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Plumtree's Potted Meat: The Productive Error of the Commodity in *Ulysses*

MATTHEW HAYWARD

ULYSSES IS STOCKED WITH A RICH array of commodities, and these have attracted notice almost from the start. In the 1920s, Edwin Muir observed that *Ulysses* brought into literature “things banished from it, as we now see more clearly, on moral and conventional rather than essential grounds” (331), while Wyndham Lewis rejected the novel as a “suffocating . . . expanse of objects, all of them lifeless, the sewage of a Past twenty years old” (108); in the 1930s, for very different reasons, Alick West criticized what he saw as Joyce’s bourgeois depiction of “numberless acts of consuming, spending, enjoying of things” (169). Yet it was some half a century until critics began to see these “things” as significant in their own right. Before the flourish of interest in Joyce and consumer culture in the 1980s, commentary remained incidental and for the most part critically orthodox; such seeming ephemera as Plumtree’s Potted Meat appeared to be, as Fredric Jameson

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ABSTRACT: Symbolic interpretations of the commodities in *Ulysses* have obscured fundamental material details. A materialist approach shows that Joyce significantly altered the historical commodity Plumtree’s Potted Meat in the “Ithaca” episode, representing this English product as Irish. Explaining this alteration in the context of Ireland’s colonial economy reveals the political significance of Joyce’s representation. His alteration of the productive origin of the commodity in “Ithaca” is part of that chapter’s demystification of British imperial claims of progress and universal improvement.

observed, “recuperable for literature only at the price of being transformed into symbols” (136).

Robert Adams’s *Surface and Symbol* (1962) is the great exemplar of the critical payoff Jameson describes. Contending that “the choice between surface and symbol is the most important one a reader of Joyce must make” (83), Adams dwells at considerable length upon the novel’s consumerist details. Yet for all his careful and elucidating commentary, Adams is concerned with finding symbolic meaning in objects, characters, and names that would otherwise appear arbitrary, and thus disturbingly meaningless. True, he acknowledges the elusiveness of the sought symbolic master key, and seems resigned to its absence even as he allows for its possibility: “It is always conceivable a new way of looking at *Ulysses* will be found, which at a stroke will reduce to miraculous harmony all the book’s symbols, all its references to external reality” (191). But if Adams all but abandons his search for the grand, harmonizing revelation, he nevertheless assumes the necessity of filtering the symbolically significant from the “crude stuff of history” (8).

The historicist turn that has dominated Joyce studies in the twenty-first century has allowed this “crude stuff” to appear relevant in itself, and the validation of consumerism as both an important cultural context for *Ulysses* and one of its central themes has shown that essential distinctions between the novel’s meaningful and meaningless objects are practically and theoretically untenable. Were Joyce nothing more than “Dublin’s incomparable archivist,” as he is mischievously described in Flann O’Brien’s *The Dalkey Archive* (132), the material that he translated into his literature has a historical value—as indicated by the attraction Joyce’s work now holds for historians of early-twentieth-century Ireland.¹ And if Joyce is taken to be the first major novelist to depict a modern consciousness essentially constituted by the experience of consumer capitalism, then no part of this constitutive material is insignificant. Yet these remain conservative justifications, subordinating commodities to the old orders of context or characterization. Jameson’s 1982 essay “*Ulysses* in History” poses a more radical intervention. He sets out to break from the hegemony of “the mythical, the psychoanalytical, and the ethical readings” that make up the critical history of *Ulysses*: such interpretations, he argues, fail to appreciate the historical specificity of Joyce’s work, which Jameson reads as a response to capitalist alienation. In this mode, human production, embodied in the life of the city, comes to be felt as meaningless, “absurd,” and “contingent.” In place of interpretations that try to inject “meaning” back into

commodities, Jameson proposes a reading that works with their apparent “meaninglessness” (130).

As influential as Jameson’s call to historicize has been, his approach remains inadequately realized in critical discussions of commodities in *Ulysses*. This essay returns to Jameson to eschew the symbolic approach. Isolating one commodity in particular, it shows that while Joyce undoubtedly drew commodities into complex symbolic networks, these do not exhaust the commodity’s signifiatory function: Plumtree’s Potted Meat turns out to be just as suggestive as a pot of meat as it does as a symbol of sexual intercourse. However, detailed analysis of this particular commodity also shows that Jameson’s historicization remains incomplete. Approaching the product with what Andrew Gibson has defined as methodological “particularism,” this article demonstrates the central importance of the Irish situation to understanding Joyce’s representation. Gibson explains that “the particularist works to uncover what is specifically Irish in a historical process” (139), and this is just the focus that has been lacking in earlier studies of Joyce and consumerism, notably Garry Leonard’s *Advertising and Commodity Culture in Joyce* (1998). While Leonard invokes Jameson’s famous dictum, “always historicize” (16), his own historicization consists of vague references to “the time” (20, 85, 117) or “the early twentieth century” (16). As the example of Plumtree’s Potted Meat makes clear, such designations are too loose, for while Ireland’s consumer culture undoubtedly shared broad similarities with those of other European countries—especially Britain, given the bind of the Union—it also developed in a uniquely local and inflected manner. Methodological particularism attends to the specificities of Ireland’s consumer culture in the early twentieth century. It is only against this specific background that Joyce’s representation of commodities can be properly gauged and understood.

This article identifies a peculiarity in Joyce’s representation of perhaps the most prominent commodity in *Ulysses*, Plumtree’s Potted Meat. Against earlier symbolic readings, it draws upon Jameson’s materialist approach and Gibson’s more careful historicization to identify Joyce’s treatment of the commodity as part of his broader engagement with imperial discourses in the “Ithaca” episode—a stylistic engagement that exposes the exploitative drive behind British ideologies of progress and universal improvement. Connecting Plumtree’s Potted Meat to other comparable commodities in *Ulysses*, notably Bovril, it sheds new light on the political dimensions of Joyce’s complex representation of Irish consumer culture, at last moving away from the decontextualized and sometimes anachronistic speculations that have up to now dominated critical discussion.

“Plumtree’s Potted Meat? Incomplete”: Joyce’s Productive Error

Plumtree’s Potted Meat has a narrative presence disproportionate to the size of its “4 oz” pot (17.600). The product is introduced in the “Lotus Eaters” episode, when Bloom “idly” reads an advertisement in the *Freeman’s Journal*:

What is home without
Plumtree’s Potted Meat?
Incomplete.
With it an abode of bliss. (5.143–47)

The Plumtree’s advertisement comes back to Bloom again and again throughout the day, and in an unlikely coincidence, it is just this product that Bloom encounters as evidence of his wife’s infidelity. Blazes Boylan sends a jar of it to Molly in “Wandering Rocks” (10.314–22), and the pair consume it after their consummation: it is “some crumbs, some flakes” of this product that Bloom brushes from the sheets as he gets into bed at the end of “Ithaca” (17.2124–25).

Plumtree’s Potted Meat has proven irresistible to critics, and a number of interpretations have been proposed. These have followed Adams in their symbolic approach, for the most part elaborating connections already made explicit in the novel, from the mortuary connotations set up by the advertisement’s newspaper positioning—“What a stupid ad! Under the obituary notices they stick it . . . Dignam’s Potted Meat” (8.744–45)—to the sexual and (extra)marital connotations of the brand name and the advertisement.² Earlier critics, connecting the manufacturer’s name to Stephen’s Parable of the Plums, searched for biblical and classical parallels (Briskin; Davis).³ More recently, critics have drawn political analogies between the “incomplete” domestic homestead of the Blooms and an Ireland lacking the autonomy of Home Rule (Osteen, *Economy* 121–22). Yet even in this last wave of interpretation Plumtree’s has scarcely been considered as a historical fact, a commodity sold in turn-of-the-century Dublin.⁴ As such, it has yet to be remarked that Joyce makes a highly suggestive alteration in his fictionalization of the historical commodity.

According to the narrator of “Ithaca,” Plumtree’s Potted Meat is “[m]anufactured by George Plumtree, 23 Merchants’ quay, Dublin,” and “put up in 4 oz pots” with the “name on the label” (17.600–604). From here it would be distributed to Dublin retailers such as Thornton’s, where Blazes Boylan apparently buys the “small jar” that he sends to Molly (10.301), and Davy Byrne’s, where Bloom spots the potted meat on the shelves (8.742). However briefly,



Figure 1. G. W. Plumtree, Manufacturer of Home Potted Meats, made in Southport, England. © 2012 by Matthew Hayward.

Joyce depicts each of the stages that lead to the consumption of this commodity: production, packaging, advertisement, and retail. The specification of “George Plumtree, 23 Merchants quay, Dublin” would thus seem to contain the product in the domestic Irish economy, appearing to fulfil the terms of the “Buy Irish” movement that Joyce at one time endorsed as the best hope for Irish regeneration (Joyce, *Letters* 2:167).

However, there is a problem with this neat domestic circuit: Plumtree’s Home Potted Meat was English. As specified on the pot, it was manufactured by G. W. Plumtree, Southport (see fig. 1), and although a number of original pots survive, Joyce’s alteration of the commodity’s productive origin has remained unacknowledged in critical discussion. The pots came in two different sizes. The smaller of these does not specify the place of manufacture, but surviving standard-sized pots give 184 Portland Street or 13 Railway Street, Southport, there having been at some point a change of address.⁵ The 1901 Census of England and Wales confirms that Plumtree’s was an English-based company, identifying George W. Plumtree as a forty-nine-year-old “Manufacturer of Preserved Provisions” in Southport, England. (There is no Plumtree

listed in the 1901 or 1911 Census of Ireland.) From Southport the product was shipped to a small Irish agency in Dublin, first at 57 Middle Abbey Street, and, by 1904, to the address Joyce gives as the manufacturer's in "Ithaca," 23 Merchants' Quay.⁶ The agent would distribute the product to Irish retailers (including, perhaps, Thornton's and Davy Byrne's), who would then sell it on to Irish consumers.

The Irish market would have been attractive to a Southport-based "manufacturer of preserved provisions." Working- and lower-middle-class consumers were the primary market for preserved foods (Fraser 38), and there was an increase in spending power among these classes in Dublin from the late nineteenth century onward,⁷ while the daily traffic between nearby Liverpool and Kingstown (now Dun Laoghaire) made the transportation of the commodity to Dublin a simple and cheap process. What Joyce represents as an Irish home industry was in reality a British manufacturer enjoying the trade benefits of empire, and with this small alteration, a significant gap opens between the historical Plumtree's Home Potted Meat and the product of Joyce's novel. Certainly it is not the only historical detail Joyce has altered in his depiction of a Dublin day. However, masking the involvement of an English company in the colonial economy is different from Joyce's shifting of the Mirus Bazaar's opening date (from 31 May to 16 June), or his introduction of a fictional viceregal cavalcade (Gifford 283). These alterations have an easily identifiable purpose, and if they affect the political reading of the novel, they do so positively, adding a connection that might otherwise be lost. The cavalcade, for instance, introduces the reality of colonial occupation: it is a politically significant event that did not happen to take place on 16 June, but could have. To adapt a New Historicist phrase, this alteration tells the history of "what might have happened" (Gallagher and Greenblatt 57). The alteration of the productive origin of Plumtree's Potted Meat has a very different effect: far from bringing a political reality into relief, it helps obscure it.

The address that Joyce gives to the company (23 Merchants' Quay) was in fact that of the Irish agency, and since this is deceptively listed in *Thom's Dublin Directory* with only the company name, "Plumtree, George W. potted meat manufacturer," it would be easy to ignore the political implications of the change and assume that the error in "Ithaca"—"[m]anufactured by George Plumtree, 23 Merchants' quay, Dublin"—indicates nothing more than Joyce's overreliance upon *Thom's*. (This may be the source for Joyce's short note "Geo Plumtree 23 merchant's quay" in the British Museum *Ulysses* notesheets; see Herring 416.) If so, the distortion of geographical origin is mere accident: Joyce takes the details directly from *Thom's*, perhaps attracted to the

product's name because of the symbolic potentials outlined above, and never knew anything of its English origin.

However, Joyce could not have relied solely upon *Thom's*, for he includes information in "Ithaca" that was not to be found in those pages at all. The specification of "4 oz" is certainly nowhere there. Neither is the product's proper name, "Plumtree's Home Potted Meat," which Joyce clearly echoes in *Ulysses*: although he abbreviates the product to "Plumtree's Potted Meat," he retains the lost "home" in his fictional advertising slogan, "*What is home without Plumtree's Potted Meat?*" (emphasis in original). Joyce must then have made use of another source in his fictionalization of the product, and if this was another contemporary advertisement, critics have been unable to find it. R. B. Kershner—who was conducting serious archival work as early as the 1970s, and who has done more than any other critic to foster an appreciation of the centrality of seemingly ephemeral "popular culture" to Joyce's work—has recently referred to an advertisement for "Plumtree's Home-Potted Meats" in the *Evening Telegraph* for 16 June 1904 (87). Since Joyce is known to have gathered much else from this issue,⁸ Kershner's identification might seem to settle it. However, there was no advertisement for Plumtree's in the *Evening Standard*. In a rare slip, Kershner has been misled by the semifictional 1990 Split Pea Press "facsimile" of the issue, which superimposes a number of specific references from *Ulysses* onto the historical newspaper to produce a convincing mock-up of the paper Bloom reads. Genuine contemporary advertisements for the product that I have been able to find, such as the pair referred to above (note 6), do not include the word "manufacturer" or the size of the pot, and they clearly imply the Englishness of the product by specifying that the Dublin address is only for the Irish agency.⁹

There is nothing to suggest, then, that Joyce introduced this productive error unknowingly. How else might we explain the alteration? On a broadly thematic level, it might be linked to the "Ithaca" episode's Homeric concerns of betrayal and invasion. The suitor Boylan has brought Plumtree's Potted Meat into the Blooms' home with a bottle of Gilbey's Invalid Port as tribute to Molly, and the connotations of these products, with the imagery used to describe them, no doubt complement the sexual aspect of the plot. The "bottle swathed in pink tissue paper and a small jar" (10.300–301) may be phallic and vaginal, respectively, and "potted meat" has salacious overtones, even before Molly merges the gift and the giver in "Penelope": "it had a fine salty taste yes because I felt lovely" (18.132). From the thematic perspective, the Englishness of Boylan's gifts may reinforce the analogy suggested by Osteen between the domestic and national senses of "home." Osteen argues that just as Bloom

“must cope with Boylan’s invasion and ‘colonization’ of his home,” so Ireland has to cope with “the invasive colonizing presence of Great Britain.” As Osteen reads it, “both Bloom and Ireland are fighting a losing battle against ‘strangers in [the] house’” (Osteen, “Seeking Renewal” 718). Perhaps, then, the analogy between Boylan and Britain is strengthened by the fact that Plumtree’s Potted Meat and Gilbey’s Invalid Port are English—commodities that are quite literally part of the British “invasive colonizing presence.” It is true that Boylan stands as a locus for consumerist and imperial details elsewhere in the novel. His entrance is uniformly signified by the clothes that he wears, as at the end of “Lestrygonians”—“Straw hat in sunlight. Tan shoes. Turnedup trousers” (8.1168)—perhaps justifying Leonard’s description of Boylan as “the modern fashion machine incarnate” (8). And the wealth that allows this consumption is elsewhere ambiguously linked with British imperial concerns, with the narrator of “Cyclops” referring to Boylan as “Dirty Dan the dodger’s son . . . that sold the same horses twice over to the government to fight the Boers” (12.998–99).

However, as neat as this thematic explanation may seem, the analogies between Boylan and Britain on the one side, and 7 Eccles Street and Ireland on the other, are flawed. Vincent J. Cheng reads Boylan as “one extreme of Joyce’s representation of the effects of the collusion between patriarchal imperial politics and patriarchal sexual politics,” but his interpretation of “Dirty Dan” Boylan as “a man who unpatriotically sold horses to the British during the Boer War” does not take into account the ambiguity of this sale, which apparently involved a swindle, and is thus self-interested and even anti-imperial (Cheng 307). And if Boylan has brought British commodities into Bloom’s home, so too has Bloom: “Abram coal” (17.128), “Epps’s soluble cocoa” (17.307), the “piano (Cadby)” (17.1303), “Fry’s Plain Chocolate” (17.1472), and so on, not to mention his illicit top-drawer goods (17.1804–21). Moreover, if Boylan’s Irishness is compromised by his father’s contribution to the British imperial war effort, then Bloom is compromised further still, as the “Oxen of the Sun” narration makes clear: “During the recent war whenever the enemy had a temporary advantage with his granados did this traitor to his kind not seize that moment to discharge his piece against the empire of which he is a tenant at will while he trembled for the security of his four per cents” (14.908–12). Bloom’s material collusion with the British Empire is confirmed by the itemization of his interests in “Ithaca”—“Documents: . . . certificate of possession of £900, Canadian 4% (inscribed) government stock” (17.1855–65)—and he is shown to have been at one stage a vocal supporter of these imperial interests: “he had advocated during nocturnal perambulations the political theory of colonial

(e.g. Canadian) expansion” (17.1642–44). With these complications, neither Bloom nor his home can simply be equated with betrayed or exploited Ireland, any more than Boylan can stand easily for Britain. So while the Plumtree’s advertisement may be drawn into a general analogy between the domestic and the national “home,” it cannot be reduced to it, nor worked out in this way categorically.

But even excluding these complicating factors, the analogical explanation does not help to explain the alteration in the text of the commodity’s origin. Not only does Joyce make it impossible to discern the Englishness of the product from the text alone, his specification of the Irish address for Plumtree’s implies home industry; taken at face value, Boylan’s purchase of the product would denote his own small contribution to national self-regeneration, thus working against an identification between Boylan and the colonizer. The alteration is no easier to explain in straightforward symbolic terms: there is no obvious reason that the sexual, mortuary, or political connotations of the product would be more effective with it domesticated.

In any case, Jameson’s radical approach to the Ithacan commodity suggests that such conventional interpretations are fundamentally misguided. For Jameson, “Ithaca” is the climax of a book that reflects “the increasing separation, under capitalism . . . between the subject and the object.” In this chapter, commodities are no longer the detritus or incidental matter of social life, nor symbols redeemed by aesthetic resolution; they are the very subject of the narrative: “[H]ere, in reality, commodities are dreaming about themselves through us” (139). This extreme reification is countered, Jameson argues, by the chapter’s continual tracing of commodities back to their productive origins, a defamiliarizing process that exposes their contingency upon human labor and exploitation. Read in this way, the “Ithaca” episode “dereifies” the commodity, “deconcealing” the “whole dead grid of the object world of greater Dublin” and “the transformation of Nature by human and collective praxis” (140). The argument is a powerful one and seems to explain the chapter’s otherwise “boring” dilations upon “meaningless” objects; when the water with which Bloom fills the kettle is traced back through a “subterranean aqueduct of filter mains of single and double pipeage constructed at an initial plant cost of £5 per linear yard” (17.165–67), the commodified water supply is denaturalized, its contingency upon the workings of the Dublin Corporation “deconcealed” through such human, incidental details as Mr Spencer, C. E.’s prohibition of “the use of municipal water for purposes other than those of consumption” and the South Dublin Guardians’ conviction for “a wastage of 20,000 gallons per night” (17.179–80, 173–75).

Yet Plumtree's Potted Meat complicates even Jameson's neat argument. The description of the commodity in "Ithaca" is certainly defamiliarizing: the attribution of a large industrial process to a single man, George W. Plumtree, casually "putting up" the product into pots on Merchants' Quay, demystifies the commodity and humorously emphasizes the contingency of consumer capitalist production. However, Joyce's alteration of Plumtree's productive origin—his muddling of the route from the English warehouse to the Irish home—occludes the specific contingency of Ireland's consumer culture upon hegemonic colonial relations and thus defeats the dereifying process that Jameson describes. It is true that Jameson extends his concept of dereification to the work of art itself, praising *Ulysses* for refusing "to solidify into an achieved and codified symbolic order" by continually pointing toward signifying elements or events outside of the text (132). But this only shows how problematic the Plumtree's alteration really is, for the "Ithaca" description pretends to explain itself fully while actually cutting off a significant extratextual element. The problem is not that Joyce fails to adequately "deconceal" the commodity, with its contingency upon the colonial situation. The problem is that he actively conceals it.

"With it an Abode of Bliss": Science, Consumerism, and the Ideology of Universal Improvement

Connecting the excess of objects in "Ithaca" with the narrative's obsessive tracking of productive origins, Jameson breaks from the humanistic, symbolic tradition that has dominated critical discussion. His approach not only recognizes the prominent narrative position of commodities, but it at last acknowledges the political nature of the chapter's most striking feature, its style. However, writing before postcolonial theory had reshaped the way in which Joyce's politics was defined, Jameson was generally inattentive to the novel's anti-imperial dimensions, and it was not until Gibson's *Joyce's Revenge* (2002) that the specific politics of the Ithacan stylistic assault was brought into relief.

Joyce designated the "art" of "Ithaca" to be "science" (Gilbert 356), and as Gibson shows, the narrative both plays upon and destabilizes the claimed impartiality of scientific discourse. On the one hand, he points out, the "Ithaca" episode "lays strenuous claim to powers of empirical and systematic method—clarity, reason, deliberation, exactitude, observation." On the other hand, the distortions of fact in the chapter serve to resist this method: so, as Gibson establishes, scientific terms may be "coinages, fake or parodic"; they may be used in "more or less unscientific ways"; and at times the science of "Ithaca" may just be "plain wrong" (242–43). Gibson politicizes Joyce's critique of the

scientific method by locating it within a contemporary colonial context. The claim to scientific objectivity was an imperial claim, and the accompanying promise of universal progress belied self-serving motives, particularly in trade and industry. As Gibson argues, the method of “Ithaca” works to undercut this spurious appeal to progress, mocking the “triumphalism of imperial science” and resisting its “efforts to present what is particular as universal” (249).

Joyce’s general suspicion of the universalizing scientific ideal can be seen again later in the decade, in his remarkable 1928 exchange with H. G. Wells, whom he had approached with the unlikely request for some kind of assistance in the writing of *Finnegans Wake*. Wells refused, claiming, we might say, creative differences:

Your training has been Catholic, Irish, revolutionary; mine, such as it was, was scientific, constructive and, I suppose, English. The frame of my mind is a mould wherein a big unifying and concentrating process is possible, . . . a *progress* not inevitable but interesting and possible. That game attracted and holds me. For it, I want language (and statement) as simple and clear as possible. (Joyce, *Letters* 1:274–75; emphasis in original)

At first sight, Wells’s comments betray just the imperial ideals that are taken apart in the technical offensives of “Ithaca.” The “scientific” method is connected to a universalizing imperative (“a big unifying and concentrating process”), to an emphasized ideal of “*progress*,” and to a seemingly neutral or objective linguistic style (as “clear as possible”). Furthermore, Wells contrasts his progressive “scientific” neutrality to Joyce’s “Catholic, Irish” training, presumably implying that his is the more stable and reliable. At the same time, however, he goes some way to relativizing these ideals by attributing them to his own English “training”—a relativization that he extends as the letter goes on, recognizing both sides to be partial: “[W]hile you were brought up under the delusion of political suppression I was brought up under the delusion of political responsibility. It seems a fine thing to you to defy and break up. To me not in the least” (275). Joyce’s own gloss to these comments in a letter to Harriet Shaw Weaver relativizes the assumptions behind Wells’s ideals further still:

I enclose a letter of his to me which seems to me—I don’t know what it seems to me. . . . For the moment I will content myself by saying in reply to his letter, which is quite friendly and honest, that I doubt whether his attitude towards words and language is as scientific as he himself ought to wish it to be. (Joyce, *Letters* 1:276)

Joyce here identifies the unscientific basis of rational, positivist ideals of language and thought, as well as the contingency of the claimed universal. It is an important key to the penultimate chapter of what was then his most recent publication. As Gibson's analysis confirms, "Ithaca" works to expose just what Joyce describes in this letter as the falsely scientific "attitude towards words and language."

Crucially, the "English" ideal of "progress," to which Wells appeals in his letter, and which was used to justify both the British Empire and the sovereignty of science and technology, was also used to proclaim the universal benefit of the dissemination of British consumer goods to new markets. That British advertisers drew heavily upon images of empire in order to sell commodities in the latter part of the nineteenth century is well documented (Richards 119–67; McClintock 207–31). As Thomas Richards has shown, these advertisements began by presenting commodities as central to imperial might, as exemplified by the infamous late-1880s Pears' soap advertisement depicting a conquered Sudanese company halted in wonder before a Pears' slogan, beneath the heading "THE FORMULA OF BRITISH CONQUEST" (121). At the turn of the century, the major British company Bovril ran countless advertisements associating the product with imperial campaigns, their captions and images ranging from the restrained ("Bovril reinforcements") to the direct ("Bovril and the Boer War") to the hyperbolic ("THE EVENT OF THE YEAR. . . [T]he route followed by Lord Roberts in his historical march . . . has made an indelible imprint of the word Bovril on the face of the Orange Free State" [Hadley 14–16]). The company extended these advertisements indiscriminately to the Irish press, bolstering their claims with long testimonials and intrusive headings: "WHAT THE SOLDIERS SAY ABOUT BOVRIL"; "ALWAYS FIRST TO THE WOUNDED SOLDIER"; "BOVRIL AND THE SOLDIERS" (*Irish Times*, 3 April 1900, 8). Joyce mocks this strand of imperial advertising directly in "Ithaca" with the testimonial for "The Wonderworker, the world's greatest remedy for rectal complaints" (17.1819–20), concluding with the "absentminded beggar's" endorsement: "What a pity the government did not supply our men with wonderworkers during the South African campaign! What a relief it would have been!" (17.1837–39). Joyce's ludicrous example—which may have been based upon a genuine advertisement¹⁰—airs the British advertisers' claims that their commodities reinforce imperial military expansion.

Yet another significant imperial advertising trope presented British commodities as in themselves the means to civilization. The most famous example, influentially reproduced and analyzed by both Richards and Anne

McClintock, is the Pears' soap advertisement headed "THE BIRTH OF CIVILIZATION," depicting a loinclothed black man, spear in hand, gazing aloft at a bar of Pears' soap that has washed up from a wrecked ship. Beneath the picture, the caption reads: "The consumption of soap is a measure of the wealth, civilisation, health, and purity of the people" (Richards 141; McClintock 224). The empire is not specifically denoted in this advertisement: it is the British product itself that will civilize, although the fantastic list of benefits—wealth, civilization, and so on—is an easily recognizable run of the usual justifications for empire. In other advertisements, finally, British commodities, progress, health, and imperial expansion are brought together under the banner of science. In a lengthy advertisement published in the *Irish Times* in 1899, Bovril proclaimed that "THE WIDESPREAD USE OF BOVRIL THROUGHOUT THE BRITISH EMPIRE . . . is one of the most striking indications in recent years of the satisfactory progress made in the science of dietetics." With science thus invoked, the advertisement goes on to detail the use of the product in the imperial military campaign in South Africa: "Bovril, Limited, are also supplying large quantities of their special Emergency Rations for the troops actively engaged" (*Irish Times*, 18 December 1899, 7). Science and military imperialism are brought together in the consumption of the British commodity.

Of course, the nature of the "science" to which such advertisements alluded was never really explained; the catchword could be deployed to justify almost any commodity. So Mellin's could advertise their cod liver oil with reference only to their "Scientific Methods," and Bovril could assert simply that their product was approved by "scientific experts everywhere" (*Freeman's Journal*, 3 January 1898, 2; 10 September 1889, 8). Such appeals were particularly prominent in advertisements for patent foods and medicines, and Joyce mocks a variation of this kind of advertising in the "Eumaeus" episode: "Anyhow inspection, medical inspection, of all eatables seemed to him more than ever necessary which possibly accounted for the vogue of Dr Tibble's Vi-Cocoa on account of the medical analysis involved" (16.804–6). The irony is that when these kinds of advertisements were printed in the Irish press—as they were, daily—they promised just the social improvements that the commodities' imperial participation helped preclude: "wealth, civilisation, health," and so on. It need hardly be pointed out that the claims are disingenuous: if consumer goods such as Bovril truly did offer "progress" and improve quality of life, they did so not to that end, but as part of an imperial economy that depended upon trade supremacy and the maintaining of colonial consumer markets.

This connection between the seemingly distinct imperial discourses of science and consumerism—their common false claim to impartiality—provides the missing key to understanding Joyce’s Plumtree’s Potted Meat alteration. The slipperiness of “facts” in the “Ithaca” episode has long been recognized: Joyce regularly introduces factual errors into the narrative, at least in some cases intentionally.¹¹ Focusing on scientific examples, Gibson convincingly identifies this falsifying drive as an attack upon the British claim to scientific objectivity, exposing the empire’s self-serving motives. Once we see that this claim was mirrored in imperial consumerist discourses, Joyce’s alteration of the productive origin of the British commodity seems easy to understand. No longer a trivial or isolated detail, Plumtree’s Potted Meat stands out as part of Joyce’s challenge to what Gibson identifies as the imperial “efforts to present what is particular as universal.” The commodity’s promise of social improvement—“with it an abode of bliss”—is exposed as just another side of the British Empire’s self-justifying appeal to a neutral, universal progress.

The explanation is elaborate, but the basic premise—that Joyce recognized the British consumerist promise of universal improvement to be self-serving and exploitative—is confirmed elsewhere in the novel by his treatment of that emblematic imperial commodity, Bovril. Toward the end of the “Oxen of the Sun” episode appears the cryptic line “Jubilee mutton. Bovril” (14.1547). The meaning of “Jubilee mutton” is well enough understood. In June 1897, to celebrate Queen Victoria’s Jubilee, quantities of mutton and beef were brought from Australia to be distributed among the British and Irish poor. According to the *Freeman’s Journal* for 29 June, Dublin’s allocation “of about 900 carcasses of sheep and 200 quarters of beef” was well received by the charities that were to prepare and distribute it. Elsewhere in Ireland, however, responses were less enthusiastic. The newspaper reported “EXCITING SCENES” in Limerick: “The majority of people who were to receive it declined it, and those who accepted brought it only as far as the river, into which they flung it” (5). On 1 July, it described similar events at Clonmel railway station: “The ordinary carriers refused to remove it. The railway porters were offered carcasses but declined. The priests refused to have anything to say to it, and the poor people declared they would rather starve than take it” (6). The Armagh Catholic committee declined the invitation to distribute twenty carcasses to the Catholic poor (out of the town’s total allocation of fifty), giving a dignified explanation for this refusal in a letter to the town clerk: “As the Catholics of the town took no part in the recent Jubilee celebrations they think it would be unbecoming for them to accept this gift” (*Freeman’s Journal*, 29 June 1879, 5). The writer crowns this statement with a quite brilliant snub—“Fears are

entertained that the meat may be unsound, and therefore dangerous to life”—but the political significance of the letter lies in its acute recognition of the disingenuousness of the “gift,” an understanding that any acceptance would be compromising in its implication of a requited colonial contract.

Annotators have noted the unpopularity of the Jubilee mutton gesture in Ireland (Gifford 447), but none have explained its relevance to the commodity Bovril. It works by direct analogy. The juxtaposition of the Jubilee mutton and the British commodity implies their equivalence, and it is no accident that Joyce has chosen Bovril in particular, for the parallel is impressively consistent. From an Irish perspective, the Jubilee mutton was a gift culled from one colony and shipped back to the poor of another. Bovril too was manufactured only with beef extracted from Australia and other colonies, as the company proudly advertised: their very first display advertisement, printed in the *Lady's Pictorial* in 1889 (a title also referred to in *Ulysses*, 13.151), specified Australia as a source for their cattle, and introduced the famous “1,000 GUINEA CHALLENGE” (Hadley 9). They ran the same copy in Irish newspapers throughout the 1890s, offering the prize to anybody who could disprove the claim that “not one ounce of any description of Beef produced, procured, or manipulated on the Continent of Europe has ever been used in the preparation of Bovril” (*Freeman's Journal*, 25 January 1890, 4). And crucially, just as the Jubilee mutton was sent in commemoration and celebration of a system that maintained the very poverty the meat was supposed to attenuate, so the colonial distribution of Bovril included the celebration and self-congratulation of empire, as seen in the kind of scientific and military advertisements quoted above.

Joyce perfectly critiques Bovril by juxtaposing it with the Jubilee mutton, although he leaves it to the reader to draw out the comparison. Bovril and Plumtree's Potted Meat are also equivalent commodities: both are British meat products, and both involve the indeterminable parts of animals being “put up” and shipped back to the colonies as consumer goods. Indeed, they perfectly exemplify the exploitative colonial economy still operating in Ireland in 1904. The Union settlement allowed untaxed access to Irish resources, especially livestock, as reflected in Bloom's remark in “Hades”: “Roast beef for old England. They buy up all the juicy ones” (6.393–94). It is thus bitterly ironic that Plumtree's has packaged offal—the usually unsaleable “[c]auls mouldy tripes windpipes faked and minced up” (8.750), as Bloom recognizes this specific commodity to be—and shipped it back, tariff-free, to Irish consumers like Boylan and Molly.

Finally, then, Plumtree's Potted Meat joins Bovril and Jubilee mutton as a quintessentially British product that attempts to conceal the exploitative

nature of its imperial burden. We have seen that advertisements for such commodities drew upon the same rhetoric of disinterested beneficence as other imperial discourses. Joyce's de-Anglicization of the bogus "home" product registers the spuriousness of such claims to impartiality. As the scientific errors of "Ithaca" work to expose the contingency of the British scientific discourse and style, so its consumerist errors work against the connected imperial rhetoric of progress—which espoused the dissemination of commodities as a universal improvement of the quality of life while disavowing the empire's particular and self-serving interest in this expansion.

Approached through Jameson's radically materialist reading of Ithacan objects, and Gibson's more historically nuanced reading of the chapter's simultaneous gesture toward, and subversion of, the language and form of imperial science, Plumtree's Potted Meat emerges as a paradigmatic commodity. The manipulations of the "Ithaca" episode expose the hypocrisy of imperial consumerist ideologies—the claim that commodification is driven by an altruistic desire to improve people's quality of life, just as imperial expansion is driven by the wish to spread the light of civilization. At the very best, we see, this "improvement" is only incidental to the empire's driving purposes of expansion, domination, and wealth. At worst, it is the economic means by which Ireland's colonial subservience is maintained. Joyce's account of the production of Plumtree's Potted Meat is far from incomplete; it introduces a most productive error.

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NOTES

Citations from *Ulysses* are made by chapter and line number.

1. "Joyce's ear for accents and conversational nuances and his sense of place make *Ulysses* a very useful source for the historian of Dublin in the 1890s and 1900s" (Ó Gráda, *Jewish Ireland* 204).

2. Mark Osteen suggests that "Plumtree's Meat functions as a metonymy of Boylan throughout the novel" (*Economy* 119). Cf. "Molly in her bed is evoked throughout the novel by references to Plumtree's Potted Meat" (Rosenfeld 218).

3. Briskin's interpretation is ambitious if nothing else: "As soon as we recognize the plumtree as the source of the twenty-four plumstones, spat out by the guardian Fates, Plumtree's Potted Meat becomes a symbol of literature. . . . [T]he inane advertising jingle suddenly rings out as a clear statement of Joyce's belief in

literature: "What is the world without / The Art of Literature? / Incomplete. / With it an abode of bliss" (246).

4. John Nash's recent observation on the Ithacan representation of Plumtree's Potted Meat—"finally, neither the naturalistic detail nor the symbolic insight is reliable" (163)—suggests that the symbolic approach may at last be on the wane.

5. A number of jars have been preserved in institutions such as the Zürich James Joyce Foundation, and in private collections.

6. Advertisements in the *Weekly Irish Times*, 26 March 1898, 1; 2 April 1898, 1; *Thom's*.

7. Cormac Ó Gráda finds that "average incomes in Ireland almost trebled between 1845 and 1914" (*Ireland* 242). Kieran A. Kennedy, Thomas Giblin, and Deirdre McHugh argue that since the massive decline in population between 1841 and 1911 was "concentrated in the poorer half of the population, a significant increase in overall average income *per capita* would emerge even if the better-off half of the population had experienced no improvement in income *per capita*," but they accept that this "statistical quirk" could account for only a portion of the increase in "real income" (20, 21). While it is likely that the poor in Dublin remained relatively poor, estimations of "a rise of 60 to 80 per cent in the money wages of Dublin building craftsmen's labourers between the 1850s and 1890s, when the cost of living in the city was probably declining" suggest that incomes increased in at least some sections of the working class (Ó Gráda, *Ireland* 238–39).

8. The front page alone includes advertisements for Mrs Bandmann-Palmer in *Leah*, *The Lily of Killarney*, the Great Marie Kendal, Eugene Stratton, *Fun on the Bristol*, Cramer's Great Musical Depot, Dockrell wallpapers, and Lalouette's, all referred to in *Ulysses*.

9. Of course it remains quite possible that Joyce simply saw a pot himself. This seems impossible to determine either way, though we may surmise that he was not averse to such products: in 1905 he advised Stanislaus "to bring a big can of tinned meat" for his journey to Trieste (Joyce, *Letters* 2:121).

10. The basis for the Wonderworker passage, including the soldier's testimony, can be found in Joyce's "Ithaca" notesheet 12, in the British Museum (see Herring 468–69). It reads very much like a copied advertisement. On the historical commodity, see Janusko and Crowley.

11. For a detailed account of these errors, see Gunn, Hart, and Beck, *James Joyce's Dublin*, 15–25. That Joyce specifically sought inaccurate "facts" for the composition of "Ithaca" is indicated by his 1921 letter to Frank Budgen, requesting "any ragged, dirty, smudged, torn, defiled, effaced, dogeared, coverless, undated, anonymous misprinted book on mathematics, or algebra or trig. or Eucl. from a cart" (Joyce, *Letters* 1:160). Richards suggests that the incorrect address for Hely's in the "Ithaca" chapter

“waggishly raises the issue of truth in advertising” (197; n. 17), although this interpretation does not take into account the systematic unreliability of the chapter’s other “facts.”

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