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Stephan's Brave New World: A Deconstructive Reading on James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*

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Abstract

A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man (1914) is considered to be one of the major examples of the genre bildungsroman (the novel of the artist). This study concerns the search of the protagonist, Stephen Dedalus, for identity and meaning, which encompass a time period from his infancy to his late adolescence. In quest of identity and meaning, Stephen breaks from two totalities-nationalism and Catholic Church- that rule over his life. The present study reads the novel within a deconstructive perspective. Stephen like Nietzsche tends to talk about "the death of god" to pave the way for his exploration of meaning and identity. He tends to rebel and go beyond what Lyotard calls "the grand narrative".

Key words: Deconstruction; Metanarrative; Nationalism; Catholic Church; Simulation

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INTRODUCTION

Completed in 1914, James Joyce's A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man depicts a perspective of the development of Stephen Dedalus from childhood until the time when he decides to leave Ireland as a way to keep independence and distance as a writer. As an account of the development of a young man's mind, A Portrait is a bildungsroman, a form that conventionally concludes at a momentous point in the hero's life, which signals the culmination of a process of self-discovery.

Eugene Jolas proclaimed "The new artist of the word has recognized the autonomy of language" (Jolas, *The Revolution of Language and James Joyce*, p.79). Jolas claimed that "when the beginnings of this new age are seen in perspective, it will be found that the disintegration of words, and their subsequent reconstruction on other planes, constitute some of the most important acts of our epoch" (Ibid, p.79). For disintegrating and then reconstructing the language, the new artist of the word destabilizes meaning, calls into question the referentiality of language, exposes its arbitrariness, its materiality and its status as rhetoric.

James Joyce's revolution of the word is part of the totality of our time, showing the revolutionary decentering of epistemology by nineteenth and early twentieth-century thinkers such as Jacques Derrida who believes:

> … the Nietzschean critique of metaphysics, the critique of the concepts of being and truth, for which were substituted the concepts of play, interpretation, and sign (sign without truth present); the Freudian critique of self-presence, that is, the critique of consciousness, of the subject, of self-identity and of self- proximity or self-possession; and, more radically, the Heideggerean destruction of metaphysics, of onto- theology, of the determination of being as presence. (*Structure, Sign, and Play*, p.250)

In *A portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, James Joyce like Nietzsche calls for "the death of god" and talks about the death of the father and god and the birth of Stephen as the reader. In Joyce's novel Stephen Dedalus at first is like a deconstructive reader who rebels against the authority of his father, religion and church to discover the meaning, but he is too naïve to understand finding an absolute meaning is impossible. Barthes as one of the significant proponent in the chain of deconstructive criticism sees

the absurdity of seeking to discover an absolute meaning in the text because such a meaning is ever-elusive. In *A portrait* Stephen starts his journey as a reader but ends it as an impersonal and isolated writer. He decides to be a writer to make himself impersonal and dispassionate and emancipate other readers in the cost of his isolation from the society.

T.S. Eliot in the early decades of the twentieth-century, and, more particularly, in his celebrated essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1921) pleads for the extinction of the empirical author. This turning away from the authority of the author is what can be seen as the beginning of what later on culminated in Roland Barthes's "The Death of the Author" (1971) as a complete denial of the role for the author. Joyce through Stephen depicts the death of the Author and that life has different meanings and no one can talk about it with certainty.

For years the author occupied the high position of god, the ruling deity, the great Omni-present- omniscient power. But early in the twentieth century this great authorial authority began to weaken in the new literary approach. Stephen comes to self-discovery in the cost of his father's weakness; as Roland Barthes believes the author must die, because the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the author. This notion can be illustrated in Stephen's confrontation with his friends who are an additional facet of society that he rebels against. Throughout the book, Stephen consistently refuses to succumb to peer pressure. The boldness of his refusals grows as his knowledge and social awareness grow. While at Clongowes, Stephen gets into a dispute with his classmates over who the greatest writer is. Dedalus is confronted:

> Admit that Byron was no good.
> No.
> Admit.
> No.
> Admit.
> No. No. (Joyce, *A Portrait*, p.91)

In spite of the 'cuts of the cane and the blows of the knotty stump' (Ibid, p.91) that his refusal to admit elicits, Stephen steadfastly believes that Byron is the world's greatest writer. This is an important step in Stephen's ability to form his own ideas, free from the ruling power of the society. Later, Stephen challenges his peers on issues that are much more important. At the University College Stephen's nationalist friend Davin asks:

> Are you Irish at all? [...] Why don't you learn Irish? Why did you drop out of the [Gaelic] league class after the first lesson? (Ibid, p.205)

When confronted with these questions about his heritage, Stephen responds:

> When the soul of a man is born in this country there are nets flung at it to hold it back from flight. You talk to me of nationality, language, religion. I shall try to fly by those nets. (Ibid, p.206)

"All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned" (Marx and Engels, 1854, cited in Childs, *Modernism*, pp. 31-32). These words are evocative of the loss of faith and certainty, the sense of fragmentation and alienation, and the atmosphere of dissolution which pervaded much of western European society from the middle of the nineteenth century. James Joyce's *A Portrait* is a reflection of the mentioned excerpt. Joyce depicts an alienation and fragmentation from the totality of Enlightenment, religion, and nationalism.

Like the Dedalus of Greek myth, Stephen must grow wings so that he may fly above the tribulations of his life. As he matures, Dedalus begins to understand his position in life, and decides to rise above the turbulent Ireland of the early 1900s in a rebellion against society, a struggle against his beliefs and a struggle against his heritage and past. He wants to rebel against all those Enlightenment project of progress and perfectibility in favor of uncertainties and provisional condition. Stephen feels the need to rebel; to break into a new setting- one in which he could be free to express all his thoughts.

1. STEPHEN DECONSTRUCTS THE METANARRATIVES

In a Catholic society, Stephen Dedalus is exposed to the term 'morality' at a very young age. Because of Ireland's critical political atmosphere, in which the church plays an important role, young Stephen becomes aware of the conflict between the secular front and the Irish Church.

From the beginning of his career, Stephen faces with two totalities; nationalism and religion. The Roman Catholic Church continued to be a potent force in Joyce's native Ireland throughout and beyond the nineteenth century, not only in terms of the doctrinal and spiritual guidance it provided but also because of the influence it exerted upon the cultural and political life of the country. Roman Catholicism had long been a focus of nationalist resistance against English colonialism, such that "Irishness had come to be seen by many as synonymous with Catholicism" (Belanger, *Introduction*, xx-xii). The Irish Ireland movement proclaimed that "Ireland's authentic cultural nationalist identity was unquestionably as a Gaelic and Catholic nation" (Brown, cited in Belanger, *Introduction*, xxii). However, the Irish nationalist community was itself divided. On the one hand, people like Dante Riordan in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* proclaimed that Irish identity was inseparable from Catholicism. They argued that priests had a duty to guide their flocks in matters of politics and "public morality" such as the Parnell affair, in which the former hero of the nationalist cause was pilloried for his adultery. On the other hand, people like Simon Dedalus and Mr. Casey argued that the Catholic Church had

betrayed Irish nationalism all too often and that it should no longer interfere in Irish politics. While Dante Riordan uses the absolute terms of a religious fundamentalist when she says: "God and morality and religion comes first … God and religion before everything" (Joyce, *A Portrait*, p.32), Mr. Casey disagrees with corresponding fervor; if he has to choose between religion and his country's political independence, then: "No God for Ireland. … We have had too much God in Ireland. Away with God" (Ibid, p.32). Joyce's hero is strongly influenced by this family argument, which he witnesses as a child. Stephan deconstructs his identity when he tells his friend Cranly:

> My ancestors threw off their language and took another … they allowed a handful of foreigners to subject them. No honorable and sincere man …. has given up his life and his youth and his affections from the days of Tone to those of Parnell but you sold him the enemy or failed him in need or reviled him and left him for another. And you invite me to be one of you. I'd see you damned first (Ibid, p.170).

At first, he identifies himself with Ireland, as shown when he says "My ancestors"; then, he proceeds to refer to the Irish of the past as "they", which could be excused because they are separated from him in time. Both nationality and religion confine Stephen in his quest of meaning, so he plans to break with these two forces and open new windows to himself. He elaborates on his sense of artistic vocation, which is inseparably linked to his alienated relationship with Ireland:

> Look here, Cranly … I will tell you what I will do and what I will not do. I will not serve that in which I no longer believe whether it call itself my home, my fatherland or my church: and I will try to express myself in some mode of life or art as freely as I can and as wholly as I can, using for my defense the only arms I allow myself to use – silence, exile, and cunning (Ibid, p.208).

In his seminal essay, "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Science" (1972) Derrida argues for a theory of Play that calls into question the "structuration of structure", the transcendental signified that stands behind and authorizes the very possibility of stable and centered structures. The play of difference within language is "permitted by the lack or absence of a center or origin"- it is "the movement of supplementarity" (Derrida, *Writing*, p.289). For Derrida, Supplementation is a substitution, or something that insinuates itself in-the-place-of something else. Stephen represents himself through the function of supplementarity and creates the opportunity to express his own self and meaning. He is against the repressive morality and narrow-mindedness of Ireland: "When the soul of a man is born in this country there are nets flung at it to hold it back from flight. You talk to me of nationality, language, religion. I shall try to fly by those nets" (Joyce, *A Portrait*, p.206). Cranly tries to convince him of the need to serve one's nation: "a man's country comes first. Ireland first, Stevie. You can be a poet or a mystic after" (Ibid, p.206). But Stephen rejects what he perceives as an uncritical patriotism, a communal movement demanding conformity. For Stephen Dedalus is, above all, to be an individualist. Nor does this mean that he is a simple, self-indulgent egotist, for he is prepared to make his own sacrifices, which he will have to make when he refuses to accept prevailing opinions, or to conform to the ways of the majority. Stephen calls our attention to the failure of all absolute powers to achieve or describe the presence or the self-identity. He intends to constitute meaning through the play of differences.

Stephen sees Ireland as a kind of trap, a restraint that will make it impossible for him to live and create. Though his father is a zealous nationalist, Stephen has great anxieties about Irish politics. He finds the Irish people disloyal; at one point, he says to a friend that the Irish have never had a great leader whom they did not betray or abandon. He also rebels against the nature of activities like petition-signing and protest; in his mind, these activities amount to an abdication of independence. At the same time, he leaves Ireland hoping to forge the new conscience of his race.

The Church is another constraint on Stephen. The teachings of the Church run contrary to Stephen's independent spirit and intellect. His sensitivity to beauty and the human body are not at all suitable to the rigid Catholicism in which he was raised. But the Church continues to exert some small hold on him. Although he eventually becomes an unbeliever, he continues to have some fear that the Catholic Church might be correct. Despite his fears, he eventually chooses to live independently and without constraint, even if that decision sends him to hell. He wants to get rid of what Derrida calls *logocenterism* that places at the center of the understanding of the world a concept (logos), such as nationalism or religion, that organizes and explains the world for us while remaining outside of the world it organizes and explains. But for Stephen this is just a great illusion because those totalities have no power that want to rule over his life. He decentralizes the world from any kinds of centers and shows the arbitrariness of the concepts. Stephen comes to the epistemology that his father and church are the metannaratives that have no place in his brave new world where all meanings are provisory. Metanarrative or what Lyotard calls "Grand of narrative" is an untold story that unifies and totalizes the world, and justifies a culture's power structures or according to John Stephen Metanarative "is a golobal or totalizing cultural narrative schema which orders and explains knowledge and experience" (Stephen, *Retelling Stories, Framing Culture,* p.6). Lyotard rejects the "grant of narrative" of progress and perfectibility in favor of uncertainties or provisional conditions.

Stephen develops an inclination for independent thinking (that suits an artist) and a strong sense of individuality by courageously facing the fall of his childhood heroes and thwarting his villains: "Stephen certainly has attained his end: he has triumphed over

the cold, white father's authoritarian rule, (...) and over his own youth and ignorance." (Epstein, *The Ordeal of Stephen Dedalus*, p.51). Stephen is exposed to an unprecedented circumstance that abolishes his father's insuperable status as 'an almost sacrosanct being' in his eyes: The situation is heightened for Stephen when, (...) he notices his father's tears. For the second time that day, he sees his father not as a god but merely human and subject, like himself. (Pierce, *Joyce's Ireland*, p.17). Along with the declining balance of incomes and expenses of the Dedalus household, this factor will be an instigator for Stephen's rediscovery of his father as a human being.

In the course of *A Portrait*, Stephen seeks to define his own identity. However, he is repeatedly confronted and confounded by the influence of his environment, and in particular his cultural and religious heritage. He proclaims that he has found his identity as an artist. He finds his way in Nietzsche's philosophy:

> "Oh, those Greeks! They knew how to live. What is required for that is to stop courageously at the surface, the fold, the skin, to adore appearance, to believe in forms, tones, words, in the whole Olympus of appearance! Those Greeks were superficial- out of profundity! […] Are we not, precisely in this respect, Greeks? Adorers of forms, of tones, of words? And therefore-artists?" (Nietzsche, *Gay Science*, p.38)

Stephen Dedalus' attempt to take flight as an artist away from the cultural, spiritual labyrinth and all metanarratives of Dublin recalls Howe's assertion that the Modernist writer disdains "the mass, the mire, the street" and "exits from history into the self-sufficiency of art" (cited in Brooker, *Modernism/Postmodernism*, 10). Joyce was influenced by the ideas of the philosopher Nietzsche, both in terms of the attack he made on religion and of the importance he assigned to the individual mind, as opposed to the mindless 'herd'. In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883-85), Nietzsche famously proclaimed that "God is dead" (Nietzsche, cited in Childs, *Modernism*, p.55). "Morality was, therefore, revealed as simply a means to consolidate power. Ethical beliefs were no more than a construct derived from the instinct of the herd to gain strength in numbers" (Ibid, p.59-60). Nietzsche went on to argue, in his Essay in *Self-Criticism* (1886) that "the metaphysical activity of mankind should be art rather than morality since the existence of the world could only be justified as an aesthetic phenomenon" (Nietzsche, *Self-Criticism*, p.55). "Given that social, political, philosophical and moral systems were externally-imposed, artificial, empty constructs, the artist must speak for himself, as an individual" (Ibid, p.60). This is precisely the lifestyle that Stephen Dedalus chooses to try.

In Eco's view, modernism wished to abolish the past, so from this perspective he sees A Portrait as "an attempt at the modern" (Eco, *Postmodernism, Irony, the Enjoyable*, pp.225-227). As a modern artist, Stephen will strive to detach himself "from the constraints of reutilized cognition and everyday action" (Habermas, *Modernity – an Incomplete Project*, p.133). He resolves to seek, through art, "the loveliness which has not yet come into the world" (Joyce, *A Portrait*, p.194).

2. STEPHEN'S SIMULATION OF BEAUTY

To rebel against his father, Stephen starts to indulge himself in sexual activities with prostitutes: "His blood was in revolt. (...) He wanted to sin with another of his kind, to force another being to sin with him and to exult with her in sin" (Joyce, *A Portrait*, p.113). Sex for Stephen can be a kind of protest against the totality of his father and society.

An impact of women on Stephen comes from the story "The Count of Monte Cristo" while reading this story, Stephen starts to indulge in fantasy about Mercedes. As he imagines, he tries to bring her to life through another girl, known as E.C. He has many sexual longings for E.C. Stephen is immersed in his desires and ends up going to a prostitute. This prostitute is a combination of what he was looking for in a woman, the Mercedes characteristics "she came over to him and embraced him gaily and gravely... her arms held him firmly to her" (Ibid, p.101) and the motherly/pure characteristics "she passed her tinkling hand through his hair, calling him a little rascal"(Ibid, p.101). Stephen makes a stimulation of Mercedes in her absence. Even, although Stephen knows that he is sinning he wants to break away somehow from the good of nature and experience what it feels like to be fallen like Adam or Lucifer. In fact, sexual affairs lead Stephen to a "loss of the distinction between real and imagined, reality and illusion, surface and depth" (Berry, *Beginning Theory*, p.88).

When Stephen hears the sermon by Father Arnall, he feels remorseful of his actions. He thinks that the sermon is totally focused on him. And from hearing this sermon, Stephen decides to change his way back towards the church. He does such a good job of being "Holy" that he is asked to join the priesthood. But this makes him go on a surge of power hunger. He thinks of all the power and respect he will get if he joins the priesthood and of all the secrets that he will hear of women and girls. This again makes him to think lustfully and makes him sin. Stephen is confused and cannot make a distinction between real and unreal, presence and presentation, reality and imagination.

He finally decides that instead of entering priesthood to become an artist and free himself from the doctrines of religion. When he makes this decision, he sees another girl on the beach and is taken by her physically beauty. He is completely overcome by her beauty and the magnificence of that moment. That is his epiphany. Stephen immediately decides he must commit his life to art - to express the beauty he sees in the world.

In *The Large, the Small and the Human Mind* Penrose proposes that the physical world, the mental world and

the Platonic world are interconnected. "The more we understand about the physical world and the deeper we probe into the law of nature, the more it seems as though the physical world almost evaporates and we are left only with mathematics" (Pesrose, *The large, the Small*, p.13). He goes on to affirm that there is "the common feeling that these mathematical concepts are products of our mentality" (Ibid, p.96). Apparently separate on the surface, the physical and mental world seem to share a common basis. Stephen tends to blur the physical beauty, mental beauty, and Platonic beauty through his art and make a presentation of all together.

Throughout Stephen's adolescent life was a roller-coaster of emotions of sexual desires and guilt of having those desires and confusion because of the guilty feelings. A lot of the confusion stems from the absence of a strong recognition of his self. He was always confused with his feelings and what he thought the church expected him to feel. In his individual world "real has replaced by simulations of reality" and "there is no truth, law, and history, even nature and the human body are irrelevant in a world in which 'signs of the real' replace the real and God, Man, Progress, and History itself die to profit the code" (Baudrillard, *Simulations*, p.111). For Stephen the opposition between real and unreal has become blurred, "everything is a model or an image, all is surface without depth …" (Barry, *Beginning Theory*, p.89).

CONCLUSION

Daedalus is the name of a talented craftsman who constructs the Labyrinth in Crete with the orders of King Minos to imprison his wife's monstrous son, the Minotaur. In spite of his satisfaction with the complexity of this masterpiece, King Minos resolves to confine Daedalus and his son Icarus to a tower to prevent the knowledge of the Labyrinth from reaching the public. Therefore, by using feathers, wax and twine, he fashions a pair of wings for himself and his son to pave their way to freedom.

Even though there exists the possibility of melting like Icarus who flew too close to the sun, Stephen mounts the cunning and skills of Daedelus the fabulous artificer, to liberate himself from the fetters of Ireland and Catholic Church. In *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Joyce chooses to unwind his imagination, revolving around the uncompromising bond between himself, Stephen Dedalus and freedom, to 'forge', as Pierce suggests, "a novel of liberation" and "a discourse on freedom". (Pierce, *Reading Joyce*, p.159)

At the end of the novel, Stephen resolves to escape the constraints of family, narrow nationalism and religious tradition by moving abroad, he states: "Welcome, O life! I go to encounter for the millionth time the reality of experience and to forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race" (Joyce, *A Portrait*, p.275-6).

Obviously, deconstructive criticism takes place within the horizon of the novel, at the moment of rupture, in those Aporias in which Stephen throws himself into doubt and makes himself free from logocenterism.

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