

“Poor Mamma’s Panacea” —The Potato in *Ulysses* *

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Abstract

Wandering the streets of Dublin on 16 June 1904, it was not the latchkey which kept Leopold Bloom company, but a more indispensable talisman: the potato inherited from his mother. This potato is usually referred to at critical moments in the text. In the course of his wanderings, Bloom feels strongly reliant on this heirloom. For a long time, this shriveled potato is regarded as a talisman, corresponding with the moly Hermes gives Odysseus to protect him from Circe’s magic. But where does the “magic” of this talismanic moly come from? Why does Joyce depict a reminder of the Great Irish Famine, and thus a symbol of betrayal, as a talisman for his modern-day Odysseus? The shriveled potato in Bloom’s pocket, a talisman replete with significances carried by an

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Irish Jew, seems more mysterious than previously thought. This paper aims to investigate the significances of the potato in *Ulysses* by tracing the cultural heritages that have endowed it with various implications, including the Andean, the Spanish, the Irish, and the Jewish. The potato in Joyce's text is not only a complex symbol, but an icon of histories and heritages, and of the reality of daily life; thus its significations are multicultural and plural, rather than parochial and singular.

Key Words: potato, *Ulysses*, Ireland, talisman, food culture

I. Introduction

Wandering the streets of Dublin on 16 June 1904, it was not the latchkey which kept Leopold Bloom company, but a more indispensable talisman: the potato inherited from his mother. The potato is usually referred to at significant moments: in the early morning when Bloom leaves home to purchase the kidney for breakfast, when he sees Blazes Boylan and tries to avoid him after lunch, and when he encounters seduction and disgrace in the red-light district at midnight. In the course of his wanderings, indeed, Bloom feels strongly reliant on this heirloom. As a talisman, the potato empowers Bloom to avert evil, but when it is taken away in “Circe,” Bloom is exposed to hallucination and humiliation. For a long time, this shriveled potato is regarded as a talisman, corresponding to the moly Hermes gives Odysseus to protect him from Circe’s magic;¹ James Joyce depicts this in his text, and Joyceans have suggested as much.² But where does the “magic” of this talismanic moly come from? As is commonly known, since its introduction into Ireland in the sixteenth century, the potato has struck roots and made a home there, playing an indispensable part in the social, cultural, and economic life of the island, and becoming the most crucial element of Irish daily life. While the potato has long

¹ It is interesting to note that the potato and the moly bear some similarities in colors. The potato produces colored- or dark-skinned tubers and white flowers (or colored flowers in shades of red, pink, blue, or purple), and the moly, according to Frank Budgen, is “a plant with dark roots and milk-white blossom” (1960: 228).

² Budgen, for example, explains that Bloom’s potato would serve as “a physical symbol” of the moly that saves him “from a surrender of his humanity” (1960: 230). Craig Carver argues that a possibility for the magical herb could be the shriveled potato, whose powers Bloom trusts to (1975: 415). Don Gifford and Robert J. Seidman note that Bloom parts in “Circe” with his talismanic potato, in contrast to Odysseus who keeps the moly with him (1988: 500). Richard Ellmann has it that “the most literal expression of Moly is Bloom’s potato” (as cited in Sims, 1989: 245). Julieann Ulin suggests that the potato Bloom possesses “is mythically aligned with the magical herb, the ‘moly,’ which protects Odysseus from Circe” (2011: 57).

sustained the lives of the Irish, it has also failed them at critical moments: the potato failures in the mid-nineteenth century led to the devastating Great Famine. Why does Joyce depict in *Ulysses* a reminder of the Famine, and thus a symbol of betrayal, as a talisman for his modern Odysseus?³ Gifford and Seidman's note on the potato further complicates the question: "A talisman, symbolic of the continuity of life and, in Jewish tradition, a central dish in the ritual meal after a funeral. The potato is also a reminder of the staple food of the Irish peasant and of the potato blight that triggered the famine" (1988: 71). Gifford and Seidman point out that the potato plays an important part in Irish history and Jewish tradition, but why it is talismanic and emblematic of the continuity of life is left unexplained, nor are their sources documented. The humble potato in Bloom's pocket, a talisman replete with significances carried by an Irish Jew, seems more mysterious than we have thought.

In spite of the mysteries surrounding the potato, curiously, research into this field is in short supply.⁴ That the shriveled tuber

³ During his stay in Trieste, Joyce lectured and wrote about Ireland. In one of his lectures, Joyce told a parable about the peasantry's habit of "eat[ing] symbolically" in the context of the government's "sow[ing] hunger" and leaving Ireland waste: the peasant family "sit round a rustic table as if it were an altar," and a herring which could feed the whole family is suspended from the ceiling; the master "arms himself with a *potato*" and "makes the sign of the cross," and the rest of the family follow and perform "the same trick so that at the end the members . . . find themselves left contemplating a *potato* in their hands, and the herring . . . is destined to be mummified for posterity." Joyce ended his parable with an ironic remark: "The peasants are gluttons for [this habit of eating symbolically], and stuff their bellies full" (as cited in Ellmann, 1983: 217; emphasis added). Obviously, Joyce satirizes in this parable the English ruler's exploitation of Ireland and the Church's paralyzing the Irish mind. Central to this parable, it is important to note, is the potato. This may indicate the crucial part the tuber has played in Irish tragedy, but inadvertently it also highlights the potato's indispensability to the subsistence of the peasantry. Ulin reads this parable from the perspective of the Famine, arguing that Joyce is "working with images of the barren wasteland, the government that sows hunger, the potato, and the sign of the cross, all of which invoke the iconography present in nineteenth-century popular histories of the Irish Famine" (2011: 23).

⁴ Seldom does the potato occupy the center of critical attention. The few earlier studies referring to it focus on the correspondences between Bloom's potato and

corresponds to the talismanic moly has long been taken for granted, while its significances have been left largely unexplored. For decades since the emergence of the Joyce industry, Robert Merritt’s remains the *only* research to tackle the mysteries of the potato. In “Faith and Betrayal: The Potato in *Ulysses*,” an article published nearly three decades ago, Merritt refers to the anthropologist Redcliffe N. Salaman’s study and the mid-nineteenth-century potato blight, arguing that the tuber acts as both a protective mascot and a symbol of betrayal in Joyce’s text (1990: 269-276). Merritt’s research unveils part of the mysteries concerning the potato: Joyce may have incorporated folk superstitions to make it a talisman (though the question as to why the potato is believed to be talismanic in folklore is left unanswered). Probably owing to its focus on the motifs of faith and betrayal and hence the potato’s association with Ireland’s tragic past, Merritt’s shortish article provides very few histories and sources to account for the potato’s multifarious meanings, nor does it address the issue of the Jewish tradition which Gifford and Seidman mention. Inspired by but attempting to complement Merritt as well as Gifford and Seidman, this paper aims to investigate the significances of the potato in *Ulysses* by tracing the cultural heritages that have endowed it with various implications, including the Andean, the Spanish, the Irish, and the Jewish.

II. A Brief History of the Potato

Before investigating the potato’s significances in Joyce’s text, it is necessary to learn of the story of this crop and its role in human history. Indigenous to South America, the potato was farmed in the

the moly (e.g. Carver, 1975: 414-422). Recent studies, on the other hand, tend to regard it as a reminder of the Great Irish Famine. Ulin, as is clear from her reading of the parable, argues that Bloom’s shriveled tuber “bears a complex relation to the Famine imagery throughout *Ulysses*” (2011: 55). Bonnie Roos sees the tuber as “a conspicuous, palpable sign of the Famine” (2006: 177). Luke Gibbons holds the view that the potato Bloom carries around with him touches off his “intermittent memories of the Famine and its ghoulish legacy in Ireland” (2015: 189).

Andes as early as seven or eight thousand years ago (Reader, 2009: 4; Stuart, 1923: 369; Zuckerman, 1998: 4). It is a hardy and tenacious plant, and this quality proves to be a precious benefit on the altiplano, for anything that grows in the Andes has to acclimatize to the poor soil, chilly wind, and precipitous topography that hinder the growth of many plants. Human survival in the region was closely bound to this tough and nutritious tuber. The natives would preserve part of the harvest and make *chuño*, a freeze-dried preparation of the potato, which could be stored for up to ten years, an excellent insurance against famine (Zuckerman, 1998: 5-6). The potato, simply put, has long been at the center of the Andean diet: an indispensable food for the highland natives in their daily lives and during times of scarcity. So important was this plant that the Andean natives held it “in such regard as to be almost sacred” (Watts, 2007: 301).

The Andes remained this invaluable tuber’s exclusive home until its encounter with the Europeans. The Spanish ran across the potato in the 1530s, and brought it home no later than 1570, after their conquest of Peru (Salaman, 1985: 143; Stuart, 1923: 371; Zuckerman, 1998: xii, 5). By 1600, the potato had entered many European countries, but did not achieve the status it had in the Andean altiplano. Clergymen and priests banned their parishioners from planting the spud for the reason that it was not mentioned in the Bible, while the *Encyclopædia Britannica* described it as a “demoralising esculent” further associating the plant with impiety and immorality (Grieve, 1971: 654; Reader, 2009: 111; Salaman, 1985: 244; Smith, 2011: 29-30). The prejudice attached to the potato was also incited by herbalists, who classified the new plant under the *Solanaceae* family, whose notorious members include the deadly nightshade and bittersweet; this classification led to the belief that the potato was narcotic and poisonous, a view long held (Grieve, 1971: 655; Salaman, 1985: 112, 119).⁵ Some early seventeenth-

⁵ Actually, the stalks, leaves, vines, sprouts, and green berries do possess the narcotic and poisonous properties of the nightshade, and when the tuber is exposed to daylight or turns green on the surface, it becomes poisonous as well (Grieve, 1971:

century publications even stated that the potato was a source of leprosy, dysentery, and other diseases (Marks, 2010: 482; Salaman, 1985: 108-109; Smith, 2011: 28).⁶ Nonsensical though some of these beliefs may be, they nonetheless signify the popular fear that attached to a new type of food never before encountered; eating this previously unknown tuber was not merely a venture in food consumption, but an audacious break with social convention and long-lasting tradition, hence necessarily accompanied by risk, guilt, and fear (Salaman, 1985: 115-116). For some time, these doubts and anxieties prevented Europeans from seeing the potato as food, let alone an invaluable staple.

It was the Irish who first accepted the potato as food. The potato reached Ireland at a critical moment when material deprivation was haunting the entire country (Salaman, 1985: 243). The peasantry had also nourished fears for the unknown esculent after its introduction into Ireland;⁷ unlike the other Europeans, however, the Irish seemed to overcome those fears more rapidly on account of the pressure of extreme want (115). The abject poverty of the peasantry, combined with climatic and soil conditions which favored potato cultivation, eventually made Ireland the classical home—though an adopted one—of potato culture. There is no certainty as to when the tuber became the dominant staple.⁸ But it is undisputed that it had been cultivated during the early 1600s and

654; Watts, 2007: 301).

⁶ According to Donald Watts, that the skin of the potato reminded people of the effects of leprosy might account for the belief that eating potatoes caused leprosy (2007: 302-303).

⁷ In Ireland, there were a considerable number of folk customs as regards the planting and harvesting of the potato. These customs could be seen as forms of expiation for the guilt of eating a forbidden foodstuff (Salaman, 1985: 115-118).

⁸ Historians hold divergent views on the date of the potato’s establishment as the country’s major diet. Salaman believes that the tuber had become the staple article of the people’s food as early as the 1630s (1985: 189). John Reader argues that the potato diet was not established until the latter part of the seventeenth century (2009: 144). Larry Zuckerman has it that the spud became the chief staple by 1780 (1998: 35).

surfaced as a field crop in the 1640s (Reader, 2009: 144; Salaman, 1985: 243; Zuckerman, 1998: 19). Over the years, the potato had gradually, but definitely, entangled itself in every aspect of the people's life, exercising profound influence on their subsistence and livelihood. Whilst Ireland has had a long and intimate relationship with the potato since its arrival in the 1580s, it was not until the nineteenth century that the esculent achieved widespread popularity in the rest of Europe (Reader, 2009: 111; Salaman, 1985: 157). As hardship pushed the tuber to dominance in Ireland, afflictions also helped the unpopular spud gain extensive acceptance in other European countries: it emerged as the staple of the northeastern European diet after a series of crop failures in 1839 and 1840 (Marks, 2010: 483). This food crisis initiated the reliance of European Jews upon the hardy and hearty tuber: socially inferior and financially vulnerable, they consumed potatoes from then on in even greater numbers than their non-Jewish neighbors (483). For the Irish and Jews alike, it was poverty and food scarcity which contributed to the emergence and prevalence of the potato, in spite of the time lag in their acceptance of the spud as food. Through the potato's eyes, indeed, we can observe countless details of social phenomena and historical changes that unfold in remarkable ways.

III. Positive Aspects of the Potato: Survival, Fertility, and Virility

While an unseemly esculent whose edible tuber lies invisible underground, the potato has played an essential part in human history. In *Ulysses*, the potato seems also lowly and trivial: most of the time it is left in Bloom's hip pocket, hidden from and unnoticed by other Dubliners; neglected, if not forgotten, by readers; yet seen as talismanic by Joyce's modern-day Odysseus. Only in "Calypso," "Lestrygonians," and "Circe" is the shriveled potato mentioned, though references to potatoes can also be found in "Sirens," "Cyclops," "Oxen of the Sun," "Eumaeus," and "Penelope." The

potato appears first in “Calypso,” the episode in which Bloom’s day begins, an episode starting with, and abundant in, food: we are told of Bloom’s preference for the inner organs of beasts and fowls, and observe him busy in the kitchen, preparing breakfast for Molly and feeding the cat (Joyce, 1986: 45). Afterwards he buys a kidney at the butcher’s, fries it, and relishes his generous breakfast of tea, bread, and pork (48-54). It is when Bloom leaves home for the kidney that the potato makes its debut: “On the doorstep he felt in his hip pocket for the latchkey. Not there. In the trousers I left off. Must get it. Potato I have” (46). Making its first appearance with the protagonist in an episode that features food, the potato *is* also food, an important staple that sustains human lives (though Bloom does not consume this foodstuff until the “Sirens” episode). For Bloom, the potato as a means of subsistence lies both in the literal and the metaphorical sense: it provides not only dietetic nourishment but psychological sustenance. Significantly, the potato is mentioned along with the latchkey: Bloom intends to carry both, but never fetches the latter despite his reminder to himself. Throughout that day, he remains a keyless wanderer carrying only the potato. That the potato is left in the pocket in which the latchkey should be likewise placed, along with the fact that Bloom remembers the one but forgets the other, subtly associates the shriveled tuber with some sort of key—the key to his survival in the hostile Dublin community—hence even more important than the latchkey to 7 Eccles Street. One of the significances of the potato, indeed, resides in its intimate connection with human survival: it has allowed Bloom to withstand predicaments that confront him in Dublin, as it had helped the indigenous Andeans, the Irish, and the European Jews tide over the hardships of life.

As mentioned earlier, the potato had been indispensable to subsistence in the Andes, where the natives saw it as the most important crop and prepared *chuño* for emergencies. Not only individual families but also the government stored *chuño*: the Inca Empire constructed and managed vast government storehouses that

were stocked with sufficient amounts of *chuño* to prevent famine for up to several years (Smith, 2011: 14-15). Providing the principal energy source for the people, *chuño* made possible Andean civilization and the Inca Empire (McNeill, 1999: 70). While the potato had been invaluable in its native land, it had been similarly instrumental after its arrival in Ireland, its adopted home. At the beginning of its adoption as food, the esculent served as a backup during shortages, seen as a supplementary food through the winter or a standby against famine when grain harvests failed (Reader, 2009: 147; Zuckerman, 1998: 19-20). In other words, it was when calamity struck the impoverished land that the value of the potato was perceived most clearly: the tuber offered the poor and needy a chance of warding off the hunger and pestilence which threatened their lives, eventually winning general popularity in the entire country (Salaman, 1985: 220-221; Zuckerman, 1998: 33). Irish poverty was alleviated to some extent by this wholesome if monotonous diet. By the 1840s, the tuber “provided over 50 per cent of the population with an adequate and healthy diet” (Kinealy, 2002: 18). Although the potato did not gain widespread acceptance in the rest of Europe until the nineteenth century, Europeans did consume it in times of crisis. In Spain, the spud was adopted by peasants and soldiers during the War of the Spanish Succession (1701-14), which produced one of the worst famines in European history and led to the abandonment of the long-held prejudice against the potato (Smith, 2011: 30). By the same token, it was to survive food shortages that the Jews adopted the potato diet, which provided an inexpensive and wholesome fare to feed the famished and underprivileged Jewish population that lived in gloomy conditions. From the mid-nineteenth century onward, the Jews’ reliance on the tuber as a new staple item had increased dramatically; they planted, stored, and subsisted on potatoes, especially during hard times and the winter, and their dependence upon the newly adopted esculent was comparable with that of the Irish (Cooper, 1993: 146-147, 152-153; Marks, 2010: 483).

Essential to human survival, the potato had been indispensable to the Andeans, the Irish, and the Jews alike. For the impoverished Irish peasants in particular, it was the only available staple: they relied almost exclusively on this esculent. Owing to such an exceptional reliance, the potato became—as is generally known—identified with Ireland. So connected with subsistence is the tuber that it seems natural for the Irish—Bloom included, who sees Ireland as his nation—to deem it a talisman. As mentioned previously, Bloom touches his talisman on the doorstep of his house before leaving home in “Calypso” (Joyce, 1986: 46). The reason behind this gesture does not surface until the “Nausicaa” episode, in which Bloom muses over the danger of seafaring and thinks of good-luck charms: “Off he sails with a scapular or a medal on him for luck. Well. And the tephilim no what’s this they call it poor papa’s father had on his door to touch” (310). Two religious traditions are referred to in Bloom’s musing. According to Gifford and Seidman, sailing with a scapular or a medal is a Catholic tradition: “sailors wear sacred medals or cloth badges symbolic of a saint’s protective presence”; and the word Bloom is looking for is *mezuzah*, a piece of parchment containing verses from Deuteronomy, “placed in a small case on the right-hand doorpost of Jewish households,” and “touched or kissed by the devout as they enter or leave the house” (1988: 401). Like the scapular or the medal, the *mezuzah* functions as an amulet to ward off evil. An unorthodox Jew though Bloom may be, yet he remembers the Jewish ritual and performs it—probably unconsciously—using as medium an esculent representative of Ireland in place of a parchment inscribed with Hebrew verses. In other words, the potato serves as Bloom’s *mezuzah*. Hugh Kenner observes this “aesthetic of delay” and comments on “the equivalence of the potato and the *mezuzah*”: Bloom “*touches [the potato] as he crosses the threshold [in ‘Calypso’] when a more orthodox Jew would touch the ‘mezuzah,’* all because his mother told him long ago that it would absorb disease from the air” (1987: 79-80; emphasis in the original). It is uncertain whether

Ellen Bloom told her son about the magical function of the potato, but it is indisputable that Leopold regards the heirloom as an amulet and inadvertently performs a Jewish ritual using an Irish symbol.

The talismanic function of the shriveled potato is clearly presented in “Lestrygonians” when Joyce’s modern Odysseus catches a glimpse of Blazes Boylan and tries to avoid him. As Bloom hastily “[makes] for the museum gate with long windy steps,” he rummages in his pockets for the potato:

I am looking for that. Yes, that. Try all pockets.
Handker. *Freeman*. Where did I? Ah, yes. Trousers. Potato.
Purse. Where?

Hurry. Walk quietly. Moment more. My heart.

His hand looking for the where did I put found in his
hip pocket soap lotion have to call tepid paper stuck. Ah
soap there I yes. Gate.

Safe! (Joyce, 1986: 150)

Bloom’s strong reliance on the talismanic potato is fully illustrated by this incident: he searches frantically for it everywhere as if he were about to confront a life-threatening danger and needed this mascot to keep him from the menace posed by Molly’s paramour, who threatens his existence as a *man* in Dublin. As potatoes had historically prevented people from deprivation and starvation, on 16 June 1904 it saves Bloom from the embarrassment of encountering a rival who endangers his position as husband, thus playing a crucial part in relation to his well-being in a city permeated with menace and hostility. Significantly, it is when Bloom searches out the potato that he safely reaches the museum gate and rids himself of Boylan. The synchronism further indicates the great import of the potato with regard to his survival: he needs the mascot—psychologically at least—to maintain his composure and screen himself from intimidation. The potato’s association with talismanic property is overtly indicated again in “Circe,” when Bloom is about to meet with a tram accident:

He looks round, darts forward suddenly. Through rising fog a dragon sandstrewer, travelling at caution, slews heavily down upon him, its huge red headlight winking, its trolley hissing on the wire. The motorman bangs his footgong. . . .

The brake cracks violently. Bloom, raising a policeman’s whitegloved hand, blunders stifflegged out of the track. The motorman . . . yells as he slides past over chains and keys. . . .

Bloom trickleaps to the curbstone and halts again. He brushes a mudflake from his cheek with a parcelled hand. (Joyce, 1986: 355)

John Hunt, in the note on the potato in the online *Joyce Project*, observes that after Bloom’s near collision with the tram, “he reaches instinctively for the potato” (2017). Indeed, when Bloom is safe from the collision, “*he feels his trouser pocket*” immediately for “Poor mamma’s panacea” (Joyce, 1986: 356). As Carver argues: Bloom “thinks that he is saved from the trolley that nearly hits him because he is carrying his potato-charm” (1975: 415). The talismanic potato, so far as Bloom is concerned, guards him from danger literally in this incident, as it has protected him metaphorically from the threat posed by Boylan earlier on.

As mentioned previously, the potato was essential to human survival. However, it did not merely sustain human lives; it helped produce more lives and contributed to population growth. Prolific and nutritious, the potato required little effort to grow, harvest, and consume; potato-growing thus easily supported large families, and population explosions often occurred whenever the spud became a major crop (Smith, 2011: 33-34). In Ireland, the cheap potato encouraged early marriage, which drove up the birthrate; its abundance and nutritional excellence tended to increase fertility and keep down mortality, hence leading to population explosion:⁹ in

⁹ According to M. Umadevi, P. K. S. Kumar, D. Bhowmik, and S. Duraivel., the potato “contains a nitrogenous substance which favors the growth of children”

1780, Ireland had a population of four million, but the number had doubled to eight million by 1841, and the date that rapid doubling began coincided remarkably with the potato's achievement of general dominance throughout the island (Connell, 1962: 60-63; Zuckerman, 1998: 39-40). The tuber also helped feed the population of the rest of Europe and made possible demographic increase in the nineteenth century, especially in central and northeastern Europe (Flandrin, 1999: 355; Teuteberg & Flandrin, 1999: 445). For European Jews in particular, the potato was especially significant: it provided an inexpensive fare to fill the hungry stomachs of the destitute Jewish populace, its availability and popularity corresponding to the phenomenal Jewish population growth—a growth rate more than twice that of their non-Jewish neighbors (Cooper, 1993: 151; Marks, 2010: 483). Without the potato, this population growth might have been impossible.

That the potato contributed to demographic upsurge in Europe is interestingly traceable to the role it played in ancient sacrificial rituals in South America. Archaeological evidence shows that the cultivation of the potato and agricultural fertility rites were inseparably connected: in these rites the tuber symbolized a human being, sacrificed for the purpose of protection against devastating diseases and in hopes of bringing abundant harvests—both closely related to population increase.¹⁰ It is noteworthy that in these rites the potato could be associated with either the male or the female sex: in more ancient rituals, the figures represented in relation to the potato were predominantly male, yet in rites of more recent date the potato was decked as woman and addressed as “the generative mother,” and these customs continued into the Spanish period (Salaman, 1985: 25). Whether being regarded as male or female, the tuber signified productive capacity in these rituals. The association

(2013: 16-17). This also explains why the tuber, as a major staple, contributed to population upsurge.

¹⁰ For details of the archaeological record of the potato in ancient Andean culture, see Salaman (1985: 14-33).

between the potato and fertility has been passed down from ancient times to the present: the native folklore of today tells us that giant twin potato tubers are endowed with special reproductive power (18).¹¹

The potato’s assumed reproductive power was preserved in Europe. The Spanish conquistadores called the plant *turma de tierra*, which means literally an earth-testicle (Salaman, 1985: 129); such a name unmistakably associates it with fertility and virility. Judging from its indispensability to the Andeans, it seems not too far-fetched to name it thus. It is interesting to note that in Europe the potato’s association with virility was due to its being confused with a similar plant: the sweet potato. Unlike the true potato—or *papa* in its original Andean name—which grew on the rude and barren altiplano and is classified botanically under the nightshade family, the sweet potato belongs to the same family as morning glory, and was established as a staple food throughout the lush Caribbean islands and the Central American isthmus, where it was known as *batata*. Europeans chose the sweet potato over the Andean tuber on account of its origin as well as its rareness and expense: the sweet potato was a rich person’s food because Spain was the only country whose climate supported its cultivation (Zuckerman, 1998: 9). Somehow or other, the Spanish fancied *batata* as an aphrodisiac, as did Henry VIII of England (Smith, 2011: 21; Zuckerman, 1998: 9). As both *papa* and *batata* grew underground and looked similar, their names inevitably became confused, and the alleged aphrodisiac qualities of the latter were bestowed upon the former as a result (Reader, 2009: 22; Salaman, 1985: 105). In sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europe, in fact, root vegetables were generally endowed with the attribute of inducing lust: they were said to prompt women to menstruate or lactate, and men to produce sperm (Zuckerman, 1998: 14). The potato’s rumored aphrodisiac qualities,

¹¹ The potato itself, hardy and prolific, was associated with fertility. Departure from the normal, such as being over-sized or twin, was thought to be equipped “with an extra gift” (Salaman, 1985: 30).

as well as its contribution to large families, was referred to by a number of English writers, including William Shakespeare, and this confusion and attribution lasted until the nineteenth century (Reader, 2009: 78; Salaman, 1985: 105; Smith, 2011: 22). So connected with aphrodisiac attributes was the potato that it was not uncommon for physicians to use it as an encouragement to fecundity (Reader, 2009: 148).¹²

In *Ulysses*, the potato's association with fertility and virility is clear. Bloom panics at the sight of Boylan in the "Lestrygonians" episode because the paramour, who is about to consummate his affair with Molly later that day, threatens Bloom's place as the husband, or more precisely his manhood. Therefore, the intimidated husband needs something symbolic of virility to sustain his endangered manhood, hence his searching in the pockets for the aphrodisiac potato, and this, indeed, is where the talismanic property of the potato resides. When Bloom glimpses Boylan once again in "Sirens," he follows the seducer to the Ormond Hotel, keeping an eye on him while wondering if the rendezvous has passed out of his mind: "At four. Has he forgotten? Perhaps a trick. Not come: whet appetite. I couldn't do. Wait, wait" (Joyce, 1986: 219). Boylan does not forget the tryst, and Bloom is left in the restaurant, having his meal of liver and bacon: "In liver gravy Bloom mashed mashed potatoes" (222). It is noteworthy that Bloom does not *eat* the earth-testicle but *mashes* it, as if his masculinity was to be mashed owing to cuckoldry. Bloom's act of mashing the already mashed potatoes suggests further the impending endangerment of his manhood. In spite of his psychological reliance on the talismanic potato, it is "*shrivelled*" (388), indicative of his shrunken virility and wasted prolificacy: he begot merely two children, only one of whom survives—a contrast to the procreative Simon Dedalus who begot

¹² Despite its Spanish name as earth-testicle, the potato's association with both male and female productive power—or its doubleness—seemed evident in Europe as well, though it was more often associated with male attributes owing to its appearance.

fifteen children, and an anomaly in prolific Ireland where fruitfulness was the norm. When Molly, in the “Penelope” episode, suspects an affair between Bloom and the domestic servant Mary Driscoll, and accuses Mary of “stealing my potatoes and the oysters” (609), we may assume that what really exasperates the mistress is the servant’s theft of her man rather than her foodstuffs—as both the tuber and the seafood are believed to be aphrodisiac.

The potato’s connection with aphrodisiac is even more obvious in “Circe.” Bloom encounters Zoe in the Nighttown, an English prostitute who accosts him, caresses his groin, and arrogates the potato:

His skin, alert, feels her fingertips approach. A hand glides over his left thigh. . . .

Her hand slides into his left trouser pocket and brings out a hard black shrivelled potato. She regards it and Bloom with dumb moist lips. . . .

She puts the potato greedily into a pocket then links his arm, cuddling him with supple warmth. He smiles uneasily.
(Joyce, 1986: 388-389)

Bloom’s encounter with the prostitute, as the stage directions reveal, is saturated with sensuality and eroticism. That her hand glides over his crotch and brings out the earth-testicle associates to a considerable degree the potato with his “nuts” (388). After his separation from the symbolic testicle, Bloom, without the protection of his talisman, is subject to humiliating hallucinations: he turns at first into “the world’s greatest reformer” (392), the “undoubted emperor-president and king-chairman, the most serene and potent and very puissant ruler of this realm” (393), but is then diagnosed “bisexually abnormal” (402) and reduced to a beast, or a “Dungdevourer” (433), and finally “unmanned” (436) in the brothel by Bella/Bello, the “massive whoremistress” (429). The course of Bloom’s degeneration implies, to some extent, the sequence of being deprived of manliness: he endeavors to be as grand as he can at the outset, but the inflated grandeur is soon wrecked, and the

“unmanned” person is degraded and humiliated as a result. Roos interprets Odysseus’s god-given moly as a gift of masculinity, which allows the wandering hero “to reestablish male dominance and exploit Circe sexually” (2006: 174); Joyce’s modern Odysseus, Roos argues, also possesses his moly/masculinity “in the form of a potato he carries in his pocket” (175). Indeed, the potato *is* symbolic of the testicle. Once his talismanic potato/masculinity is forfeited, the modern Odysseus loses his male dominance and falls prey to persecution and exploitation. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that the “unmanned” and “bisexually abnormal” Bloom, being the original potato-holder, turns meanwhile into a fecund mother bearing “*eight male yellow and white children*” (Joyce, 1986: 403), as though the loss of the symbolic testicle brought out his feminine properties. Like the potato in ancient Andean culture, Bloom is endowed with qualities of both sexes, or a “womanly man” (403). It is uncertain whether Joyce had knowledge of the potato’s history, but his depiction of the androgynous Bloom is curiously reminiscent of the doubleness of the potato in ancient Peruvian culture.

Not until Bloom retrieves the potato from Zoe does he release himself from the spell of hallucinations and regain his manhood: “Give me back that potato, will you?” (Joyce, 1986: 453). To grant Bloom’s request, Zoe “*hauls up a reef of her slip, revealing her bare thigh, and unrolls the potato from the top of her stocking*” (453). Merritt argues that the potato acts as a surrogate for Bloom, which has passed from his groin to Zoe’s and back again, thus symbolically performing the rite of sexual intercourse and protecting Bloom from actual infidelity with the prostitute (1990: 273). The potato’s circulation between Bloom’s and Zoe’s groins, undeniably, suggests to some extent sexual intercourse. The connection between the potato and virility cannot be more manifest here. Hunt observes that although Bloom temporarily loses his protective moly, “*he regains the potato just as he regains his manhood*: he breaks the spell of the nymph, rebukes Bella, takes the potato back from Zoe, and then makes sure that Stephen is not cheated of his money, earning Bella’s

admiration” (2017; emphasis added). The potato, in short, is closely related to masculinity. This talismanic symbol of virility is necessary to Joyce’s modern-day Odysseus, as his parting with it in the Nighttown leads to his loss of manhood.

Essential to survival and representative of fertility and virility, the potato had played an indispensable part in Ireland. For a long time, the Irish had not only consumed it as the major, or even the sole, dietary staple, but also used it for other purposes, such as feeding livestock and making starch (McHugh, 1994: 393). The esculent was so important in the family and social life of the people that legends and superstitions began to develop and spread. This also explains in part why Bloom regards the shriveled tuber as a talisman. Although actual facts concerning who, when, and how the potato was introduced into Ireland have never been verified, legend has it that Sir Walter Raleigh, in the 1590s, brought it to his estate at Youghal, County Cork (Grieve, 1971: 654; Salaman, 1985: 147-148; Zuckerman, 1998: 19).¹³ As many aspects of the peasants’ life were related to it,¹⁴ the potato has acquired a more individual and intimate position in folklore.¹⁵ More importantly, healing powers have been bestowed upon the magical spud. A dried tuber carried in the pocket or suspended from the neck is believed to be a sure protection against rheumatism; if one is unfortunately afflicted with it, it can be treated by poulticing the affected area or immersing sore joints in water in which potatoes have been cooked.¹⁶ As mentioned

¹³ The legend of Sir Walter Raleigh has been dismissed by most scientific writers, but Salaman argues that the story is not entirely improbable, and to refute it summarily is to abjure tradition and neglect contemporary evidence (1985: 157). For the controversy regarding the Raleigh legend, see Salaman (1985: 147-157).

¹⁴ According to Zuckerman, the potato “affected everything from housekeeping to attitudes toward marriage to the length people grew their thumbnails” (1998: 18).

¹⁵ For example, the turning red of the flesh of the seed potato was thought to be recording the death of a child, namely, its removal from this world. See Salaman (1985: 118).

¹⁶ Remedies for rheumatism are the best-known, but there are more for other

earlier, ancient Andeans used the potato in fertility rites as a symbol of protection against devastating diseases (Salaman, 1985: 31);¹⁷ by the same token the Irish deemed it an amulet to ward off illnesses and ailments. For Andean natives and the Irish alike, the potato had been an all-important plant, crucial to their existence and daily life. It seems therefore unsurprising that legendary accounts and folk remedies are attached to the seemingly inconspicuous tuber. These folk beliefs, as William George Black argues, belong to culture; they represent the last resort when people are out of means, and remain “imbedded in the common speech and thought of every-day life” (1883: 212-213). Black’s argument is echoed by Bloom’s musing on seafaring and superstition in “Nausicaa”: “Something in all those superstitions because when you go out never know what dangers. Hanging on to a plank or astride of a beam for grim life, lifebelt round him, gulping salt water, and that’s the last of his nibs till the sharks catch hold of him” (Joyce, 1986: 310). For Bloom, the scapular and sacred medal, the *mezuzah*, and the potato all function as the lifebelt, or the plank for people to hang on to for grim life: as talismans, they provide psychological support for believers, and are thought to bring good luck and produce magical or miraculous effects. These beliefs might be deemed superstitious, but not at all meaningless or pointless.

Some of the folk beliefs are referred to in Joyce’s text. In the hallucinatory and phantasmagoric episode of “Circe,” Bloom

ailments. To carry a peeled potato in the pocket of the same side as an aching tooth will cure the ache as soon as the tuber is reduced to crumbs; sore throat can be treated with a poultice of boiled potatoes in a sock; the raw potato is a treatment for ulcers and severe back pain, and so forth (Black, 1883: 182; Grieve, 1971: 655; Hatfield, 2003: 276-277; Salaman, 1985: 118; Watts, 2007: 302). Nonsensical though these folk remedies may sound, yet recent experiments show that the potato *is* medicinal: the potato is very rich in vital mineral salts that eliminate uric acid, and thus helps relieve rheumatism, arthritis, and gout (Umadevi et al., 2013: 16, 19).

¹⁷ Incan communities also used the potato in daily life for healing broken bones and relieving rheumatism and indigestion (Umadevi et al., 2013: 17).

remarks on the legend of Raleigh: “Sir Walter Raleigh brought from the new world that potato . . . a killer of pestilence by absorption” (Joyce, 1986: 390). Bloom’s remark illustrates the wide spread and deep-rootedness of the Raleigh legend in Ireland, which is generally accepted by the people as true despite controversies regarding it. The remark also reveals the strong faith the Irish have in the potato, seen as “a killer of pestilence,” namely an amulet that fends off diseases, or a cure-all that heals illnesses. The descendant of a Jew, Bloom is slighted and rejected throughout the day by his anti-Semitic fellow Dubliners, and yet the fact that he has incorporated what is widely believed in Ireland—along with the fact that he carries with him an object representative of Erin—demonstrates that he does belong there, as he claims in “Cyclops” that Ireland is his nation because “[he] was born [there]” (272). The belief in the potato as a killer of pestilence is touched upon once again in “Circe,” when Bloom is cast for the part of Jesus Christ going for crucifixion, and the daughters of Erin kneel down and pray:

Kidney of Bloom, pray for us
Flower of the Bath, pray for us
Mentor of Menton, pray for us
Canvasser for the Freeman, pray for us
Charitable Mason, pray for us
.....
Potato Preservative against Plague and Pestilence, pray for
us (407)

What is noteworthy in this prayer is that “Flower of the Bath,” “Canvasser for the Freeman,” “Charitable Mason,” and so forth—all of them aliases of Leopold Bloom—are juxtaposed with “Potato Preservative against Plague and Pestilence.” “Potato” thus becomes another identity of Bloom. As Bloom in this hallucinatory scene acts the part of Jesus Christ, “Potato” is therefore synonymous with the Christ, the Savior of humankind. Ulin argues that the final title bestowed upon Bloom “places him in the position of martyred Savior from catastrophes” (2011: 55). In fact, not only Bloom but

the potato, “Preservative against Plague and Pestilence,” is placed in the position of the Savior. Judging from the special position the potato has long held in Irish society, it is perfectly understandable that the esculent is exalted to such a high status. The faith people have in the potato explains why Bloom calls the shriveled tuber inherited from his mother “Poor mamma’s *panacea*” (Joyce, 1986: 356; emphasis added) and values highly the “Heirloom” (388): for the Irish, indeed, the potato is equivalent to a magical plant, a remedy for all ills and difficulties, hence an invaluable treasure, or the moly, to Joyce’s modern Odysseus. Illustrating the potato’s talismanic potency as Bloom regains from Zoe his moly, Hunt concludes that “the potato holds some kind of power to ward off evil or disease” (2017). For Peter Sims, the “evil or disease” refers to the venereal disease Bloom might be infected with via intercourse with prostitutes in the brothel; the potato, providing “the supernatural protection of a charm,” therefore functions as a prophylactic, or a “hygienic talisman” for “the phallus’s protection” (1989: 245). Sims’s argument is echoed to some degree by Merritt’s observation that the potato, as Bloom’s surrogate, prevents him from actual intercourse with prostitutes (1990: 273). In other words, the potato fends off evil and disease for Bloom. It is in this respect that the potato as a panacea or killer of pestilence is manifest in the evil-and-disease-saturated Nighttown. The curative effect of this killer of pestilence is also mentioned in “Oxen of the Sun” when someone asks, “Spud again the rheumatiz?” (Joyce, 1986: 347), a popular and long-lasting folkloric belief imbedded in Irish mind. So greatly trusted is the potato that it seems reasonable for Joyce to depict it as the moly and for Bloom to regard it as a talisman. In “Lestrygonians,” accordingly, when Bloom senses threat and danger, he searches frantically in his pockets for the potato: “Trousers. Potato. Purse. Where?” (150). He relies on the talismanic tuber to defend himself against the Plague and Pestilence that has bothered him throughout that day—Blazes Boylan, Molly’s paramour.

IV. Negative Aspects of the Potato: Exploitation, Poverty, and the Famine

In spite of the fact that the potato, being associated with fertility and virility, has long nourished the Irish, the magical plant has paradoxically exploited the peasantry and reduced them to extreme poverty and ultimate misery—as what happened in the Andes after the sixteenth century. When the Spanish conquistadores arrived in South America, they realized the potato’s economic importance at once and regarded it as food for slaves: *chuño* was fed to conscript miners who, before long, filled the rest of the world with an unprecedented amount of silver (McNeill, 1999: 70; Salaman, 1985: 101). The important role the potato had long played in the high Andes, after the conquest of Peru, led to the aborigines’ exploitation by the Spanish: the slave labor fed on the potato, and Spanish conquerors grew rich by supplying potatoes to the miners. In Europe, the immediate political effect of this silver rush was that it allowed King Phillip II and his successors to pay for Spain’s imperial fleets and armies (McNeill, 1999: 70). In other words, the potato made possible Spanish prosperity and the Spanish domination of the seas, acting as an invaluable agent in the exploitation of indigenous laborers in the mines. As John Reader comments, it is no fault of the potato that it offers a filling, healthful, and nutritious meal, but this innocent tuber undoubtedly helped perpetuate the Spanish exploitation of native Andeans (2009: 14). After its introduction into Europe, the potato also facilitated exploitation when it was popularly cultivated and accepted. As mentioned previously, the Irish climate and soil favorable to potato cultivation provided obvious advantages that contributed to the potato’s initial adoption by a land-hungry and colonized population lacking in material wealth.¹⁸ However, the easy cultivation and high productivity of

¹⁸ Food production per acre of the potato, according to Ruth-Ann M. Harris, was around four times greater than that of grain crops (1999: 4). This high production, along with the fact that the natural environments of Ireland were advantageous to

the potato led to the unthought-of condition of English landlords demanding higher rents: as a small plot of land was sufficient for peasant folks to cultivate potatoes and raise a family, landlords considered it reasonable to raise the already excessive rents as tenants could now afford the increase (Merritt, 1990: 274). A vicious cycle was formed consequently: the more the Irish depended on the potato, the more destitute they became. As Eric B. Ross comments: “The potato, an essential element of the English system in Ireland, thus was used as a convenient scapegoat by the beneficiaries of the very system that had encouraged its increasing prominence” (as cited in Lowe-Evans, 1989: 16). Nourishing *and* exploiting at the same time, the potato was in effect a convenient scapegoat for the rulers. Despite the fact that the potato had long sustained the Irish and contributed to population growth, complete dependence on it led ironically to further exploitation and destitution, just as the indigenous Andeans’ reliance on it resulted in their abuse by the Spanish conquistadors.¹⁹

This reminder of colonial exploitation is, naturally and inevitably, associated with lowly status and hence poverty. So far as the Europeans were concerned, the fact that their New World underlings subsisted on this strange tuber linked it necessarily to the abject and inferior (Zuckerman, 1998: 7). After its introduction to Europe, the potato never shed its lowly image. As a matter of fact, when Europeans began to cultivate the spud, it was fed to farm animals rather than consumed by humans, and only in the face of abject poverty did the peasantry—against the instructions of the Church—adopt the quickly and abundantly growing tuber as their diet (Marks, 2010: 482; Smith, 2011: 31). Accordingly, the potato

potato farming, conduced to the widespread popularity of this adopted esculent.

¹⁹ As Salaman reports, native silver-workers fed “almost exclusively on *chuño*.” The middlemen from Spain bought it cheaply from the producer, sold it at a high price to the slave workers, and “returned home with their ill-gotten fortunes.” This form of sustaining slave labor “had been adopted in all the Spanish mines in Peru and elsewhere,” where untold thousands of slaves “are said to have perished by reason of their ill-treatment in [the] deep and dust-laden galleries” (1985: 40-41).

was welcomed more warmly in poor areas than in fertile plains where wheat flourished (Teuteberg & Flandrin, 1999: 444-445). Its lowly status, well established, meant it was inseparable from abjection and poverty. As mentioned above, ironically, the more peasants relied on it, the poorer they became: their exploitation by the colonial landed classes reduced the already destitute to greater destitution. The potato, in this light, has been a reminder of exploitation *and* an indicator of poverty, the two closely related to each other. Irish suffering and deprivation continued, if not intensified, by means of this innocent tuber. Salaman is convincing in stating that “for close on 300 years the potato both stabilized and perpetuated the misery of the Irish masses”: “by reducing the cost of living to the lowest possible limit, it caused the value of labour to fall to a corresponding level,” meanwhile permitting, or even encouraging, an ever-growing population (1985: 343).²⁰ Exploited, impoverished, and overpopulated, Ireland could only be reduced to complete destitution, and exemplify what Stephen Dedalus describes as “the old sow that eats her farrow” (Joyce, 1964: 203)—and what fed up the old sow was the potato. For a long time, undeniably, the talismanic potato had nourished the Irish, and yet it was also implicated in Ireland’s inescapable poverty and suffering.

The potato’s association with exploitation and poverty is subtly hinted at in *Ulysses*. Undeniably, when Bloom was wandering the streets of Dublin in 1904, the role the potato played in Irish economy was not as predominant as it had been owing to the increase of food varieties after the mid-nineteenth century, but its legacy lasted: Dublin was still a city haunted by misery and deprivation. In “Leistrygonians,” the episode of food, hunger, and

²⁰ While critics generally agree that the potato contributed to rapid population increase in Ireland, Louis M. Cullen has a different view. Cullen argues that the potato’s role in Irish history is “a passive rather than an active one,” and its widening cultivation and consumption should be seen as “fitting into a process of population growth already under way” instead of “a cause of that growth” (1968: 82). Whether or not it caused the population explosion before the mid-nineteenth century, the potato was intimately associated with that explosion.

starvelings, Bloom makes this remark when he casts a glance at Dilly outside Dillon's auctionrooms: "Good Lord, that poor child's dress is in flitters. Underfed she looks too. Potatoes and marge, marge and potatoes. It's after they feel it. Proof of the pudding. Undermines the constitution" (Joyce, 1986: 125). Stephen's sister and one of the procreative Simon's daughters, Dilly is waiting for her father in order to secure some money. Bloom's observation that the girl is starved and malnourished is correct: Dilly and her sisters are suffering from hunger on 16 June 1904, trying their best to feed themselves, while their father and brother squander their money on alcohol. Despite his accurate observation and sympathy for the girl, Bloom is in error in seeing potatoes as innutritious. The potato, as mentioned earlier, provides a substantially wholesome and nourishing meal. What gives Dilly the "underfed" look is not the consumption of potatoes, but the lack of food. Erroneous as Bloom's assessment of the potato diet may be, yet his associating the tuber with the needy highlights the fact that the potato has never shed its image as food for the poor. Heartrendingly, Dilly and her sisters are deprived even of the food for the poor: juvenile, resourceless, and underprivileged, they represent the bottommost victims of colonial rule, exploited by British colonizers and neglected by their frustrated elders. Their starvation and malnutrition therefore seem inevitable. Dilly is not the only starveling in this episode, though. In the course of his chat with Mrs. Breen, Bloom steals a glance at "[a] barefoot arab [standing] over the grating, breathing in the fumes" from Harrison's confectionery to "[d]eaden the gnaw of hunger" (129), and "[a] bony form [striding] along the curbstone from the river staring with a rapt gaze into the sunlight" (130). Later, he helps a blind stripling with "thin elbow[s]" and "limp seeing hand[s]" cross the street, the young man's "wallface frown[ing] weakly" upon Bloom's inquiry (148)—another example of undernourishment. All these starved and underfed Dubliners epitomize the poverty and privation the underprivileged are suffering from, in which the potato has involuntarily played a major part. Roos sees the potato as both

“a symbol of Irish subjection” and “a memory of that experience,” closely related to “England’s exploitation” and “Ireland’s economic culpability” (2006: 177). Ironically, this symbol of subjection also serves as an invaluable staple essential to the survival of the deprived Irish.

The severest disaster generated by the potato—or rather by the peasantry’s complete reliance on this sole article of diet—is the Great Irish Famine. In fact, sporadic potato failures had occurred before the mid-nineteenth century, but the affected areas were partial and the number of victims limited. The potato blight of 1845, however, spread wide and fast, resulting in an unprecedented catastrophe that assailed the entire country for several years, known later as the most deadly calamity in modern Irish history. Six successive years of famine brought about complete devastation. Irish population fell by 25 percent, from eight million to six million; among the lost two million, a half died of starvation and disease, and the other half emigrated to England, Canada, the United States, Australia, and other countries. Emigration did not end when the Famine was over. Ongoing emigration, combined with postponed marriage and perpetual celibacy, led to lower marriage rates and birth rates, hence the permanent decline of demographic figures. By 1901, Ireland had a population of only four million, about half the pre-Famine level. The Famine ravished more than the population; its impacts on sociocultural aspects of the island were even more disastrous: the Gaelic language, Irish traditions and customs, communal life and spirit, and many other priceless assets were devastated by this catastrophe.²¹ Salaman comments on the implication of the potato failure in relation to the Irish: “When the crisis came and the potato failed the Irish cultivator, it was more than the loss of food, it was the basis of his whole social system which had been withdrawn; his collapse was inevitable” (1985:

²¹ For studies of the Great Irish Famine, see, for example, Edwards and Williams (1994); Gribben (1999); Kinealy (1997, 2002); Ó Gráda (2000); Woodham-Smith (1991).

342). The potato, indeed, was not simply a dietary article; it was an indispensable part of Irish life and culture. This accounts for the reason that the large-scale potato failures of the mid-1840s brought about the most lethal catastrophe in modern Irish history. As a survivor recalled her Famine experience several decades later: “The year of the Famine, of the bad life and of the hunger, arrived and broke the spirit and strength of the community. . . . These things were lost and completely forgotten. . . . *The Famine killed everything*” (as cited in Kinealy, 1997: 155; emphasis added). Even half a century after the calamity, her description was still poignant, revealing the pain inherent in and the losses consequent upon this tragedy.

In spite of Terry Eagleton’s complaint that the Famine is not in Joyce, it is actually referred to in *Ulysses*.²² Garrett Deasy mentions it in his conversation with Stephen in the “Nestor” episode: “I remember the famine in ’46” (Joyce, 1986: 26). In “Lestrygonians,” Bloom reflects upon the proselytizing activities prevalent during the Famine: “They say they used to give pauper children soup to change to protestants in the time of the potato blight” (148). Certain phrases and images in this episode, such as “The harp that once did starve us all” (137) and “Famished ghosts” (140), are also reminiscent of the tragic event. The nameless Citizen’s chauvinism in “Cyclops” notwithstanding, his assertion that numerous Irish “were driven out of house and home in the black ’47” (270)—either on account of eviction or emigration—is nevertheless historically correct. However scantily, Joyce does refer to the Famine in his text, a tragedy resulting from the potato blight, which gave occasion to starvation, proselytism, eviction, emigration, and death, as what he realistically though infrequently represents in *Ulysses*. The life-saving potato, in this respect, paradoxically acted as the ultimate life-

²² Eagleton argues that Irish major writers seldom write about the Famine *directly*. He asks indignantly, “Where is the Famine in the literature of the Revival? Where is it in Joyce?” (1996: 13). Eagleton’s often-quoted accusation has been challenged by recent critics, though. See, for example, Cusack and Goss (2006).

terminator when the blight destroyed the potato crop, which failed the people who had long entrusted their lives and living to it, just as Bloom is exposed to humiliating hallucinations when the potato is confiscated in the Nighttown by Zoe.

Among the few references to the fatal event in the voluminous *Ulysses*, it is when Old Gummy Granny makes her appearance in “Circe” that an iconic Famine image is most manifestly represented: “*Old Gummy Granny in sugarloaf hat appears seated on a toadstool, the deathflower of the potato blight on her breast*” (Joyce, 1986: 485). As Ulin comments, “the white, milky, feminized potato blossom, traditionally associated with nourishment, becomes the blighted death flower” (2011: 40)—a horrific and ominous image haunting the people when the blight struck Ireland. Saying to Stephen, “You met with poor old Ireland and how does she stand?” (Joyce, 1986: 486), Old Gummy Granny is Ireland personified. Ulin suggests that this personification of Erin recalls the milkwoman in “Telemachus,” but she exemplifies the milkwoman of the Famine version: with the deathflower of the potato blight on it, her breast, shrunken and absent of nourishment, “becomes the site for the Famine’s inscription,” and “continues to embody the memory of the Famine.” What is more, she represents the deceptive mother: “in sitting on a ‘toadstool’ and wearing a ‘sugarloaf hat,’ she embodies death and poison through bewitchment even while promising nourishment (sugarloaf)” (2011: 39). Ulin’s reading recalls Margaret Kelleher’s elucidation of the ambivalent maternal figure represented in many Famine texts: “The archetype of the Great Mother may also manifest itself as the bad or . . . the ‘Terrible Mother’: giver of life and of death, source of nurture and protection, but also possessing the power to deprive, devour or destroy” (1997: 7). Joyce’s representation of Old Gummy Granny reflects the archetypal yet ambivalent maternity during the Famine period: promising her children nourishment, she brings them blight and death instead. Upon seeing this milkwoman of the Famine version, Stephen shouts: “Aha! I know you, gammer! . . . The old sow that eats her farrow!”

(Joyce, 1986: 486). Clearly, Stephen associates her with a betraying mother who fails the ones she is obliged to nurture: rather than nourish them, she destroys them—as the potato failed the Irish when the blight devastated the island. Another incident in this episode also insinuates the Famine. When he mentions the Raleigh legend, Bloom points out that Sir Walter Raleigh brought to Ireland the potato *and* the tobacco weed, the latter “a poisoner of the ear, eye, heart, memory, will, understanding, all” (390). Bloom’s narration seems to suggest two antithetical plants, but as Ulin asserts, “the Famine destabilized this binary by rendering the potato not ‘a killer of pestilence by absorption’ but, in fact, a ‘poisoner of the ear, eye, heart, memory, will, understanding, all’” (2011: 54). Roos also notices the ambivalence of the potato in relation to the Raleigh allusion: “If the potato is a ‘killer of pestilence by absorption,’ able to obstruct future famines by providing a food source for the Irish, the potato is also the source of the Famine because of Ireland’s overwhelming reliance on this single crop” (2006: 181). The potato, indeed, has long been an invaluable esculent sustaining the Irish; however, this nurturer is also a reminder of the deadly Famine, or even an accomplice in it, “a poisoner” of all.

V. The Potato in Everyday Life

For better or for worse, the potato has played an essential part in Irish history. When Joyce composed his texts in the early twentieth century, the spud was still an important, popular, and common esculent, despite the fact that food varieties had greatly increased after the deadly Famine. As K. H. Connell comments: the tuber meant more than nutriment before the Great Hunger, and was never ousted after the tragic event: “For all the agony that followed its failure, there was feeling still for the potato,” and “people were drawn back to it by more than the need for food and bodily comfort.” The Irish eat the potato, Connell argues, “because it is liked, not because it is necessary” (1962: 67-68). More accurately, the Irish are

still attached to the potato diet even after the Famine because they like it wholeheartedly and need it psychologically; it has always been a necessity, in spite of the dwindling of its monopolistic status in the Irish diet.

In Joyce’s representation of Dublin life in 1904, that the potato is still a crucial part in Irish dietary practice and Irish daily life is manifest. We observe in “Sirens” that Bloom has a meal of liver and bacon with mashed potatoes, though he mashes the mashed potatoes instead of eating them. In “Lestrygonians,” one of the hungry eaters at Burton’s orders “Roast and mashed here” (Joyce, 1986: 139). In one of the hallucinatory scenes in “Circe,” the potato is an ingredient of the mutton broth that is spilt all over Deasy (468). In reality and in fantasy, the potato is consumed by Dubliners. The fact that this foodstuff appears in two of the three meals Joyce depicts on 16 June 1904—breakfast in “Calypso,” lunch in “Lestrygonians,” and dinner in “Sirens”—demonstrates the popularity of the tuber in post-Famine Ireland: it is a common food eaten daily by the Irish. As the spud is popularly consumed, scenes like “spherical potatoes” (242) sold in the food market near Barney Kiernan’s pub and “the chip potato variety” (520) vended over in little Italy near the Coombe are therefore ordinary. So common and important is the spud that potato brokerage becomes a business: “potato factors” form their guild, marching with other “guilds and trades and trainbands” (392) when Bloom is crowned in the “Circe” episode. Readily available, the potato, as Joyce depicts comically, may also serve conveniently as a weapon: it is one of the objects the mobsters throw at Bloom in another hallucinatory scene in “Circe” (478). All these references to the potato illustrate the special role it has still played in Irish day-to-day life; it is indispensable to Leopold Bloom on 16 June 1904, as potatoes have long been to his countrymen.

Not only is the potato an essential part in everyday life, but it establishes connections between people. Bloom inherits from his mother, Ellen, the shriveled potato, which he naturally associates with its giver. When he escapes collision with the tram in the red-

light district, Bloom “*feels his trouser pocket*” for “Poor mamma’s panacea” (Joyce, 1986: 356): Bloom regards the dried tuber not simply as a mascot; more importantly, it functions in a subtle sense as Ellen’s double: the mother who guards and protects her child from harm.²³ The intimate connection between Ellen and the tuber is unmistakably represented in “Circe” when she shows up in a hallucinatory scene: “*She hauls up a reef of skirt and ransacks the pouch of her striped blay petticoat. A phial, an Agnus Dei, a shrivelled potato and a celluloid doll fall out*” (358).²⁴ Seen and kept as a talisman by her, the shriveled potato was her belonging, a part of Ellen Bloom, and Leopold treasures it on account of this intimate connection. Therefore, after his brief parting with the inherited potato, Bloom requests Zoe to return it: “It is nothing, but still, a relic of poor mamma”; “There is a memory attached to it. I should like to have it” (453). The potato, in other words, is saturated with memories: Ellen’s own memories and Bloom’s memories of her. Inheriting the potato from his mother, Bloom inherits these memories: the “Heirloom” (388) connects Ellen and Leopold, mother and son. Ulin argues that here for Bloom the potato represents more a personal memory than a cultural inheritance: “Despite all of the cultural associations of the potato with the Famine, Joyce complicates this symbol as Bloom reappropriates the potato physically and psychologically”; his repossession of the heirloom “has

²³ In this sense, the potato also plays the part it has long played in Irish history: nourishing the needy, thus echoing its role as generative mother in Andean culture.

²⁴ Sims observes that the erotic scene in which Zoe returns the potato—“*she hauls up a reef of her slip, revealing her bare thigh, and unrolls the potato from the top of her stocking*” (Joyce, 1986: 453)—is reminiscent of Bloom’s vision of the original appearance of the dried tuber when his mother hauls up her skirt (1989: 247). Like Ellen, Zoe also has the surname, “Higgins” (Joyce, 1986: 387). Hunt suggests that the correlation between Ellen and Zoe may imply the Oedipal origins of Bloom’s sexual desires, or it may indicate that the mother’s gift protects her son “from the Circean allure of the prostitutes” (2017). More accurately, Ellen’s gift protects Bloom because, as mentioned earlier, the potato acts as a surrogate for Bloom and prevents him from actual intercourse with prostitutes.

more to do with a recognition of his familial identity rather than with any memory participation in the Irish Famine” (2011: 56-57). Similarly, Sims suggests that Bloom wants his potato back because “It is not just a question of having things, but of having memory, of having a history, of allowing experience to repeat” (1989: 249). To put it short, the memories attached to the potato are both cultural and personal, though the reason Bloom requests its return from Zoe is certainly more personal than cultural.

The potato establishes connections not only between the mother and son. As Molly recalls in “Penelope,” Bloom’s first attempt at a proposal of marriage was accompanied by the tuber: “he was on the pop of asking me too the night in the kitchen I was rolling the potato cake theres something I want to say to you only for I put him off letting on I was in a temper with my hands and arms full of pasty flour” (Joyce, 1986: 612). Although Bloom did not pose the question that night in view of Molly’s temper, which was caused less by the pasty flour covering her hands and arms than by her “let[ting] out too much the night before talking of dreams” (612), the discreet Bloom did pluck up his courage to propose when Molly was engaged in making the potato cake—and Molly remembers this event. Furthermore, the potato links Molly and Milly: “wouldnt even teem the potatoes for you of course shes right not to ruin her hands” (630); “theres no use going to the fair with the thing answering me like a fishwoman when I asked to go for a half a stone of potatoes” (631). In spite of her complaints about Milly, Molly shows a deep concern for her daughter, who, learning photography alone in Mullingar, plays a major part in the mother’s remembrances that night. What connects the mother and daughter, indeed, is the common but indispensable esculent, the potato: it is through trivial matters and daily routines such as teeming or buying potatoes that Molly remembers and misses her daughter. Connections between people, or more precisely between family members, are facilitated via the potato.

VI. Conclusion: Molly, Bloom, and the Potato

As mentioned above, the potato was introduced in the sixteenth century by the Spanish from South America, and then spread all over Europe; it was the Spanish conquistadors who first perceived this strange plant's economic value, calling it an earth-testicle. Molly, who has occupied Bloom's mind throughout his wanderings in Dublin streets, grew up in Gibraltar, once a Spanish colony, and then immigrated to Ireland with her father. Molly's migration from Spain to Ireland is analogous to the potato's introduction into Ireland. As is generally acknowledged, the name of Joyce's female protagonist, which is only one letter different from the mythical herb, suggests that Molly is Bloom's moly/talisman.²⁵ It is his regard for her that Bloom resists temptation in the brothel (Merritt, 1990: 274). In other words, Molly as moly protects Bloom from seductions, guarding him from infidelity with prostitutes. The role as guardian and protector endows Molly with the attributes of earth-mother. Molly's association with earth-mother, in fact, has long been established. When she listens to Bloom's narration in bed in "Ithaca," she takes a reclining posture in the manner of the Greek earth-goddess and the Roman earth-mother: "reclined semilaterally, left, left hand under head, right leg extended in a straight line and resting on left leg, flexed, in the attitude of Gea-Tellus, fulfilled, recumbent, big with seed" (Joyce, 1986: 606).²⁶ Significantly, this earth-mother grew up in a Spanish colony. In another Spanish colony, Peru, the potato was actually believed to be representing earth-mother: as mentioned before, the tuber was adorned in fertility rites as woman, symbolizing potato-mother, or "generative

²⁵ Joyce defines moly as "the invisible influence (prayer, chance, agility, *presence of mind*, power of recuperation) which saves in case of accident" (1992: 272). Molly's "invisible influence" on Bloom is obvious in the text: he is preoccupied with thoughts of her on 16 June 1904.

²⁶ For arguments of Molly as fertility goddess and related controversies, see Herring (2012: 87).

mother,” and such customs persisted into the Spanish period (Salaman, 1985: 25). Molly’s connection with the potato seems therefore more intimate than we have thought.

Bloom’s connection with the potato, on the other hand, is not only intimate but inseparable: it is the potato which keeps him company in his wanderings on 16 June 1904. Ever since its introduction into Ireland and its adoption by the peasantry, in fact, the potato has been a companion in the peasant folks’ everyday life, synonymous with Ireland. As mentioned previously, the tuber has long played a vital part in nourishing the needy, who seized on the potato as a safeguard. Zuckerman has it that the potato saved the West, as the subtitle of his book *How the Humble Spud Rescued the Western World* indicates. Zuckerman may have somewhat overstated the case, but the potato did rescue the Irish peasantry from food scarcity and starvation, as it helps Bloom—psychologically at least—overcome challenges and difficulties permeating the outer world: he touches the talisman, consciously or not, on the doorstep of his house for good luck (Joyce, 1986: 46). Undeniably, however, this savior and mascot also forsook and disappointed the Irish at a critical moment when their reliance on it reached the zenith, leaving them in hunger and death, as Bloom is exposed to humiliating hallucinations when his talisman is taken away by Zoe. Significantly, this talisman—a reminder of the Great Famine as well—was left to Bloom by his Irish mother.²⁷ Inheriting the potato/heirloom, Bloom is bequeathed with not only Famine memories, but, more importantly, Irishness, or Irish culture and tradition, as the potato has long been embedded in every aspect of Irish life. Despite Bloom’s position as an outsider in the Dublin community, the fact that he possesses an object representative of Ireland associates him with Irishness. Ulin rightly notes that the potato, like Bloom, is an outsider: “the potato came to Ireland from elsewhere; . . . it

²⁷ It is worthy of note that Ellen might have been a Famine survivor as Leopold was born in 1866.

originated in another land but holds the power to nourish Ireland” (2011: 57). It may remain uncertain whether Bloom also holds the power to nourish Ireland, but his indivisible connection with the potato, which is identified with Ireland, is unquestionable.

Bloom’s position as an outsider, admittedly, results from his Jewish lineage. Joyce did collect and consult Jewish-related materials when writing *Ulysses*.²⁸ In spite of his frequent violation of Jewish rituals and teachings, Bloom has a smattering of knowledge of Jewish tradition—and he performs a Jewish ritual, though probably unconsciously and using an Irish symbol, before leaving home in the morning. The potato, as we have learned from its history, was essential to the survival of both the Irish and European Jews, although the latter’s dependence on it did not begin until the mid-nineteenth century. As mentioned earlier, the potato is a hardy and tenacious plant, growing rapidly and abundantly in poor soils and in every conceivable habitat; difficult circumstances and hostile environments do not frustrate its flourishing. This quality is similar to the character of Leopold Bloom, who, a wandering Jew, or an outsider like the potato, subsists in hostile Dublin community, where anti-Semitism, prejudice, and hatred abound. It is within such an unfavorable milieu that Bloom overcomes adversity, establishes roots, has his family, and participates in communal life. Joyce’s presentation of Bloom’s wanderings, as is generally recognized, echoes the motif of the wandering Jew. Alix Wall reports that during their diaspora, the Jews “ate what was available, as long as it was kosher”: they “have always incorporated native foods into their diets” and “followed local food trends wherever they lived” in order to survive (2015). Wandering Jews were, in a word, adaptable in terms of food choice. It is important to note that Joyce’s modern Odysseus is not the only wanderer in the novel: the shriveled potato keeps him company throughout most of his adventures that day, and acts as

²⁸ For Joyce’s construction of his Jewish protagonist and his association with the Jews, see Davison (1996); Nadel (1989).

another wanderer. In a subtle sense, the wanderings of the potato may suggest the spread of this all-important esculent: the spud traveled from its home in the high Andes to the rest of the world, as the Jews spread out from their homeland to the adopted homes. The potato, in this light, connects Bloom with his Jewish origin; the three are similar in their adaptability: the potato acclimates to adverse environments, the Jews incorporate local foods, and Bloom adapts to the hostile Dublin community.

It is noteworthy that although Gifford and Seidman state that the potato symbolizes the continuity of life and serves as a central dish in the ritual meal after a funeral in Jewish tradition (1988: 71), there is no document to verify their statement. The potato is after all a relatively recent addition to the Jewish pantry; its absence from historical documents thus seems inevitable and predictable. Despite the potato’s absence from records of Jewish tradition, Gil Marks’s account of Jewish dietary behavior during the mourning may give some clues. According to the instructions in the Talmud, the first meal after the burial of a close relative should be provided by people other than the mourners. Therefore, it is customary for friends and neighbors of the bereaved to prepare a meal of consolation upon returning from the cemetery. A grieving person usually has no appetite, but she/he needs nourishment, which is supplied at the meal of consolation, a simple meal consisting of foods circular in shape, such as bagels or rolls, hard-boiled eggs, and lentils. The circular shape symbolizes the cycle of life and death, and the act of eating acknowledges that the person is alive (2010: 544-545). These dietary guidelines may support Gifford and Seidman’s statement: the potato is consumed in the ritual meal after a funeral because it is circular and easy to prepare, hence suitable for nourishing the bereaved who lose appetite but need nutrition to stay alive. In this respect, the potato indeed symbolizes the continuity of life since it sustains human lives. Anyhow, the potato did help European Jews survive hard times and contribute to population increase in the second half of the nineteenth century; their seeing it as a new

addition to their pantry rather than as the sole article of food, as well as the comparative diversity of their diet, prevented them from the tragedy the Irish had suffered from in the 1840s.

The potato in *Ulysses*, Merritt argues, symbolizes faith and betrayal, its “association with Ireland’s tragic history emphasiz[ing] the motifs of political and individual betrayal in the novel” (1990: 269). The tuber actually means more than that: it is not merely a symbol of faith and betrayal, but a symbol of fertility and impotence, provision and exploitation, prosperity and poverty, life and death, masculinity and femininity. It is, in short, a symbol of doubleness, or ambivalence. Furthermore, the potato is associated not simply with Ireland’s tragic history, but with a past when the spud sustained people’s lives and contributed to rapid population growth. Also importantly, it plays an indispensable part not only in Irish history but in Andean and Jewish histories. The potato, indeed, is endowed with various implications: it represents a complex symbol, an icon of histories and heritages, and of the reality of daily life; its significations are therefore multicultural and plural, rather than parochial and singular.

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「可憐的媽媽的靈丹妙藥」：
《尤利西斯》中的馬鈴薯

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摘要

1904年6月16日這天，當布盧姆在都柏林街頭漫遊，伴隨著他的不是重要的大門鑰匙，而是對他而言更加不可或缺的護身符：繼承自母親的馬鈴薯。文本中這顆馬鈴薯往往在關鍵時刻被提及。在布盧姆漫步街頭的過程中，他對這項母親的遺物始終有著強烈的心理依賴。長久以來，這顆乾癟的馬鈴薯被視為護身符，等同於赫米斯贈與奧德修斯免於瑟喜魔法的靈草。但是這株護身靈草的「魔力」來自何處？為何喬伊斯在《尤利西斯》中把愛爾蘭大饑荒的提醒物／背叛的象徵描寫為其筆下現代奧德修斯的護身靈物？布盧姆口袋中乾癟的馬鈴薯，一枚由猶太裔愛爾蘭人隨身攜帶、布滿意涵的護身符，似乎遠比想像中更加神秘。本論文企圖追蹤賦予馬鈴薯種種意涵的文化來源，包含安地斯、西班牙、愛爾蘭與猶太傳統，藉以探究《尤利西斯》中馬鈴薯的重要含意。喬伊斯文本中的馬鈴薯不僅僅是個複合象徵，更是一段歷史、一項傳承、一件日常生活現實，其含意廣泛多元而非狹隘單一。

關鍵詞：馬鈴薯、《尤利西斯》、愛爾蘭、護身符、飲食文化