a personal note when it leaps from conspirators (“traversers in covin”) to adulterers like Molly and Boylan (“violators of domestic connubiality”) (1617-33).

Bias, “Ithaca” suggests, is as present in society as disorder. Bloom can only imagine a community in flux, “a heterogeneous society of arbitrary classes, incessantly rearranged in terms of greater and lesser social inequality” (1617-20). His

⁵ In a letter to Frank Budgen, Joyce reported that he was “writing *Ithaca* in the form of a mathematical catechism . . . so that the reader will know everything and know it in the baldest and coldest way” (*Letters of James Joyce* 159-60).

society, “organized” hierarchically yet arbitrarily, recognizes no real standard of social organization. This implies that the only society imaginable is, in de Certeau’s words, a society “subjected to contradictory movements,” illegible, imperceptible, irrational (128). An “arbitrary” system that “incessantly” shifts defies the classificatory schema of the social sciences. Bloom’s impulse to manage the unmanageable community is further undermined by his presumption that the incidents of human congress are brought about less by intelligent design than by coincidence (Joyce, *Ulysses* 633-35). His private meditations themselves bear this out, for even to dream of managing a population of innumerable inconsistencies is itself on some level irrational, as Booth conceded.⁶

Far from being able to organize a society, Bloom cannot even keep his own home in order. The social statistician’s enumeration of people per household and their material conditions and furnishings is obliquely ridiculed in the Ithacan homecoming, which features Bloom misplacing his house key and breaking into his own home only to find that someone has rearranged all of the furniture and been sleeping (with his wife) in his bed. Bloom’s domestic situation is so changeable that it is no wonder he does not always recognize his own bedroom when he wakes and whacks his head on an unexpected sideboard (852-53, 1274-78). In “Ithaca,” domestic space is not fixed or enduring. It is more in line with Booth’s baffled conclusion that “change proceeds so fast that what was already is not, and much of what still is, will perhaps no longer be before these lines are print” (1: 184).

Bloom’s attempts to put his home in order are Lilliputian in scope and, even so, fail. He represents the rational categorizations of the scientist when he reflects on “the necessity of order, a place for everything and everything in its place” while reorganizing his bookshelves (Joyce, *Ulysses* 1410-11). At least one of these books, however, is quite out of place, “13 days overdue” to the Dublin Public Library; significantly, the book is Doyle’s *The Stark Munro Letters* (1375-78). In the book’s foreword, Doyle claims to have done away with the conventions of plot and written a novel of disjointed events that neither connect nor progress in the usual manner of a narrative (*The Stark* ix). The presence of this book on Bloom’s shelf points up the impossibility of such a claim.⁷ In “Ithaca,” nothing, neither people and things nor events, can be isolated, disjointed, or liberated from discourse; all is “contingent,

⁶ As explained above, Booth was reflective enough to own and frank enough to admit that the prospects of his project to map the unstable city were quite dubious.

⁷ For a fuller examination of *Ulysses* and *Stark Munro*, particularly their relationship to theories of social Darwinism, see Hart.

partial, and open to transformation” (Flynn 74), including the analyst of that volatile material.

The material world acts on and influences the observer, altering how he or she perceives the world. As Bloom contemplates a lampshade, an embalmed owl regards him with a “motionless compassionate gaze,” and he in turn assumes a “motionless compassionated gaze” (Joyce, *Ulysses* 1344-47). The transfer of compassion from a “compassionate” object to a “compassionated” observer signals the porous borders between people and the material world. “Compassionated,” a neologism formed from a verb meaning, apparently, “to render compassionate,” repeats the point in syntax. In “Ithaca,” nothing is inert, not even nouns, which are animated as participles. The chapter’s inventories are not inert or impermeable, either, but born of cultural interference. Bloom’s schemes for social advancement constitute one such list. Related in the point-by-point fashion of an inventory, the list suggests that categorical knowledge is infiltrated by popular fiction and song. Popular culture informs and shapes Bloom’s itemization of potential windfalls. When he thinks that he might “break the bank at Monte Carlo” (1694-96), he is citing the title of a popular song by Fred Gilbert. His hope that a “Spanish prisoner” might donate a “distant treasure of valuables” (1687-88) evokes Edmund Dantes’s benefactor in Dumas’s *The Count of Monte Cristo*. And the “precious stone” that might be found “in the gizzard of a comestible fowl” (1679-87) is a direct reference to the Holmes story “The Adventure of the Blue Carbuncle,” in which the valuable gem is found in the crop of a goose destined to be Christmas dinner.

If, as Karen R. Lawrence argues, “Ithaca” “dons the anti-literary mask of science” (559), then that mask’s anti-literariness is playing on the illusion that the sciences and humanities engage in antithetical modes of knowledge production. As Lawrence’s study suggests, “Ithaca” does something more complicated than a mere pitting of science against literature. It presents science’s categorical knowledge as a narrative medium that popular culture has always already molded. Bloom can conceive of a list of possibilities organized with the meticulous care of the sciences, but that list is generated in cultural terms—songs and stories. This cultural slippage in epistemological processes is repeated in the interlocutor’s line of questioning. The interlocutor’s questions include presuppositions derived from narrative. The interlocutor grafts fictional events onto people in the world and interprets those people as though they were the fictional characters who took part in the fictional events. For example, after Stephen sings the legend of Harry Hughes, a “schoolfellow” who is murdered by a “Jew’s daughter,” the interlocutor references Stephen and Milly by the exact same assignations, as a “schoolfellow” and a “Jew’s daughter,” and

presumes (although we have no proof that Stephen and Milly have ever met) that they are in need of a “reconciliatory union” (Joyce, *Ulysses* 940-42).⁸ After Stephen and Milly are referenced as a “schoolfellow” and a “Jew’s daughter,” the process of mapping the narrative onto life continues, and Stephen and Milly, conceived as characters from a song, are ascribed the preexisting relationship of those characters.

But the interlocutor is not dependent on folk songs for knowledge production since original fictions can be got up for that purpose. Together, the Ithacan interlocutor and addressee fabricate Bloom’s reactions in order to interpret them. As Bloom enters his bed and registers signs of Molly’s adultery earlier that day, the interlocutor asks, “If he had smiled why would he have smiled?”, and the addressee responds that he would have smiled at the thought that “each one who enters” a bed “imagines himself to be the first to enter whereas” in reality he is always just one of a series (2126-31). This imaginary moment presupposes that we learn more about Bloom through story than we do through empirical observation. At the same time, what we learn about him is shot through with the potential for error. After all, he never did smile. Presumably, the reflection that would have caused him to smile never took place. The addressee and interlocutor have created a story and interpreted it. This is literary analysis masquerading as science. The implication, though, is that both disciplines tend to fabricate knowledge. In the sciences, facts can be made to suit presumptions just as easily as the interlocutor can concoct a nonexistent smile and its nonexistent cause.

Like Holmes in “The Yellow Face,” the interlocutor carries out inquiries in the conditional. The possibilities supersede the facts. Rather than ask for what purpose Bloom boils water, the interlocutor asks for what purpose he “could” have boiled water (275). When the addressee responds that Bloom “could” have used the water to shave, the interlocutor pursues that possibility and asks about the advantages of shaving by night. In fact, Bloom is preparing hot cocoa for Stephen (355-58). This study of possible rather than actual circumstances implies that social circumstances are too multivalent to be treated as one would treat a secure entity. Indeed, in “Ithaca,”

⁸ Some readers argue that the “reconciliatory union” concerns Bloom and his wife because a union between Stephen and Milly will draw Bloom and Molly closer together. For example, see Ford. However, it is simultaneously possible that the reconciliation concerns Stephen and Milly. Readers might miss this by overlooking the chapter’s process of manufacturing “reality” through cultural means such as songs. Stephen and Milly never met, never fought. But the “schoolfellow” and the “Jew’s daughter” did. If Stephen is the “schoolboy” and Milly the “Jew’s daughter,” then, by the chapter’s illogical constructions, Stephen and Milly met, fought, and need to be reconciled. This reading emphasizes the way culture works on the production of knowledge and therefore falls in with one of the dominant themes of the chapter.

people and their conditions are so unstable that the conditional tense might be the only way to talk about them. Identities are constantly redefined relative to each other. The addressee cannot always distinguish even between Bloom and Stephen, referring to “theirhisnothis fellowfaces” (1183-84). The word-cluster performs the waffling that attends an attempt to define beings that resist definition. The three possessive pronouns—one plural, one singular, one negated—crush up against the communal noun, playing out the proposition that people least of all can be understood in isolation. As Paul K. Saint-Amour argues, “*Ulysses* is deeply interested in how things are defined and perceived through their relation to other entities” (201). People, the most consistently protean of Ithacan “things,” strain and obscure the categories defining them.

A flexible mind might be able to follow some of these contortions, but the interlocutor’s thinking is too rigid. A caricature of scientific inquiry, the interlocutor betrays a certain literal-mindedness that hinders discernment. When informed that once at a circus a clown “publically declared to an exhilarated audience” that Bloom was his (the clown’s) “papa,” the interlocutor asks, “Was the clown Bloom’s son?” (Joyce, *Ulysses* 975-85). The question is hopeless in its naivety and ignorance of culture. Humor, that slipperiest of human creations, escapes the scientific mind. This cultural ignorance can be read as a reply to and reversal of T. H. Huxley’s stance that cultural studies are ignorant of the sciences. Huxley argues that “the free employment of reason, in accordance with scientific method, is the sole method of reaching truth” (“Science and Culture” 76). Such singularity is belied by the chapter’s proliferating paths to knowledge, its succession of errors and scientific methods colored by cultural influence. Huxley’s contention that “scientific truths” can be “established” is too simple, says “Ithaca” (76). Huxley argues that classicists “betray an ignorance of the first principles of scientific investigation” (76), and it is this argument that Joyce turns on its head. In “Ithaca,” scientific empiricism betrays an ignorance of its own manipulation of and by cultural epistemes. It does not understand that its methods of perception are derived from and influenced by cultural origins and biases nor that the process of *establishing* truths is at least as much a process of cultural figuration as of detached reasoning or experimentation.

Huxley’s faith in objectively “established” truths is further ridiculed in the Ithacan performance of the mutability of facts given to discourse. In *Ulysses*’s penultimate chapter, statements of fact are never just statements; the facts are modified by *the way* they are stated, evoking Austin and his conclusion that even descriptive utterances possess performative power. “Ithaca” makes this point by piling on the modifiers. When Bloom declines a dinner invitation, he does not simply

decline, but “very gratefully, with grateful appreciation, with sincere appreciative gratitude, in appreciatively grateful sincerity of regret, he declined” (Joyce, *Ulysses* 473-76). This is less a statement of fact than a joke about obsequious etiquette. Ithacan dissemination of knowledge is inseparable from its style of dissemination. Style is content; the message is not in the matter, but the manner.

And that is precisely the point in “Ithaca”: just as the observer of social phenomena is implicated in the observation, so too is speech inseparable from its manner of speech. Once again, the point serves as a response to Huxley’s confidence in objective empiricism. One of Huxley’s titular *Twelve Lectures*, a book Joyce owned,⁹ argues for educational reform in favor of the sciences and ends in an appeal to the audience to consider the facts of the speech stripped of their manner of delivery. If he has spoken “strongly,” Huxley says, he would ask the audience “to forget the personality of him who has thus ventured to address you, and to consider only the truth or error in what has been said” (“The Educational Value” 17). Huxley is trying to circumvent the problem “Ithaca” exploits: the impossibility of the stark or impersonal transference of knowledge. In “Ithaca,” the “facts,” ornamented with invisible scare quotes, are altered a priori, the moment they are uttered, modulated, packaged, and contextualized.

But if “Ithaca” scoffs at the claims of Victorian science’s most outspoken advocate, the chapter also derides the claims of Huxley’s intellectual rival, Matthew Arnold. Clashing with Huxley, Arnold’s *Culture and Anarchy*¹⁰ advocates for cultural as opposed to scientific curriculums in education. Arnold’s argument for “humanised knowledge” appears unexamined in “Ithaca” (57), where knowledge bears nothing if not imprints of human mediation. To “humanise” knowledge, Arnold says, is to divest it of all that is “harsh, uncouth, difficult, abstract, professional, exclusive” (56). The joke in “Ithaca” is that the chapter takes a cultural form of knowledge production, fiction, and renders it “harsh, uncouth, difficult, abstract, professional, exclusive,” if only to show that a fecund, personal, interactive element is at play even in a seemingly sterile, impersonal, invariable scientific mode. Arnold’s call for a cultural infusion misses the point that culture is already mobilized in and mobilizing what only appears to be a fixed mode of inquiry. “Ithaca” suggests that science and society are not nearly so mechanized as Arnold presumes. Instead, the chapter stages a farce ridiculing the idea of an easy divide between scientific and cultural ways of thinking. Huxley and Arnold establish the lines that “Ithaca” jauntily blurs. For Huxley, “classification” is the “essence of every science” (“The

⁹ See Ellman for an inventory of Joyce’s personal library in Trieste in 1920.

¹⁰ Also in Joyce’s library. See note on Ellman above.

Educational Value” 11). For Arnold, classifications that “must stand isolated” are “tiresome” and boring (“Literature” 83). Ithacan classifications upend both authors’ expectations. If classification is, as Huxley says, “the essence of science,” then for “Ithaca” the essence of science and the tendrils of culture are profoundly enmeshed.

Joyce, Doyle, and Booth each confute the idea that science and culture are unbridgeable islands. For these authors, epistemological modes overlap, and the rationale and language of the sciences are loaded with cultural preconceptions and methods of discursive framing. Joyce’s connection to Doyle props up two more bridges: one spanning the supposed chasm separating Victorianism from late modernity; the other spanning another apocryphal gap, the supposed split between popular and erudite fiction. The dynamism of Ithacan social science has a companion in the Holmes stories. Like “Ithaca,” Victorianism’s most popular detective stories plant subtle critiques of the conceit that knowledge of human beings can be fixed, unmediated, or constructed categorically.

This is not to suggest that Joyce is in debt to these earlier writers for his ideas or approach or that *Ulysses* derives its critiques of the social sciences from Doyle or Booth. Rather, it is to show that each text in its own way is challenging the premise that the sciences can generate knowledge that is extradiscursive or separated from cultural influences. As Booth demonstrates, this is a problem of which the social sciences themselves were well aware, and in this instance the gap between the modernist critique of Victorian scientific empiricism and Victorian science’s self-critique may not be as wide as later criticism maintains. But what is particularly interesting is that all three authors, Booth and Doyle as well as Joyce, suggest that this more complex understanding of scientific knowledge as nonobjective leads to a fuller understanding of the sciences as disciplines of cultural mediation. In the work of the social statistician and the commercial writer as well as the modernist, the likelihood that objective knowledge is out of reach is not presented as a limitation of the social sciences. Instead, each author in reaching for a deeper epistemology implies that a nuanced understanding of social relations requires a rejection of the possibility for total knowledge, a reconceptualization of the sciences in their relationship to cultural studies, and an awareness of the productive power of language.

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