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Molly Bloom and the Comedy of Remarriage

Camelia Raghinaru
University of Florida

Drawing upon Stanley Cavell's concept of the comedy of remarriage and Alain Badiou's event theory, this essay argues that, in James Joyce's Ulysses, Molly Bloom's love-event is necessarily missed the first time, but it is reasserted in a final repetition, after the initial misrecognition of infidelity.

In Molly Bloom's monologue of James Joyce's *Ulysses* we see the fullest expression of an affirmative, "Yes," a utopian opening onto the potentiality of a radically new future, one unbound and undetermined. My treatment of this form of utopianism relies on what might appear unusual or surprising to many readers—a form of the heuristic genre the philosopher and film critic Stanley Cavell names the comedy of remarriage. As Slavoj Žižek argues in *In Defense of Lost Causes*, for Hollywood at least, the family drama is the fundamental venue for reaching the utopian possibilities of our historical experience (52). Phillip Wegner has capitalised on the connection between "yes-saying" remarriage comedies and their utopianism in his discussion of films such as *Notting Hill*, *Groundhog Day* and *Stalker*. Starting from the classic structure of the remarriage comedy as a struggle for reciprocity and equality between man and woman, Wegner puts pressure on the series of crises in these love relationships to point toward the utopian significance of the films (*Life Between Two Deaths* 31). In *Stalker*, he argues for a link between faith and the possibility of a utopian transformation of the world. The ideal locus for the authentic act of the leap of faith is marriage—the last signpost of affirmation of faith in a world devoid of hope. The woman's role is to enact this affirmation through her reiterated "yes!". In this essay I employ Cavell's concept of the comedy of remarriage and Badiou's concept of the event to argue that Molly's monologue from the "Penelope" section in *Ulysses* is a comedy of remarriage that seeks to get in touch with the love-event through the same affirmation and repetition of yes-saying.

Badiou's theory of the event is based on four categories that can generate potential events: science, politics, art, and love. For Badiou, the love-event is a radical interruption of the status quo. In fact, love is the mode through which the new enters a world delineated by two disjunctive positions: that of man and woman. Because these two irreconcilable positions cannot be mediated by a third, which would in some way neutralise the differences, Badiou maintains that the situation must be supplemented not by a third position, but by a singular event. This event is the amorous encounter that serves as the aporetic space that retrospectively links the two irreducible positions. What emerges is not the annihilation of the difference, but a truth that transcends it. The impact of the love-event shatters the stability of the status quo and results in the systematic breakdown of all previously recognisable representations. The void opened by this interruption marks the potential for a new truth that proceeds, however, through a repetitive cycle marked by hesitation, aporia, and indecision.

However, it is this commitment to hesitation and indecision that opens a path for the new. Neither stasis nor a full-blown new world, the situation enacted by the event is an in-between state that persists in tracking down, and maintaining fidelity to, this event.

The event in Badiou's definition consists of a commitment to something momentous found through a chance encounter. It is marked by a fidelity to something that is hard to explain in words that others will understand. According to Badiou, "It will therefore always be doubtful that an event has taken place, except for the one who intervenes, who decides on its belonging to the situation" (*Being and Event* 229). The event takes place amid confusion and obscurity, and clarity is the result of repetition (as in remarriage). As Peter Hallward notes, "It is not that the event itself is nothing. It has the same (inconsistent) being-as-being as anything else. An event can be only a multiple, but it is one that counts as nothing in the situation in which it takes place" (115).

Badiou's category of the love-event either has been disputed or seen as an umbrella category that could accommodate any of the domains falling outside of the political, artistic or scientific—such as psychoanalysis, theology, and philosophy. It can be further categorised, Žižek holds, through the responses it elicits: fidelity, which leads to normalisation and integration through marriage; ; rejection of sexual love leading to abstinence;; and, finally, a resurrection of the initial love, leading to the remarriage (*In Defense* 387). I place the relationship between Molly and Bloom on a continuum of fidelity, rejection (in its two guises—libertinage, for Molly, and abstinence, for Bloom), and remarriage, with the focus of this essay falling on the latter. Thus, according to Badiou, the event is necessarily missed the first time, and fidelity only becomes possible through repetition, as resurrection. I argue that Molly's end of the monologue is the true event of her remarriage to Bloom, just as Cavell writes that "the validity of marriage takes a willingness for repetition" (*Pursuits of Happiness* 126).

Because the event belongs to the situation, it is undecidable and unrepresentable from within the situation. Only subjective intervention decides if the event belongs to the situation or not. The event reveals the void of a situation and names it as a truth-event. When an event erupts for the first time, it is perceived as so traumatic that its significance is missed. In *The Sublime Object of Ideology* Žižek talks about the event asserting itself through repetition after a process of misrecognition—the initial failure of opinion to recognise the true character of the event (61). Through repetition, the event is recognised and placed in its symbolic network. Originally mistaken for contingency, the event realises itself *through* misrecognition. This is the case with Molly's marriage to Bloom—her event—in relation to her simulacrum affair with Blazes Boylan. The latter has been read by critics as either an act of defiance and insubordination or self-affirmation and empowerment. Insofar as it occupies a locus of repetition—a stand-in for her now paralyzed lovemaking to Bloom—this affair marks the aporetic space between Molly and Bloom. Akin to a form of hysteria, her affair with Blazes restores Molly to the patriarchal authority against which she rebels, but also rends the fabric of marital status quo enough to place the two spouses in an event-generative crisis.

Molly's experience of love as truth-event encompasses both the Lacanian and the Badiouian approach to truth: the latter when she met Bloom, and the former during her "remarriage," a comedic reversal of Lacan's concept of the two deaths, as I will show later: "While, for Lacan, Truth is this shattering experience of the Void—a sudden insight into the abyss of Being, 'not a process so much as a brief traumatic encounter, or illuminating shock, in the midst of common reality'—, for Badiou, Truth is what comes afterward: the long arduous work of fidelity, of enforcing a new law onto the situation" (Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do* lxxxii). Paradoxically, the lover feels inclined to betray the event. On one level, Molly's betrayal of Bloom, her first love, culminates in the adulterous tryst with Blazes. On another, Boylan himself functions as a double for a younger Bloom in a fantastic recreation of Molly's youthful pleasures in Gibraltar. The pleasure Molly takes in her encounter with Boylan does not liberate, but rather reengages her, in a remarriage to Bloom. Betrayal and repetition go hand in hand. Far from simply overcoming her past attachment to Bloom, Molly's comparisons between Bloom and Boylan indicate her identification with a past that preserves the marital pleasures that have become self-defining for Molly, even as they are carried into extra-marital relationships.

What Joyce thematises in Molly's monologue is "the possibility for the subject of not reproducing its subjectivization, but instead, of producing itself anew" (Ensslin 11). Wegner describes this space as "a moment of 'sublime beauty,' of openness and instability, of experimentation and opportunity, of conflict and insecurity—a place, in other words, wherein history might move in a number of very different directions" (29). As a remarriage comedy ending in a repetitive "yes," Molly's monologue is the comedic counterpart of Lacan's space of the undead. Her erotic fantasy, transposed into reality, places her into an endlessly repetitive cycle of erotic memories, some consummated, some purely fantastical.

The undead end up caught in a cycle of pain and guilt, which begins to change when one "shifts his perspective and comes to view his existence outside of history proper as a tremendous opportunity, both for self-remaking, developing new talents and becoming another kind of subject altogether, and to experiment in the creation of community and new truly human relationships" (Wegner 32). Molly's history of recounted past and present infidelities places her outside her marital history with Bloom, with its failures—the death of Rudy, the boredom and suffocation of the housewife whose dreams of becoming a prima donna have been stifled and rendered slightly absurd—in an open space in which she is able to recreate herself. This is another way of saying that Molly's utopian "yes" at the end of the novel can only come as a consequence of her period of exile from her commitment to Bloom, when anything, including infidelity, was possible. And yet, as Wegner points out regarding *Groundhog Day*, the event occurs only in retrospect, "only after an uncontrollable number of repetitions" (32).

Molly's virtue is that of actively exiling herself from her present reality with Bloom and manufacturing other possibilities, albeit adulterous, with Boylan, which will only reinforce the fact that Bloom's weakness is more potent than Boylan's strength. In this sense, Molly's reaffirmed commitment to Bloom at the end of the novel meets the utopian requirement suggested in Adorno's

words, according to which, in the messianic time, “duty [will have] the lightness of holiday play” (112). Molly’s infidelity and later claim to renewed fidelity is not so much a going astray as a way of reinventing herself and her marriage. Molly’s exile from history into the fantasy of the erotic is the loop through which she returns to her confession of fidelity to Bloom. It contains its own mark of the utopian in the fact that she was always already returning to Bloom.

The difficulty with Molly’s monologue is the same as with issues surrounding Badiou’s naming the event. Naming the event constitutes the event for the situation. By being named, the event attains a certain efficacy and presence, as the name becomes the trace of the event in the situation, since the event is not and cannot be presented as such. Ed Pluth claims that, according to Badiou, the name of the event is generated neither by the situation, nor from outside of it, but rather it comes from the void itself. A completely new word or name emerges from the void. Naming the event is akin to an intervention that splits the event in two: on one hand, we have the actual event, which cannot stand presentation and becomes subtracted, and then the naming of the event, which ends up doubling the event through a repetition within the situation, bringing about its presentation. Through Cavell’s notion of remarriage comedy, Molly’s monologue is such a faithful naming of the event that attempts visibility and presentation.

To sum up Cavell’s argument on remarriage, his emphasis is on the heroine as a married woman in a new type of comedy that is not about bringing the pair together, but bringing them back together in the wake of conflict, separation or the threat of divorce. He also focuses on a comedic genre associated with the thirties and the Great Depression and which calls for the creation of a new woman—“a phase in the history of the consciousness of women” (*Pursuits*16). He defines the means of the development of this consciousness as a struggle between two disjunctive positions, between a man and a woman who fight for reciprocal recognition. Equality in the relationship happens through a series of mishaps that lead from one misunderstanding, disappointment and desire for revenge to another—a series of events that ends up with the two hitting a wall. This is the realisation of their need for reciprocal forgiveness and personal change, which involves the relinquishing of personal control, as Fischer notes (88). The event emerges through divorce. In the threat of separation, the couple’s willingness to remain together becomes the free-willed decision that authenticates the marriage. In their search for each other, the two have to engage in a series of avoidances and recognitions that culminate in the moment of crisis. As Cavell remarks in his discussion of *Adam’s Rib*, the necessity of testing the marriage, of taking it to court, as it were, in the open, in order to preserve mutual independence, brings with it “the capacity to notice one another, to remember beginning, to remember that you are strangers; but it is only worth subjecting to this examination if the case is one of intimacy, which you might describe as the threat of mutual independence” (*Pursuits* 216).

In order to preserve the mutual independence, it is precisely because Bloom has fashioned young Molly’s subjectivity into one of his liking that he has to release her, and she would have to return to him of her own volition rather than merely because he claims her back. In the case of *His Girl Friday*, Cavell claims that Walter needs to give Hildy the freedom to “free herself from her

divorce, to prompt her to divorce herself from it" (*Pursuits* 164). Bloom goes even beyond that: he helps Molly to enact her freedom by providing opportunities for her tryst with Boylan. In effect, by enacting her scene of engagement on the mountain and giving Bloom all the sexual pleasure he wanted of her own accord and initiative, Molly brings into contrast her present affair with Boylan as counterfeit, less than voluntary, through a different kind of constriction, as if she were asking Bloom to save her from the phony happiness Boylan would offer her. This present realisation comes only through the repetition of her past realisation of happiness.

In this context, Molly's love with Bloom finds its Edenic moment in Gibraltar, followed by a prolonged crisis—their marriage. In *Lady Eve*, Cavell talks about the film as a comic version of the expulsion from the Garden of Eden. In a sense, Molly's story of her childhood and adolescence in Gibraltar is exactly that. She too leaves an exotic peninsula on which she had been devoted to the pursuit of sexual knowledge, but, more significantly, Bloom himself comes to this island to pursue sexual knowledge. Molly herself appears as a native seducer, an inhabitant of this paradise who clunks Bloom on the head with the apple of her sexuality. Cavell notes that the myth of the Garden of Eden is "about the creation of woman and about the temptability of man," and the end of Molly's monologue marks this episode as the event: her sexual identification as an exotic flower (*Pursuits* 48). The fact that Bloom tells her she has the body of a flower is consistent with her sexual stories, which involve the female body opening to sexual encounters. Bloom's seduction of Molly, or rather Molly's of Bloom, is described in detail at the end of the section. Cavell also describes the female protagonist of remarriage comedies as an adventuress—precisely what Molly is throughout her section—while the man is described as a gullible dupe. Though Bloom does not seem to merit this description fully, he seems ignorant about Molly's true thoughts and feelings up on the mountain and throughout her monologue. He is a pseudo-scientist, just like Charles in *Lady Eve*. As Cavell argues, "tales of romance are inherently feats of cony catching, of conning, making gulls or suckers of their audience" (*Pursuits* 48). Similarly, Molly's monologue is a debunking of romance. Thus, I equate her monologue with a picture of the marriage in crisis, but also with the void opening in a moment of crisis to make room for the event-like repetition, culminating in Molly's affirmative "yes." As a homecoming—a return to Gibraltar, home to her true marriage to Bloom—Molly's monologue is not a nostalgic return to the past, but rather a remaking of the past into the present. It takes into account the crisis of her marriage and all the changes she and Bloom have undergone in these almost twenty years.

If we look at the encounter in Gibraltar as a pivotal moment followed by crisis, we perceive this crisis as a period of flight and pursuit, successively. The woman has the knowledge that she is the object of the man's repressed desire. The couple's attempt to flight, to extricating their lives from one another's, is transforming itself into a process of pursuit, as Cavell notes of the two characters in *Bringing Up Baby* (113). The midsummer's eve in Connecticut is an allegory of the wedding ceremony, plus the need to hide the embarrassment of the sexual act under laughter, given that both characters emerge into adulthood from sexless childhoods. The fact is, however, that as much as the woman pursues, the man repeatedly tries to extricate himself, in a metaphorical divorce from her. Quite the opposite is true of Molly and Bloom. Though Bloom is the one in pursuit, theoretically, his

desire for his wife is rather passive. On the other hand, one could argue that Molly's affair is her own version of the pursuit. She has played this teasing game before, with both Bloom and Boylan.

Infidelity and recommitment are processes by which the characters revalidate their marriage, through repetition. Thus, this cycle "poses a question concerning the validation of marriage, the reality of its bonding" (Cavell, *Pursuits* 126). It also addresses the fact that "the validity of marriage takes a willingness for repetition, the willingness for remarriage" (Cavell, *Pursuits* 127). And, most importantly, as it applies to Molly and Bloom, "The task of the conclusion is to get the pair back into a particular moment of their past lives together. No new vow is required, merely the picking up of an action which has been, as it were, interrupted; not starting over, but starting again, finding and picking up the thread" (Cavell, *Pursuits* 127). Only those who are already married can genuinely marry, Cavell argues, because they realise that divorce, although theoretically possible, is not feasible when "you find that your lives simply will not disentangle" (*Pursuits* 127).

To claim, however, that in the end Molly's narrative of infidelity is merely a reassertion of her initial fidelity to Bloom is to transform *Ulysses* into the fairytale it was not meant to be. This narrative would bring closure to a space that opens up precisely in order to avoid this totalising reading. The repetition of Molly's final "yes," if read as a mere re-doubling of her initial acceptance of Bloom's offer of marriage, severs, in fact, rather than puts forth, the utopian values of this repetition. It is this space of tautological repetition of the two *yesses*, that is neither fully the presence of death, nor of life, that I seek to define in the rest of this essay.

A dimension of the Real of this repetition must be brought to light, and what I have in mind is the Real at the heart of Lacan's "zone between-two-deaths" (320). Lacan takes Sophocles's Antigone as his exemplary figure of the Real. Sealed in her tomb, Antigone crosses the threshold between life and death: "Although she is not yet dead, she is eliminated from the world of the living" (280). As such, she becomes inscribed in the tradition of a varied community of the undead (ghosts, demons, vampires, zombies), who are dead in the realm of the Real (as physical bodies) but continue as living beings in the realm of the Symbolic. "A-mortal," the undead is the opposite of that which exists, but also of that which is dead. Lacking representation, it belongs to a Real that does not appear as part of reality as such. It remains unnamable, incalculable, and uncountable. Felix Ensslin explains that the place between two deaths is annihilated in the Symbolic order, in which the fragmentation of the mirror stage, with its horror of dissipation, lack of mastery, anxiety, and undifferentiation, is brought to closure through the fantasy of unity, of "forming the fragmented body and its drives into a unity" that leads to "the possibility of self-control and mastery" (3). In the place where the Symbolic meets the Real, a split opens—the space between two deaths. In fact, Molly's fidelity is a fiction, but, most importantly, so is her infidelity, insofar as it enacts a Romantic idea of the artistic wife. In terms of morality, or even aesthetics, the paradigms of marital fidelity or infidelity in modernism, of virtue and excellence in general, have lost all applicability. They are merely historical, Romantic topoi, stemming from the need in one respect to project and create one's self, and, in the other, to cast a nostalgic look back to a Romantic ideal. Joyce suspends Molly in a void in which the ties with nature are broken.

This is the space between two deaths, the space where subjectivity as such is produced and is productive. In this space, through Molly, Joyce produces valuations of the subject's non-existence. But this space precisely opens up the possibility, not to recover that loss, the self, but rather to empty out completely the space of subjectivity.

Since the space between two deaths is a transitory space, but also a space with no exit, subjectivity itself plays out an unending fantasy of either nostalgic restitution or utopian repetition. The empty place of subjectivity cannot remain trapped between the two deaths, a place of the undead, after all, where nobody lives. Rather, subjectivity acknowledges this gap as the space of possibility. Out of it, one either becomes a hysterical melancholic subject in the tradition of Judith Butler, attempting the nostalgic restitution of the self under the guise of ideologies of the Symbolic, thus betraying the space of suspension and its eventual possibilities. Or, one sees the utopian dimension of repetition that lies beyond restitution and that moves beyond the merely ironic and parodic forms of restitution, into what Ensslin calls the "Other jouissance" (10). The movement from restitution to repetition that marks the space between two deaths and opens the utopian space.

Regarding the space of suspension between the two deaths, in which the subjectivity is caught in the position of the end, James Mellard notes that "the integration of the subject's position into the field of the big Other . . . becomes possible only when the subject is in a sense already dead . . . 'when the game is already over'" (194). This is the reason for which Molly's marriage to Bloom has to go through the valley of the shadow of death, in terms of her marital infidelity. Indeed, Molly is living in an in-between state, and not only because she is caught between Bloom and Boylan. As a fictional character, she is flesh and ideal, satire and romance, archetype and individual, Madonna and whore. Another trait of Molly's suspension is her verbal hysteria, which is a symptom of her entrapment between the Symbolic and the Real, once she has committed the adultery out in the open. After all, the second death is that of the individual separated from all her previous symbolic systems of survival, which in Molly's case are all connected to Bloom and her marriage to him. She uses her affair with Boylan both to expose the fragility of this dependency and to strengthen it. One could borrow Lacan's word *extimité* to describe this phenomenon in Molly: her affair is her attempt to draw a line between interior and exterior, psychological and real, and to minimise her anxiety.

Actually, Cavell himself links the comedy of remarriage to Lacan's concept of the space between two deaths, in an interview with Rex Butler, who asks specifically about Lacan's two deaths in connection to the female protagonists under Cavell's analysis. Butler notes that some of these female characters have refused to compromise their desire, which has driven them to a place beyond their death. Butler wonders whether the "unknowability" of these women, in Cavell's terms, could be explained in terms of their uncompromising desire. In response, Cavell discusses the way his comedy of remarriage inherits the tradition of "old comedy," or melodrama, in which the woman may undergo a process akin to death and restoration. Pursuing one's desire to its ultimate consequences marks a kind of symbolic death. Since comedy is the inverse form of melodrama, Cavell places the female protagonist of the melodrama in an imaginary dialogue with that of the comedy. Addressing the latter,

the former laments: “You may call yourselves lucky to have found a man with whom you can overcome the humiliation of marriage by marriage itself” (Cavell, *Contesting Tears* 6). What saves Molly from the “death-dealing” realisation of her melodrama counterpart is the fact that she escapes into a therapy of conversation and wit—what Cavell calls “the willingness for conversation (for ‘a meet and happy conversation’) [as] the basis of marriage” (Cavell, *Contesting Tears* 5). Unlike melodrama protagonists, Molly remakes herself not by death and resurrection through the suffering and struggle involved in following her desire to its bitter end, but by remaking her surroundings to match herself as a new creation. In comedies of remarriage, the creation of the new woman comes as the effect of the woman’s education by the man, and Molly is in fact the product of such an education. This is the comedic equivalent of dying. As such, Molly is caught between the two deaths: initially, on the cliffs of Gibraltar, she becomes the product of Bloom’s desire, the flower of the mountain, and at the end of her monologue, transformed by both Bloom and Boylan, she becomes Bloom’s renewed wife. In the old comedy, marriage and conversation are neglected. The female protagonists of this older comedy redefine themselves through other routes than marriage. Their death-dealing realisations come from the fact that they have to cut their ties to acceptable and conventional society. It is the reverse for Molly and remarriage comedies. Molly renews her condition by coming to accept what she had refused all along, and her final “yes” is the actualisation of her initial symbolic “yes.”

As yet another example of the remarriage comedy, *Ulysses* subverts oppressive patriarchal practices, as we see Molly’s desire running the show unchecked, though Bloom gets his girl back in the end. This is the utopian deferral—that, according to David R. Shumway, the happy ending functions both as utopia and totalisation: “We accept the happy ending in part because of the romance that has been constructed as erotic tension seeking to be relieved in orgasm. In this sense, the ending functions as a consummation of our desire as well” (15).

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Author Biography

Camelia Raghinaru has recently completed her PhD in English at the University of Florida and is currently revising two more articles for publication: one on D. H. Lawrence for *Studies in the Novel* and one on Joseph Conrad for an edited collection.