

## How to Listen to “Sirens”: Narrative Distraction at the Ormond Hotel

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In *The Odyssey of Style in “Ulysses”* Karen Lawrence points out a peculiar fact about the musicality and linguistic excess of the “Sirens” episode: “the play of language is, in fact, a kind of linguistic diversion from the main event of the day, which occurs offstage: Molly’s adultery with Boylan.”<sup>1</sup> This peculiar ellipsis, the momentary distraction that both Bloom and the reader feel while under the spell of the Sirens’ song (both the actual music in the bar and the music of the text), functions in a very specific manner. I argue that the mode of selective narration and distraction particular to “Sirens,” the music of the text, can generically be said to function according to two principles: a strict chronology, and a “masculine” sort of territoriality that seeks to maintain “the security of the house.”<sup>2</sup> These principles, in turn, suggest a new model for reading the “Sirens” episode, one based upon listening.

Bloom, and by association the narration and reader, is obsessed in the episode with one thing: the time of Boylan’s meeting with Molly. He not only listens for Boylan’s signature sounds (the *jingle* of his coach, the *creak* of his boots), but also obsessively checks his watch in anticipation of the 4pm tryst and presumed 4:30 consummation,<sup>3</sup> the threat to his home. This obsession with time and territory carries over into the narrative itself, littered as it is with sonic codes and punctuation. There is so much noise, so much stopping and starting in the episode that we, like Bloom, can become pleasantly distracted. The narrative turns into an abstracted puzzle of sound and reference rather than what it actually is: the story of a man in his most painful hour. In this way “Sirens” greatly differs from other portions of the novel and, as I will argue, we see a

direct counterpoint given to this chronological and territorial narrative in Molly's unpunctuated and wandering soliloquy.

The episode's simultaneous obsession with and distraction from Molly's infidelity parallels a similar obsession with and distraction from the realities of British Colonial Rule. The musical diversion not only distracts Bloom from his own loneliness and the usurpation of his house and bed, but the musicality also distracts him (and reader, and narrative) from the usurpation of the House of Ireland by the British. In "Cyclops," the episode immediately following "Sirens," we are encouraged to think of Bloom when the xenophobic Citizen informs us: "No more strangers in our house. The strangers... Our own fault. We let them come in. We brought them in. The adultress and her paramour brought the Saxon robbers here... A dishonoured wife... that's what's the cause of all our fortunes" (*U* 12.1157-63). Bloom is simultaneously the "stranger" in the Citizen's house (Ireland) and the one whose house has been infiltrated by the usurping Boylan. Historically, the Citizen's reference is to Dermot MacMurrough's affair with Devorgilla which sparked the Anglo-Norman invasion of Ireland in 1169,<sup>4</sup> and implicitly to the affair that ended Parnell's career in which he forgot his "home ties" to independence—but we cannot help but think of Bloom's home too. Thus, in this essay I shall make a second argument: just as the old Irish epithet "strangers in our house"<sup>5</sup> takes on two senses in the novel (the political and the personal), so does the elaborate system of narrative distraction in "Sirens." In other words, in the way we are distracted from Boylan's steely *jingle* (*U* 11.19, 578-9, &c), so too are we distracted from its phonic and political counterpart, the "hoofirons steelyringing" (*U* 11.1) of the "viceregal cavalcade" (10.709) that opens the episode. It is no coincidence that in "Circe" Boylan calls up Bloom's memory of the time at the Ormond

Hotel, wearing “*Ormond boots*” (15.3729), and then “*strides off on stiff cavalry legs*” (15.3783-4), a verbal echo of the jingling “steelyringing” of the “viceregal cavalcade.”

Thus “Sirens” is actually two episodes from the *Odyssey*. The overwhelming musicality of “Sirens” distracts us from the fact that the episode is also a rendering of Book XXI, Odysseus’ confrontation with the suitors. Indeed, it is so from the from its first line: “Bronze by gold heard the hoofirons, steelyringing” (*U* 11.1), a reference to “the store room at the end of [Odysseus’] house, where her husband’s treasures of gold, bronze, and wrought iron were kept” that Penelope opens to retrieve her husband’s powerful bow<sup>6</sup> for a contest among the suitors that Odysseus easily wins. And yet the text’s astounding lyricism turns the reader away from this early conflict, just as it turns us away from the veiled archery contest that occurs later in the episode where Bloom is “aimless” and Boylan holds what is now “Blazure’s skyblue bow” (*U* 11.390-4). The contest is to send the arrow through the wrought iron rings of twelve axes,<sup>7</sup> to which perhaps the imperial “steelyringing” and “ringing steel” (*U* 11.65) are early allusions, and a weakened Bloom / Odysseus is not up to the task. He surrenders to Boylan, losing a home, losing a homeland, losing himself in music.

### “Bending in Sympathy to Hear”: Listening and Narrative

The central question of this essay can be posed as such: *how exactly does narrative distraction work in “Sirens”?* In some sense this is an atypical question since analyses of *Ulysses* tend to pose questions of language or style in relation to genre, or theme, or historical or literary allusion—seldom does one discuss “narrative” in *Ulysses*, especially in “Sirens.”<sup>8</sup> Thus I have found it necessary to spend some time situating the episode’s diversions and “musicality” within a theoretical (that is to say, a narratological) framework. To do so, I have consulted the

National Library of Ireland's recently discovered *Ulysses* manuscripts,<sup>9</sup> particularly a draft of "Sirens" dated between 1917 and 1919 (in the "Proteus"- "Sirens" Copybook, the earliest draft of "Sirens" in existence), and also the first half of a later version of "Sirens" (the so-called "Sirens" Copybook). Michael Groden theorizes that this first portion of "Sirens" was written far earlier than previously thought, perhaps even concurrently with "Proteus" and the other Stephen episodes.<sup>10</sup> Maybe the most interesting, and most discussed, aspect of the early draft of "Sirens" is the fact that Bloom enters into the manuscript all of a sudden, literally from the margins, as though it were originally an episode written without him. Suggestively, the introduction of Bloom into the narrative coincides with the fragmentation and dissolution of the narrative into a series of sounds. That is, with Bloom comes the exaggerated music of the text.

The 1922 version of Bloom that we know today could only have come about through Joyce's repeated rereadings of his drafts. Writing, as we shall see, is also for Joyce a form of reading,<sup>11</sup> a process that quickly becomes compounded in "Sirens," an episode Joyce likely spent several years writing and rereading. Within the episode there are at least three models of reading at play: Joyce reading his own text; Bloom reading the scene in the Ormond pub, and reading the secret letter that his writing to Martha; and the reader reading the text. All of these models are not only interconnected processes, but also are dependent upon *rereading*: Joyce rereading his drafts of the episode and the developing drafts of other episodes; Bloom rereading his own writing, and rereading the events of the day to determine whether Boylan and Molly are having an affair; and the reader anxiously flipping back and forth between the episode and earlier portions of the book; and, perhaps most importantly, the reader flipping back to the Overture, which sonically foretells the episode's events before they actually happen. In this way the process of reading and rereading in "Sirens" becomes a particular sort of reading, writing and

rereading: *listening*. Joyce listening to the adulterous *jingle* of the “loose brass quoits of the bedstead” in “Calypso” (*U* 4.59) and the repeated “jingle of harnesses, hoofhuds lowringing” in “Lestrygonians” (*U* 8.615, 634, 641), and then weaving those sounds into the signature sound of Boylan’s usurping coach in “Sirens”; Bloom listening for Boylan’s *jingle*, and listening to the scratch of his own letter writing; and the reader tied to the mast, listening for the Overture’s codes, trying to piece together the episode’s exploded narrative.

To sort through these layers of reading and listening I have turned to three French theorists of time and narrative: Paul Ricoeur, Roland Barthes and Maurice Blanchot. Before addressing the problem of this essay (how narrative distraction works in “Sirens”), a simpler question, one that Ricoeur calls “superficial,” must be answered: what is “the *development* of a plot and its correlate, the ability *to follow* a story.”<sup>12</sup> As will become clear, this “superficial” question is by no means simple, particularly when posed in a text as narratologically complex as *Ulysses*. If “Sirens” is the episode of sound, then following its story is both like “following a tune” and following or tracking someone in the dark. And indeed, I think that *following* is an apt term for the process of reading that occurs in “Sirens”—like a detective, we are always a little bit behind, we are always trying to catch up to the episode’s many narrative threads. And like Bloom, our other listener (or even our “ears”), we never quite hear the details of Boylan’s plans—we have to wait until Molly’s soliloquy, for that.

Barthes lists three types of listening.<sup>13</sup> The first is simple, animal alertness, in which a creature “pricks up its ears” and orients itself towards various *indices* such as prey, predators, mothers, fathers, intruders. The second mode of listening is *deciphering*, in which one searches for *patterns* and *codes*. As Barthes explains, this second mode entails a certain degree of intelligence: “here, no doubt, begins the human: I listen the way I read, i.e. according to certain

codes.” And finally, the third type of listening is entirely human and reflective: one asks “but who speaks, who emits.” While listening, and also while reading, we use all three modes: we search, we interpret, we identify and personify.

Barthes goes on to suggest that this multi-layered form of listening is not merely a passive way of navigating through space, but also an aggressive act of staking claim to one’s domain: “the appropriation of space is also a matter of sound—the approximate equivalent of animal territory—is a space of familiar, recognized noises whose ensemble forms a kind of household symphony.”<sup>14</sup> This type of listening is neither value neutral nor objective, but sets forth an interpretation: “its object (what it is oriented towards) is menace, or, conversely, need... the security of the house.”<sup>15</sup> Under this sort of reading it is easy to imagine that while Bloom sits at his table in the Ormond pub, he sends out partially-conscious feelers, listening for several different threats, but primarily for the threat (*jingle*) of Boylan. Bloom has been catching glimpses of Boylan all day and therefore listens in order to decipher a code (*jingle, creak*) and identify the source of that sound as Boylan, the menacing usurper. It is no coincidence that while Bloom scans the sonic realm for Boylan’s threat he is not in his own house, but in a place that is both a public house and a boarding house: the pub at the Ormond Hotel. Like Odysseus, he is away, and weakened, and must plan his attack carefully.

And yet there is a sort of double-consciousness at work in Bloom’s listening: he wants to identify Boylan as a threat, but, since that thought is so painful, he also desperately wants to be distracted from it. The *jingle* references not only a direct presence in the pub (Blazes Boylan), but also a memory from “Calypso” of Molly as “she set the brasses jingling as she raised herself briskly, an elbow on the pillow” (*U* 4.303-4). That scene in “Calypso” coincides with the morning discussion of the mysterious letter to “Mrs. Marion Bloom” (*U* 4.244) written in

Boylan's "Bold hand" (*U* 4.311). So in "Sirens" Boylan's *jingle* also echoes the imagined future event of Boylan and Molly setting "the brasses jingling" in unison. This is perhaps why Bloom has chosen to sit in such a public space (the dining room of a pub) during his most difficult hour. There is talking, singing, clanking, clunking, tapping, hissing, "warbling," "throbbing," "chirruping," fluting "throistles," "Clapclap. Clipclap. Clappyclap," "hawhorns," farting, "Longindyings calls": any number of encoded noises that can divert Bloom's attention away from the "Jingle jingle jaunted jingling" (*U* 11.15). As Barthes explains, listening is not simply labeling sounds, but also *selecting* them: "it is against the auditive background that *listening* occurs, as if it were the exercise of a function of *intelligence*, i.e. of selection. If the auditive background invades the whole sonic space (if the ambient noise is too loud), the selection or intelligence of space is no longer possible, listening is injured."<sup>16</sup> In this way Bloom's listening (to music, to conversations, to the scratch and voice of his own secret letter-writing) becomes not just a mode of deciphering a threat, but also of *concealing* the very fact of the threat: "what is listened for is no longer the *possible* (the prey, the threat, or the object of desire which occurs without warning), it is the *secret*: that which, concealed in reality, can reach human consciousness only through a code, which serves simultaneously to encipher and to decipher that reality."<sup>17</sup> Listening thus mimics Bloom's sense of masochistic guilt that reaches a frenzy in "Circe" where he both wants to watch (decipher) Molly's infidelity through the keyhole, and to divert the many different interlocutors'—Bella, Zoe, Florry, Kitty, Stephen, Lynch, the mirrored and "beardless" face of Shakespeare (*U* 15.3822), and the reader's—attention away from the reality of the affair. In Barthes' quasi-religious interpretation of this aspect of listening, he asserts that "the object of listening is internalized to the point of becoming pure conscience."<sup>18</sup>

Bloom, in other words, half wants his hearing to be damaged and enciphered. And, in fact, this partial desire is carried over into the musicality of the text itself wherein the burden of listening is placed upon the reader. Like Bloom, we readers are given a cacophony of sound that we are compelled, because we are reading after all, to order into some sort of narrative. In doing so, we reenact Barthes' notion of "active listening." Some uncertain narrative voice speaks to us, and, in listening, we speak back: "Interpellation leads to an interlocution in which the listener's silence will be as active as the locutor's speech: *listening speaks*."<sup>19</sup> That is, in an episode composed of pure sound and lacking a direct narrative, we as readers end up narrating both the events within the episode (e.g. Bloom tracking Boylan through the pub), as well as the events to which the episode makes subtle reference (be they occluded events in the past, such as Molly's and Bloom's possible post-breakfast conversation, or possible future events such as the 4:30 consummation). This paradoxical proposition—that narrative is not strictly chronological, but retrospective and anticipatory, and that *we* as readers do it—raises a few questions.

First, *how do we, as readers or listeners, narrate?* Barthes points to several different possibilities, one of which is that we narrate through repetition: "By rhythm, too, listening ceases to be a purely supervisory activity and becomes creation."<sup>20</sup> In this musically organized episode, we begin picking up on certain recurring themes like Boylan's *jingling*, the Viceregal Cavalcade's *steelyringing*, the orgasmic and chronological *O!*, the blind man's *taptap*, the lonely and open-ended *Bloo*. As these *leitmotifs*<sup>21</sup> are repeated, we begin to make sense of them, we begin to fit them into something that resembles a narrative. To take an example from early in the episode, we must construct a narrative for ourselves when we see the mysterious lines: "By Cantwell's offices roved Greasebloom... Must see him for that par. Eat first. I want. Not yet. At four, she said. Time ever passing. Clockhands turning. On. Where eat?" (*U* 11.185-9).

Only through the repetition of the *leitmotiv* of the ticking clock and four o'clock can we begin to tie together that time, or even time itself, with Boylan and the probable affair. But who is the "she" who had said "at four"? Our first thought might be Miss Dunne who in "Wandering Rocks" talks with Boylan on the phone, telling him that "Mr. Lenehan, yes. He said he'll be in the Ormond at four" (*U* 10.396). Despite the verbal echo of "at four," there seem to be at least two problems with this reading. The first involves how Bloom could talk to Miss Dunne to learn that Boylan would be at the Ormond pub at four—how would he know to ask? The second problem comes from a second verbal echo, a sort of meta-commentary on the novel's "mystery" plot: "Miss Dunne hid the Capel street library copy of *The Woman in White* far back in her drawer and rolled a sheet of gaudy notepaper into her typewriter. Too much mystery business in it. Is he in love with that one, Marion? Change it and get another by Mary Cecil Haye" (*U* 10.368-72). Joyce's wry reference to the character in Collins' mystery novel (whose name is actually spelled *Marian*) is also a meta-commentary on his own: is Bloom / Boylan in love with Molly? The cipher "Marion" turns us back to "Calypso," when Bloom finds Boylan's presumed letter: "Two letters and a card lay on the hallfloor. He stooped and gathered them. Mrs Marion Bloom. His quickened heart slowed at once. Bold hand. Mrs Marion" (*U* 4.243-5). At his asking, Molly tells Bloom directly that Boylan would be bringing the music program by the house (*U* 4.412), but she does not mention *when*. And so we are left building tentative narratives about who said "at four"—did an unrecorded conversation take place between Bloom and Miss Dunne, or between Bloom and Molly? The casual reader Miss Dunne's slip in calling *Ulysses* an unwieldy mystery novel explains more than she thinks.

It is important to remember that by this point listening is no longer an activity that takes place from second to second, but is necessarily retrospective—we piece together our narrative in "Sirens" from *Ulysses*' previous episodes and from the developing code within "Sirens" itself.<sup>22</sup> Although listening is oriented towards the future (what might happen, what is possible), it

quickly becomes a *re-telling* of what has been anticipated or dreaded up until that point, as though it were always already haunting and structuring the narrative. As Hugh Kenner points out, this belatedness is itself anticipated by a change in the mode of narration. It is in this episode, after all, that “style” becomes “more expressive and more apparent than narration, forcing us to pay close attention if we want to be sure what the characters are doing.”<sup>23</sup> Such a marked shift in the mode of narration is accompanied by that Derridean *always already* retrospectiveness on two fronts. On the first, the “narrator” begins to hark back to previous phrases of the book, like in Kenner’s example where Bloom who “As said before... ate with relish the inner organs, nutty gizzards, fried cods’ roes” (*U* 11.519).<sup>24</sup> But the episode is actually doubly retrospective: on the second front, the “narrator” musically repeats phrases from within the episode—as in “Bloom ate liv as said before” (*U* 11.569)—and also from the Overture, as though the story we are hearing has already been told. Telling becomes retelling, as in an actual Greek myth, and the sequential narrative of events becomes a tool for delay and stylistic distraction, like or Penelope endlessly weaving and unweaving her robe, Scheherazade weaving her infinite narrative in the *Thousand and One Nights*. We might even say that because Bloom simultaneously desires to identify the threat (Boylan’s *jingle*) and to forget that such a threat exists, a negative space is opened within the narrative that is filled by the narrator’s “style.” That is, because half of Bloom’s thoughts are too painful to reach consciousness, which would be the text’s typical source of language, the play within the narration becomes fuller and, in Kenner’s words, “more expressive.” It is as though the narrative, in sympathy with Bloom, fills in the gaps with sonic play to distract the reader from Bloom’s plight. Thus in a certain sense Bloom’s watch stopping right at 4:30pm is more than a coincidence. It quite literally represents what Seymour Bushe’s ironically recounted speech in “Aeolus” called “*that stony effigy in frozen*

*music*” (U 7.768), poetry<sup>25</sup> rather than narrative: the desire to stop time and suspend the tenacious sequence of events that inevitably lead to 4:30.<sup>26</sup>

“Oscillation between Events of Imperial and of Local Interest”

While Barthes’ concept of territorial and chronological listening gives us an ideal model for the sentence to sentence dynamics of how listening (and reading) works within “Sirens,” it doesn’t address narrative distraction on a larger scale. For that, we will now turn to Blanchot’s concept of the *narrative event* as it is outlined in an essay felicitously entitled “The Song of the Sirens.”<sup>27</sup> According to Blanchot, every narrative is structured around an event, and yet this event can never be directly described: “Narrative is the movement toward a point—one that is... unknown, ignored, and foreign.”<sup>28</sup> This event outside of the narrative is “so imperious” that the event cannot “begin” without first being narrated. It is a bit like the structuralist concept of a Center that is both inside and outside of a structure, that both structures and sets in motion the structure’s internal logic.<sup>29</sup> The Event of the June 16, 1904, the narrative’s Center or *omphalos*, is of course Molly’s affair with Boylan. And yet over the course of the novel, in fact, the event is never directly related. In the dramatic narrative of “Circe” we *hear* Bloom watching it through a keyhole; in “Penelope” we “hear” Molly obliquely refer to it in her monologue; and in “Sirens” the event supposedly happens in real time (what Ricoeur will call *Aktzeit*), but we are given no direct sight or sound of it. It happens “offstage,” as though in the *Textzeit*, the time of the narration.<sup>30</sup> Indeed, because Bloom’s watch stops and Molly’s watch never works it is unclear whether the “event of the day” even happens within the “actual” time (*Aktzeit*) of the day: “I never did know the time even that watch he gave me never seems to go properly Id want to get it looked after when I threw the penny to that lame sailor for England home and beauty” (U

18.344-6). Here Molly's abbreviated *I'd* turns into a Freudian *Id*, which, we might note, also exists and acts outside of time: "The processes of the Ucs are timeless: *i.e.* they are not ordered temporally, are not ordered by the passage of time, in fact bear no relation to time at all." Rather, the "time-relation," says Freud, "is bound up with the work of the system Cs."<sup>31</sup> Time, in other words, becomes a function of Barthes' second two stages of listening, decipherment and identification, a process far closer to Bloom's anxious listening in the pub than Molly's sleepy, liquid memories in the bed.<sup>32</sup>

If we are thus compelled to see the day's event as somehow "not ordered by the passage of time," then perhaps we should read Blanchot's analysis of the narrative event quite literally: "Narrative is not the relating of an event but this event itself, the approach of this event, the place where it is called on to unfold, *an event still to come*, by the magnetic power of which the narrative itself can hope to come true."<sup>33</sup> Bloom cannot *verify* Molly's infidelity, and therefore must (perpetually) imagine it. Like the novelist Richard Rowan in Joyce's play *Exiles*, Bloom lives in a world of "restless living wounding doubt" and can "never [know] in this world" whether it is true (*E* 112). Even after the fact, in *Ulysses*, the event is "still to come," be it Molly's infidelity or, by analogy, British occupation.<sup>34</sup> This mode of interpretation has the odd result of focusing the act of infidelity into a singularity or a point in time—the recurring *Done* that ends the episode. And in fact, this is perhaps why Bloom does not see his own actions (leering at Gerty in "Nausicaa," hanging around the brothel in "Circe," or writing the love letter to Martha in "Sirens") as indications of infidelity. In Bloom's mind such actions are not so much *evental*, as they are imaginary—passages in *Textzeit* rather than *Aktzeit*.

The episode's percussive *Done*—which is simultaneously Boylan's imagined orgasm, the end of the episode, and Bloom's basso flatulence—occurs in several other places throughout the

text, even significantly *before* “Sirens” actually “begins,” in the Overture. Indeed, the Overture strategically creates a specifically chronological way of reading the text.<sup>35</sup> The discordant list of sixty-three line of sound that opens up the episode creates something of a to-do list for the reader who then reads the text according to a specific narrative: the reader constantly asks herself two questions: a) *what does sound x mean*; and b) *and then when will I hear sound x + 1*. And this chronological aspect carries over from the texture of narrative technique into the episode’s reflective content. Bloom, for instance, tells himself: “Time ever passing. Clockhands turning” (*U* 11.188). Time is double-edged and renders things inevitable, as in the case of Molly’s adultery: “All lost now. Mournful he whistled. Fall, surrender, lost” (*U* 11.635-6). But the movement of time also gives one the opportunity to become lost within it: “Time makes the tune. Question of the mood you’re in. Still always nice to hear” (*U* 11.841-2); or “All most too new call is lost in all. Echo. How sweet the answer. How is that done?” (*U* 11.634-5). From the Overture we know that this “Lost. Thristle fluted. All is lost” (*U* 11.22), this birdsong that lays claim to a mate and a territory, is connected to the sublimated sonic combat between Bloom and Boylan (“Jingle. Bloo.”) that results in a call to “War! War!” (*U* 11.21-2). In the body of the episode the “sweet” and playful call strikes a threatening *done* (the same sad note that ends the episode) and rebounds a mournful echo: “Two notes in one there. Blackbird I heard in the hawthorn valley. Taking my motives he twined and turned them. All most too new call is lost in all. Echo. How sweet the answer. How is that done? All lost now. Mournful he whistled. Fall, surrender, lost” (*U* 11.633-6).

The next paragraph, located at the episode’s exact center if judged by line number, draws the connection between the repeated “all is lost” and Boylan’s usurpation:

Bloom bent leopold ear, turning a fringe of doyley down under the vase. Order. Yes, I remember. Lovely air. In sleep she went to him. Innocence in the moon. Brave. Don't know their danger. Still hold her back. Call name. Touch water. Jingle jaunty. Too late. She

longed to go. That's why. Woman. As easy stop the sea. Yes: all is lost.

—A beautiful air, said Bloom lost Leopold. I know it well (*U* 11.637-42).

Bloom here relates, consciously, the theme of the “*M'appari*” (sung in “real time” by Simon Dedalus) to his own circumstances, even admitting to Richie Goulding that he “know[s] it well.” He imagines calling out as Boylan walks out the door, turning the sonic combat of the “bent leopold ear” into physical combat, but chickens out. The *now* of “all is lost now” evaporates from the episode’s *Akzeit* and into its *Textzeit*. All has always been lost: in the prophetic Overture; in the repeated failures of Bloom to confront Boylan; in the imagined *Done* that concludes the episode.

Perhaps we can now make more sense of what Blanchot means when he paradoxically speaks of *the event to come* as the event that has already happened (the event “cannot even ‘begin’ before having related it”). In “Sirens” just about every action happens at least twice: in the overture and in the episode proper.<sup>36</sup> This creates a rather peculiar dialectic. *Question*: why read the episode if via the overture we already know what is going to happen? *Answer*: to figure out what happened in the overture. Through telling the story (cryptically, the event) in condensed form before it “actually” occurs (in Ricoeur’s *Aktzeit*), the narrative effectively banishes the event from the actual time of the novel (again, *Aktzeit*). Like Bloom, we as readers have abstracted the event of the day—we have made the *Done* (the 4:30 affair) into an inevitable narrative conclusion outside of time rather than as a result of a set of circumstances that happen within time. And in doing so, we can become, inevitably, distracted.

But let us return to the specific narrative in “Sirens.” We now have an idea of *how* we as readers / listeners create a narrative, but a question has been left over: *what do we narrate?* Barthes spoke of the ever-present “auditive background” that threatens to overwhelm our

selective listening (that is, our narratives). Blanchot extends this idea and makes it an end in itself. Speaking specifically of the genre of the novel<sup>37</sup>, Blanchot asserts that “diversion is its profound song.”<sup>38</sup> Through this continual and playful, almost game-like movement, anxieties are converted into “pleasant distraction.” Thus Blanchot distinguishes between two sorts of novel: those that use diversion as a tool for encompassing the narrative event, and those that attempt avoid such an event altogether. It seems safe to say that, as a whole, *Ulysses* falls into the former category because, although Molly’s infidelity is never directly confronted nor observed by Bloom, and yet the text does “account” for it and approach it from many different angles: Bloom’s thoughts; Boylan’s hints; the whispering of other characters, and extra-narrative asides; Bloom’s masochistic fantasy in “Circe”; and Molly’s retrospective monologue.

#### “Innuendo of Home Rule”: Colonialism and Sonic Resonance

Blanchot’s analysis of the Odyssean myth opens up a dialogue for us between “Sirens” and the “epilogue” of the *Ulysses*, “Penelope,” particularly in terms of the distinction between *Aktzeit* (the time of the day) and the *Textzeit* (the time of the narrative). At first glance, one could simply assume that Molly’s infidelity occurs in the *Aktzeit*, whereas Bloom’s distraction occurs in the mediated *Textzeit* of the sympathetic narrator who suspends time for Bloom (and for us). If, however, we take seriously Sebastian Knowles’ assertion that Molly is the Siren *par excellence*, then one might say that nearly *all* of Molly’s time occurs in the *Textzeit*.<sup>39</sup> In a certain sense, such a reading is entirely logical. The time of Molly’s soliloquy in “Penelope” is listed in the Gilbert schema as non-existent, whereas “Sirens” is listed punctually as “4pm,” the time Boylan asks after in the “Proteus”-“Sirens” Copybook. When Boylan enters in that earliest draft, which happens much earlier than in the episode’s later and final versions, Boylan discusses

time at length with Misses Douce and Kennedy, with calls to *sonnez la cloche* (also in *U* 11.404), and a “clockface” clacking.<sup>40</sup> The final version of “Sirens” gives us a “clock clacked” three times: twice when Boylan pays for his drink (*U* 11.381 and 383), but first in the Overture (*U* 11.16), just after the “Jingle jingle jaunted jingling” (*U* 11.15) and directly after which Boylan’s and Bloom’s sonic monikers, “Jingle. Bloo.” (*U* 11.19), are placed in dire juxtaposition. The proximity and timing provokes conflict, and the Overture announces “Boomed crashing chords. When love absorbs. War! War! The tympanum” (*U* 11.20). The downbeat *tympanum* marks not only the drum that announces the war between husband and suitor, but also the instrument by which Bloom participates in and witnesses that war—his middle ear. Perhaps that is why when the episode’s fourth *clack* strikes, it is “A clack. For me” (*U* 11.384). Bloom, listening, knows that the *clack* of time is for him even before Boylan asks “—What time is that?... Four?” (*U* 11.385). The lone “O’clock” that follows in the next line simultaneously brackets off Bloom’s thoughts from Boylan’s conversation and foretells 4:30’s orgasmic *O*—an *O* that Boylan’s man Lenehan also foreshadows with his own *O*’s and lecherous and repeated demands for the Miss Kennedy to “*Sonnez la cloche! O do!*” (*U* 11.404).

Bloom flees the scene, seeking refuge in hunger, sitting with Richie Goulding, half-consciously scheming:

The bag of Goulding, Collis, Ward led Bloom by ryebloom flowered tables. Aimless he chose with agitated aim, bald Pat attending, a table near the door. Be near. At four. Has he forgotten? Perhaps a trick. Not come: whet appetite. I couldn't do. Wait, wait. Pat, waiter, waited.

Sparkling bronze azure eyed Blazure's skyblue bow and eyes (*U* 11.390-4).

The passage is a clear reference to Book XXI of the *Odyssey* in which Odysseus challenges the

suitors to string his bow and then shoot an arrow through a series of iron axe rings, except that in Joyce's version Odysseus loses. The threat of Boylan's "bow" causes Bloom's "aimless" "agitated aim," provoking him to agree to sit close to the door should he later need to stop Boylan from leaving in his jingling coach. In this heavily reworked episode, it apparently took Joyce several stages of revision to reach this "bow." In the earliest draft, we are only given "Blaze's bold eye," and in the later draft what became the final version's "Blazes Boylan's flower and eyes" (*U* 11.399) was originally merely a "brow and eyes." The homonymic "bow" appears to be a very late addition, perhaps in concert with the Overture's declaration of "War! War!" Thus the ambiguous "whet appetite" hovers between Bloom's hunger, Boylan's sexual hunger (he's been eying the barmaids), and the war motif introduced in the Overture. Undecided, Bloom chooses to "whet" and "wait, wait" until he hears more information.

In the Linati schema the description of time in "Penelope" becomes even more suggestive, where it is listed as "the recumbent 8," Joyce's sign for infinity, eternity and the female genitalia.<sup>41</sup> As Joyce explains to Harriet Weaver in a February 8, 1922 letter, Molly becomes simultaneously "pre-" and "posthuman," and her song becomes timeless (*Letters I* 180).<sup>42</sup> In other words, Molly's soliloquy does not exist in the *Akzeit* of the day (there are no sequential actions aside from her thoughts), but only exists in its *Textzeit*, the "other" time, the time of the telling. Thus there is a certain affinity between the "Sirens" episode and "Penelope." Each becomes a pure re-telling: "Sirens" by virtue of the already-told Overture, "Penelope" by the already-told novel.

And yet in another sense "Sirens" and "Penelope" are stylistic opposites. While "Penelope" remains somewhat freed from time and pacing (there is no watch, there is no punctuation), "Sirens" is governed by chronology (Bloom's watch, the pacing of the overture,

Boylan's demands to know the time, the clockwork timing of the punctuation). Similarly, the sympathetic narrator of "Sirens" works to conceal as much as possible through a series of sonic diversion, whereas the narrator of "Penelope" (Molly, presumably) works to disclose as much as possible, without the self-conscious stopping and re-starting of the punctuation in "Sirens." It is unclear whether, for Molly, there really was an *event* of the day. Or at least it is unclear whether her soliloquy is quite so centered around that "imperious" event as the "Sirens" episode is. And indeed, while "Sirens" very carefully avoids mention of British occupation and Irish Home Rule, "Penelope" simply doesn't bother with it. There is virtually no masculine and territorial "anxiety" of the sort described by Barthes—no careful deciphering and identification of threats. Molly's song is pure diversion in the sense that it does not divert from anything at all—it is *music*, Molly's siren song, rather than an *effigy frozen in music*. Perhaps, in simply ignoring the "imperious" Center, Molly's soliloquy approaches what Hélène Cixous—an astute critic of Joyce—calls *écriture féminine*.<sup>43</sup> While both Bloom and the sympathetic narrator in "Sirens" invoke an "enormous system of transgression"<sup>44</sup> to cover over their secrets, Molly simply functions outside of "the spell of transgression."<sup>45</sup>

Stephen, meanwhile, takes a third path: declared transgression. In the unbridled revel of "Circe" he had through brute will and force severed his home ties, cutting the "three nooses" (*U* 2.234) of "home," "fatherland," and "church" (*P* 247) by shattering the chandelier with his ashplant: "*Time's livid final flame leaps and, in the following darkness, ruin of all space, shattered glass and toppling masonry*" (*U* 15.4244-5). The root of *masonry*, is of course the French for home—Stephen who cannot return home (*U* 1.744) topples his *maison-ry*, and in doing so restores the pacing of the episode's *Aktzeit*.<sup>46</sup> Rather than concealing or revealing the Law in the *Textzeit* (like Bloom and Molly, respectively), Stephen, at least momentarily, bridges

the two through a physical act, and in so doing wrecks his home.

The nonviolent Bloom is unwilling to sever his home ties, just as he remained unwilling to confront Boylan at the Ormond Hotel. The connections between Boylan and British Colonial rule are numerous: the parallels with the suitors and Odysseus' house and kingdom; Boylan's vague connection to Molly's former lover, the British Gardner, and Mulligan / Haines, the Irish / British "usurper" (*U* 1.744); the visual echo of Boylan's signature red carnation (10.335) and the standard color of the British Military; the verbal echoes of the "jaunty jingle" of Boylan's coach, his "stiff cavalry legs," and the "steelyringing" of the Viceregal Cavalcade; the simple repeated phrases *home, home rule, home ties, stranger in the house*. But by the time we reach the hung-over pacing of "Eumaeus," and we hear once again of Parnell "falling a victim" to Mrs. O'Shea's "siren charms and forgetting home ties" (*U* 16.1382-3) to Irish independence, we might wonder whether Stephen might be right, that "sounds are impostures... like names" (*U* 16.362-3). In other words, is the link between the personal and the political here anything more than an echo? Bloom, after all, *does* stand up to the Citizen in the episode just after his "surrender" to Boylan, so why even draw a connection between the two?

Perhaps the place to address this issue of the sonic connection between the personal and the political is not at the public house, the whore house, or Bloom's house, but outside the cabman's shelter, where Stephen sings "an old German song... about the clear sea and the voices of sirens, sweet murderers of men": "*Von der Sirenen Listigkeit / Tun die Poeten Dichten* (*U* 16.1812-6). Words and "sounds are impostures," and yet it is "from the cunning of the Sirens / That poets make their songs"—yet another "ineluctable modality of the audible" (*U* 3.13).<sup>47</sup> And yet if sounds are impostures, sometimes those disguises are necessary, as when Stephen sings in the end of his ballad that "*alle Schiffe brücken*" (*U* 16.1883-4), accidentally substituting the

hopeful “all ships are bridged” for the pessimistic “all ships are broken.”<sup>48</sup> The distractions and mistakes of the *Textzeit*, the sonic echoes and suspended action, allow one to bridge: the personal and the political; home and exile; self and other; the personal and painful. Stephen and Bloom “continu[e] their *tete à tete*... about sirens enemies of man's reason, mingled with a number of other topics of the same category, usurpers, historical cases of the kind” (*U* 16.1888-91), returning.

<sup>1</sup> See Lawrence, Karen. *The Odyssey of Style in “Ulysses.”* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1981), p. 99.

<sup>2</sup> The phrase comes from Roland Barthes’ “Listening,” in *The Responsibility of Forms: Critical Essays on Music, Art and Representation*. Tr. Richard Howard. (Los Angeles: U California P, 1991), p. 249.

<sup>3</sup> There is some debate as to exactly when things happen in the episode, but the clearest explanation seems to be that Boylan is supposed to meet Molly at 4pm, but remains at the Ormond Hotel until some time later, thus arriving at 7 Eccles Street on his jingling coach late, and causing Bloom to imagine Molly and Boylan consuming their affair on the jingling bed at 4:30. The standard “4pm tryst” is therefore more likely 4:15-ish.

<sup>4</sup> See Gifford, Don. With Robert J. Seidman. *Ulysses Annotated: Notes for James Joyce’s Ulysses*. (Los Angeles: U California P, 1988), 2.293-4.

<sup>5</sup> Gifford, 9.36-7.

<sup>6</sup> From Samuel Butler’s translation, one of two versions of the *Odyssey* that Joyce used in composing *Ulysses* (the other being Alexander Pope’s verse translation). See MIT’s The Internet Classics Archive, “The Odyssey by Homer.” <http://classics.mit.edu/Homer/odyssey.21.xxi.html>. Visited 4.20.2008. We might also note that in Book XXII bronze and gold are compensation offered by the suitors in exchange for their lives—“we will keep on giving you gold and bronze till your heart is softened”—just as the Sirens’ song is offered to console Bloom in his time of need.

<sup>7</sup> There has been a great deal of scholarly debate over both *how* the axes were shaped and *what* exactly Odysseus shot the arrow through, a longstanding theory being that the axe-handles possessed rings, as in Pope’s translation: “Now sitting as he was, the cord he drew, / Through every ringlet, leveling his view; / Then notched the shaft, released, and gave it wing; / The whizzing arrow vanished from the string, / Sung on direct, and threaded every ring” (XXI, ll. 458-62). See *The Odyssey of Homer, in the English verse translation by Alexander Pope*. (NY: Heritage, 1942). For a debate over the issue, See Peter Brain and D. D. Skinner’s “Odysseus and the Axes: Homeric Ballistics Reconstructed.” *Greece & Rome, Second Series*, Vol. 25, No. 1 (Apr., 1978), pp. 55-58.

<sup>8</sup> For instance, in an interesting, and exceedingly thorough, essay “The Substructure of ‘Sirens’: Molly as *Nexus Omnia Ligans*,” Sebastian Knowles uses Samuel Butler’s translation of *the Odyssey* (one of the two Joyce had access to) as a starting point for reading “Sirens” intertextually. From Butler’s idiosyncratic rendering Knowles draws out a very specific reading of Joyce’s episode (that the Sirens’ song is based on air) as well as a catalogue of many possible Sirens in the episode—(he comes up with fifteen, all female, all somehow connected to Molly). Another interesting strategy (the *musical reading*) for reading “Sirens” intertextually is one which takes quite literally Joyce’s statement that the episode contained a fugal, contrapuntal structure (technically a *fuga per canonem*, a Medieval technique of transcribing written text into musical notes). There are at least a dozen essays that attempt to decipher a concealed musical code within Joyce’s text, and a good summary of their various successes and failures can be found in David W. Cole’s essay “Fugal Structure in the Sirens Episode of *Ulysses*.” Also notable is Michel Rabaté’s essay “The Silence of the Sirens” which sees a one-to-one correspondence between the musical codes critics have discovered and narratological terms—the first half of his essay is devoted to translating these codes. See Knowles, Sebastian. “The Substructure of ‘Sirens’: Molly as *Nexus Omnia Ligans*,” *JJQ* 23.4 (Summer 1986), pp. 447-63. Cole, David W. “Fugal Structure in the Sirens Episode of *Ulysses*.” *Modern Fiction Studies* 19(2), 1973—pp. 221-6. Rabaté, Jean-Michel. “The Silence of the Sirens” in *James Joyce: The Centennial Symposium*. Ed. Morris Beja, Philip Herring, Maurice Harmon and David Norris. (Urbana: U Illinois P, 1986).

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<sup>9</sup> I would here like to acknowledge U.C. Irvine's generous Humanities Research Grant, and to thank the National Library's Luca Crispi for his wealth of knowledge, generosity, and diligent assistance with Joyce's unwieldy manuscripts.

<sup>10</sup> See Groden, Michael. "The National Library of Ireland's New Joyce Manuscripts: A Statement and Document Descriptions," *JJQ*, 39.1 (Fall 2001), p. 41.

<sup>11</sup> The interrelated nature of writing and reading has become a common theme in Joyce studies, particularly after Joyce's manuscripts became widely available. See, for example, Brook Thomas' "Formal Re-creation: Re-reading and Re-joycing the Re-rightings of *Ulysses*" in *Critical Essays on James Joyce's "Ulysses"* (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1989); or Michael Groden's "*Ulysses*" in *Progress* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1977).

<sup>12</sup> Ricoeur, Paul. "Narrative Time" in *On Narrative*. Edited by W.J.T. Mitchell. (Chicago: U Chicago P, 1981), p. 168. His italics.

<sup>13</sup> I am here freely summarizing Barthes' poetic descriptions from "Listening," pp. 245-6.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 246.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 249.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 247.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 249.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 251.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 252.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 249.

<sup>21</sup> By *leitmotiv* I have in mind the (now common) usage, introduced into Joyce scholarship by Clive Hart in his *Structure and Motif in Finnegans Wake* (Northwestern: Northwestern UP, 1962): "The main requirement of a true *leitmotiv* is that it should, as its name implies, *lead* from point to point; it is, in fact, an essentially dynamic device. Reiteration alone is not enough to convert a phrase into a *leitmotiv*... Real *leitmotiv* entails a use of statement and restatement in such a way as to impel the reader to relate part to part; each recurrence of such a motif derives in some necessary way from all its previous appearances and leads on to future resurgences, pointing to relationships and correspondences far beyond those that hold between the individual motif and its immediate context" (164-5). One might go so far as to say that "Sirens" is the first locus of *leitmotiv* in Joyce's oeuvre.

<sup>22</sup> Barthes remarks that when listening becomes creative, "what is thereby revealed is a listening no longer immediate, but recounted... narrative, a mediate, delayed construction" (257).

<sup>23</sup> Hugh Kenner notes that the "Sirens" episode introduces a marked shift in the mode of narration: "For the first time 'style,' some game the narrator is playing, is more expressive and more apparent than narration, forcing us to pay close attention if we want to be sure what the characters are doing. And, in a manner reminiscent of 'Wandering Rocks,' details commence to find their way on to the page without regard for the consciousness of anyone present, thoroughly subverting the premise of the initial style [of the novel—i.e. narrating the inner thoughts of characters]. In 'Wandering Rocks' such details had been the cross links of synchronicity. In 'Sirens' their origin is in former time, coming as they do from earlier parts of the book." See Kenner, Hugh. *Ulysses*. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1987), p. 64.

<sup>24</sup> This phrase, of course, recalls the peculiar phrasing of the opening of Bloom's portion of the novel: "Mr. Leopold Bloom ate with relish the inner organs of beasts and fowls. He liked thick giblet soup, nutty gizzards, a stuffed roast heart, liverslices fried with crustcrumbs, fried hencods' roes" (4.1-3).

<sup>25</sup> The words come from Bushe's defense in a "case of fratricide, the Childs murder case" (7.748-9), and their beauty makes Stephen blush, "his blood wooed by grace of language and gesture" (7.777).

<sup>26</sup> For Barthes, listening and narrative always run the risk of being monocular or monovocal. Like the xenophobic and patriotic Citizen in "Cyclops" the danger lies in focusing solely upon the past, of seeing and hearing the future only in terms of the past and freezing it in a perpetual and stony present. This is what Nietzsche calls *monumental history*. See "On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life" in *Untimely Meditations*. Tr. R. Hollingdale. (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997), p. 69.

<sup>27</sup> The sheer amount of coincidence between Blanchot's essay and Joyce's episode makes me think that, either a) this is a remarkable example of "parallel evolution," or b) Blanchot secretly had Joyce in mind, perhaps via Borges.

<sup>28</sup> See Blanchot, Maurice. "The Song of the Sirens" in *The Book to Come*. Tr. Charlotte Mandell. (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2003), p. 7.

<sup>29</sup> In another certain sense Derrida's deconstruction of the concept of the Center in "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences" isn't all that helpful here, since this paradox is, at least partially, resolved by the distinction between *Aktzeit* and *Textzeit*. Even if the dichotomy of these two modes of time can be deconstructed, it seems clear that Joyce is purposefully using them, as may be evidenced by the *Nacheinander / Nebeneinander*

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discussion in “Proteus” (*U* 3.10-20). Indeed, Joyce seems to be critiquing the very notion of excessive play espoused by Derrida in that essay. See “Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences” in *Writing and Difference*. Tr. Alan Bass. (New York: U Chicago Press, 1978), pp. 351-70.

<sup>30</sup> See Ricoeur, Paul. *Time and Narrative: Volume II*. Tr. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer. (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1985): “The possibility of a lag between the time of the act and the time of the text results from the linear character of the speech chain and hence from the unfolding of the text itself. On the one hand, every linguistic sign has something before it and something after it in the speech chain. As a result, the information already given and that anticipated contribute to determining each sign in the *Textzeit*. On the other hand, the orientation of the speaker in relation to the *Textzeit* is itself an action that has its own time, the *Aktzeit*. The time of action can coincide with the time of the text, fall behind it, or anticipate it” (p. 70). *Textzeit* is often a sort of commentary or play upon the action of the *Aktzeit*.

<sup>31</sup> See Freud, Sigmund. “The Unconscious” in *General Psychological Theory: Papers on Metapsychology*. The Collected Papers of Sigmund Freud. (New York: Collier, 1963), p. 135.

<sup>32</sup> It might be objected that Molly does decipher and identify in narrative, except that there is neither urgency nor direct immediacy to her recollections—indeed, even her suitors become an unending and interchangeable string of anonymous men. Identity and the process of identification, in a sense, break down. Perhaps the point at which time is most present for Molly, in the *Aktzeit*, is when she listens for and fantasizes about Stephen while he spends time in the Blooms’ house (e.g. *U* 18.1460-4), though even that is told retrospectively.

<sup>33</sup> See “The Song of the Sirens,” p. 6.

<sup>34</sup> By living in a heroic past, it might seem as though the “event” of British occupation never happened.

<sup>35</sup> In my reading, the Overture is not, as M. Keith Booker argues, simply a politico-stylistic move—that is, a demonstration of the possibilities of language, a rebellion against some sort of authoritarian law of style. See Booker, M. Keith. “*Ulysses*”, *Capitalism and Colonialism: Reading Joyce after the Cold War*. (Westwood, CT: Greenwood Press, 2000). My reading is closer to Heath Lees’, which suggests that “Joyce opted for the old title of *fuga per canonem*... in order to invoke this medieval practice of providing ‘cryptic directions’ which act as precept or guide to the main unfolding” (p. 41). See “The Introduction to “Sirens” and the *Fuga per Canonem*,” *JJQ* 22.1 (Fall 1984), pp. 39-54.

<sup>36</sup> And in some cases there is even further intra-episodic echoing, as in the case of the *done* that rings in the Overture, in the exact middle of the episode, and at the end.

<sup>37</sup> Blanchot cites *the Odyssey* as the first novel.

<sup>38</sup> “The Song of the Sirens,” p. 6.

<sup>39</sup> See “The Substructure of ‘Sirens’: Molly as *Nexus Omnia Ligans*.”

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<sup>41</sup> See Gifford, p. 610.

<sup>42</sup> “Your description of it [the “Penelope” episode] also coincides with my intention—if the epithet ‘posthuman’ were added. I have rejected the usual interpretation of [Molly] as a human apparition—that aspect being better represented by Calypso, Nausikaa and Circe, to say nothing of the pseudo Homeric figures. In conception and technique I tried to depict the earth which is prehuman and presumably posthuman” (*Letters I* 180).

<sup>43</sup> See Cixous, Hélène. “Writing and the Law” in *Readings: The Poetics of Blanchot, Joyce, Kafka, Kleist, Lispector and Tsvetayeva*. Tr. Verena Andermatt Conley. (Minneapolis: Minnesota UP, 1991).

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10. One might think of the spells in “Circe” in relation to Cixous’ suggestive phrase.

<sup>46</sup> The fantasies (Stephen’s zombie Mother, Bloom’s sadomasochism, etc.) disappear at that moment, as though the “ruin of all space” were simply the ruin of the imagined space of the *Textzeit*.

<sup>47</sup> This phrase comes from Stephen’s discussion of the *Neben-* and *Nacheinander*—we perhaps shouldn’t forget that “Sirens” was originally composed in the same copybook as “Proteus.”

<sup>48</sup> See Gifford, 16.1884. Gifford translates the phrase as “all ships are bridged,” though it is unclear why the verb is necessarily passive given that *brücken*, though rare, does exist in German.