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The Ordering Process of Narrative in James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*

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Abstract

Regarding the literary historical debates, one of the main concerns of modern historiography is the way of representing the concept of reality within the framework of a coherent narrative, a reality that is only achievable through the process of narrative that is supposed to be constructive and ordering. Therefore, in order to examine this ordering process of narrative in James Joyce's novel, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916), as a modernist novel, this article attempts to approach the problem of narrative and history and the role of narrative in the representation of reality in this novel. However, in terms of Hayden White's theory of metahistory, Joyce's impositionalism of narrative on the emplotment of this novel is an attempt to form a line of narrative through the implication of textile and fabric images. To this end, the present study intends not only to unfold these sets of images presented in the novel but also to discuss the question of how this ordering process of narrative is achieved by means of such images in a constant aesthetic act.

Keywords: historiography, narrative, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Hayden White, metahistory, impositionalism, emplotment

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1. Introduction

1.1 The affinity between narrative and history in the 19th century

Thomas Carlyle, in his uncanny, exciting essay "On History" (1830), distinguishes between reality—or what he characteristically calls "Chaos"—and the historian's efforts to represent some part of that reality in a text. The historian's attempt to mirror real events is "*successive*, while the things done were often *simultaneous*" (Tennyson, 1969, p. 32). Later he states this idea precisely in theoretical terms: "[A]ll Narrative is, by its nature, of only one dimension; only travels forward towards one, or towards successive points: Narrative is *linear*, Action is *solid*." The narrative's dependence on time and linearity and its inability to reproduce the whole of reality, however, frustrate the historian reminding the real is always beyond the grasp of language; nevertheless, these limitations help define and humanize the historiographic project, making the real in some sense approachable and writable. Realizing the impossibility of total representation, the historian should aim "only at some picture of the things acted" (ibid., pp. 59-60).

This paper intends to discuss, even briefly, the role and significance of history in *A Portrait*, and the manner by which Stephen's mind and consciousness is formed under the influence of history because it belongs to Stephen's emerging sense of self. Next, the similarities between Joyce's representation of history as a narrative and that of Walter Pater will be argued in order to disclose Pater's conception of rhythm and diction and its inevitable influence on both Joyce's aesthetics and the role it plays in founding the ordering process of narrative in *A Portrait* through the figurative and linguistic power of figuration and imagery. Then, the main discussion of this paper focuses on Joyce's textual rendering of the past and his textualized conception of history and historical representation and their textual nature. To this end, textual and fabric images, as emerges in the novel, are introduced to the reader in order to approve that history in its written form changes in to a story or narrative that is ordering and coherent. Later, Hayden White's theory of metahistory, that is defined by him as "the examination of the rhetorical

and figurative dimension of nonfiction historical accounts to unfold the elusive latent content within the manifest narrative" (White, 1973, p.17), on which this paper mostly rests on, will be applied, though succinctly, to depict White's special attention to the textulity of historical understanding and experiences and its function as a narrative that is supposed to be essentially ordering in itself as a form of language. At last, the reader is provided with an overall conclusion drawn from the main points discussed in this paper.

1.2 The significance of history in *A Portrait*

Stephen Dedalus thinks of the ordering process of narrative as a line drawn through chaos. Pondering the wealth of Irish myth and legend that Yeats, Lady Gregory, and other members of the Irish Literary Revival were accumulating at the turn of the century, Stephen—who, like Joyce, is not appealed to by "the broken lights of Irish myth" (p. 161)—complains that "no individual mind had ever drawn out a line of beauty" through this welter of cultural materials (p. 161). The historian's task is essentially the same; for Carlyle it is the attempt to "depict, and scientifically gauge," Chaos," by threading it with single lines of a few ells in length" (ibid., p. 62). The combination of trope of linearity and textile-textual image of "threading" characterizes the historian's aesthetic engagement with the real. We argue, however, this textual threading is directly related to the artist's weaving and unweaving of his image. The artist projects aesthetically a recollected and reconstructed self just as the historian offers a picture of the past woven from the threads of other texts, other narrative weavings.

Dereck Attridge in his book, *Joyce Effects: On Language, Theory, and History* (2000), states that Joyce's "historical understanding is a line drawn through chaos, a personal and aesthetic act of will" that gradually becomes "on the loom of memory and art, a constructed, woven thing, a picture of the past that remains a self-conscious fabrication" (p. 146). The inevitable heterogeneity of the historian's picture is not necessarily a falsification of the past, however. In other words, this heterogeneity

might be seen as an "adequate response to the complexity of the real, a homologous representation of what is always already a chaotic fabric" (Spoo, 1994, p. 47).

Thought of "historical understanding always involves a distortion of its object." As Jekins believes in *Re-thinking History* (2004), "there is a sense in which historiography's constructedness, its complexly woven fictiveness, corresponds to something inherent in the nature of that object" (p. 51). For Joyce the act of historical reflection is therefore justified on the same grounds that it is rendered suspect. In "On History" (1833) again Carlyle, embroidering on his earlier fabric images, articulated this convergence of historiography and its object, the real itself: "[W]e might liken Universal History to a magic web" (Tennyson, 1969, p. 16). Here the figure of fabrics covers *the* past and its survival as a text.

1.3 Paterian image in *A Portrait*

We suggest that regarding the textile tropes in Joycean text, one can link Joyce's interest in the Paterian image to his complex understanding of life, language, and textuality. Although critics often note the influence of Pater's supple, periodic prose style on Joyce, especially in *A Portrait*, little attention has been paid to the similarities in their representations of historical understanding. The passage in *A Portrait* in which Stephen imagines Dublin as a "dim fabric" and a "vague arras," old as man's weariness," filled as it is with Paterian rythms and diction, is also distinctly informed by Pater's concept of tradition as formulated in *Plato and Platonism* (1893). In his book Pater notes that in spite of all its clarity and freshness, Plato's philosophy was not "absolutely new" (p. 9). He asserts that "as in many other very original products of human genius, the seemingly new is old also, a palimpsest of which the actual threads have served before" (p. 12). Pater insists on the "conditioned, determined quality of life and thought, the impossibility of separating out from the tapestry of existence even one thread" (Dettmar, 1996). One aspect of the nightmare of history, for Pater as for Joyce, is the illusoriness of

innovation in human activity, for all forms of human existence are rooted in their antecedents and receive definition from the past and the prolonged attempt in reconstructing it. As a result, Joyce, like Pater persistently uses textile and textual images to characterize the interdependence of past and present.

2. Main Discussion

In *A Portrait*, moments after Stephen has his ghostly glimpse of twentieth century Dublin, and as he continues to walk seaward, he hears his name called by some fellow students swimming in Dublin Bay—"Stephanos Dedalos! Bous Stephanoumenos! Bous Staphaneforos!"—and recognizes in this playful intensification of his foreign-sounding name (heard or imagined) an echo of the call to Europe that is growing within him: "Now, as never before, his strange name seemed to him a prophecy" (p. 150). The strange mingling of history and language in the young men's cries causes Stephen to recur suddenly to his vision of the historicized cityscape and to pass from this to an image of the mythical artist figure Daedalus:

> So timeless seemed the grey warm air, so fluid and impersonal his own mood, that all ages were as one to him. A moment before the ghost of the ancient kingdom of Danes had looked forth through the vesture of the haze- wrapped city. Now, at the name of the fabulous artificer, he seemed to hear noise of dim waves and to see a winged form flying above the waves and slowly climbing the air (pp. 150-51).

Again the Paterian textile image appears—"*vesture* of the *hazewrapped* city"—together with a curious revisitation of the ghost figure that Stephen has associated with history since Clongowes. He still imagines contact with the past as a conjuring of ghosts, but now his thinking is informed by a developing interest in literature and aesthetics and by neo-Romantic notions of historiography.

2. 1 Modernist concept of history in *A Portrait*

The conception of historical knowledge implied in Stephen's image can be found in certain idealist trends in historical theory in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, trends that have included thinkers such as Jules Michelet, Wilhelm Dilthey, Benedetto Croce, and R. G. Collingwood, each of whom stressed, in his own way, the subjective or inter-subjective element in historiography, the importance of the historian's "feeling into" the past and making it live again in the present by means of intuitive contact with the minds of the dead (Iggers, 1997, p.52). Accordingly, Stephen's contact with the past can be possible only by an essentially aesthetic act—another tenet of Romantic historiography—which is signaled by the image of the soaring Daedalus, the "fabulous artificer." (Scholes, 2006, p.12)

Modernist writers often use images of ghostly conjuring to communicate their sense of the past. What Pound in an early poem, "Villonaud for This Yule" (1908) referred to as "winning the ghost of yester-year"(Baechler & Litz, 1990, p. 229) became a persistent metaphor for his art, culminating in the famous *nekuia* narrated by Odysseus in the final version of *Canto I*:

> Here did they rites, Perimedes and Eurylochus,
> And drawing sword from my hip
> I dug the ell-square pitkin;
> Poured we libation unto each the dead
> First mead and then sweet wine, water mixed with white flour.
> There prayed I many a prayer to the sickly death's-heads. (ibid., p. 65)

Pound's special interest in the "personac" of the past continued to be a profound source of inspiration throughout his career. In his essay "Tradition and Individual Talent" (1919),T. S. Eliot also insisted that "the most individual parts of [a poet's] work may be those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously" (Kermode,

1975, p. 38). And in "Little Gidding" (1924) he records a wired Dantesque encounter with an uncanny poet figure, "a familiar compound ghost," who tells him of the disenchantment awaiting old age." (Jekins, 2004, p. 96)

In a rarely discussed poem, "Chamber Music," first published in 1904, Joyce introduces this sense of history as an aesthetic summoning of ghosts:

Thou leanest to the shell of the night,
Dear lady, a divining ear.
In that soft choiring of delight
What sound hath made thy heart to fear?
Seemed it of rivers rushing forth
From the grey deserts of the north?

That mood of thine, O timorous,
Is this, if thou but scan it well,
Who a mad tale bequeaths to us
At ghosting hour conjurable—
And all for some strange name he read
In Purchas or in Holinshed. (Baillie, 1904, p. 92)

According to Burke, this strange poem describes the receptive and anxious mood of an unnamed lady, and praises her elaborately by comparing her experience to that of an unspecified artist figure, evidently a "ghostly amalgam of Shakespeare and Coleridge," since Holinshed and Purchas are named (1984, p. 27). In the space of twelve lines an entire theory of the historical imagination is sketched, and the origins of Shakespeare's historical plays and Coleridge's pseudohistorical fantasia are located in those poets' encounter with "some strange name" in a text, a name that moved them to summon the ghosts of yesteryear and set them wandering in a "mad tale." (ibid., 31)

Purchas and Holinshed, the only names actually given in a poem entirely about naming, stand metonymically for texts that Shakespeare

and Coleridge read and appropriated for their own reweaving of history. These strange names, appearing suddenly at the end of a tender lyric, have the effect of startling the reader into a mood analogous to the timorous musings of the lady and the creative receptiveness of the poets, so that by the end of the poem a subtle mythical method has interwoven the experiences of lady, poets, and reader, each of whom encounters history and its ghosts in a separate but no longer isolated historical moment: all ages are one.

Similarly, in *A Portrait* Stephen's glimpse of the fabulous artificer is triggered by hearing his own "strange name" called out, a name made uncanny—both strange and familiar—by being transformed into historical and mythical terms, into the "other" of the past (Stephanos Dedalos!"). As a result, "so fluid and impersonal was his own mood, that all ages were as one to him" (p. 150). In fact, Stephen is melodramatically declaring his belief in an aesthetic, spiritualistic historicism, one that Hayden White in his *Tropics of Discourse* (1978) has called "history as palingenesis" (p. 79).

We can firmly assert that for Stephen access to the past is provided by names and words. "Words which [Stephen] did not understand he said over and over to himself till he had learned them by heart: and through them he had glimpse of the real world about him" (p. 53). In his study of Roman history Stephen "had tried to peer into the social life of the city of cities through the words *implere ollam denariorum*" (p. 160). When he visits Cork in chapter II, he finds he is not able to establish the imaginative connection to his father's past in that city. But encountering the strange word "Foetus" carved on a desk in the Queen's College anatomy theater, he experiences the student life of his father's day: "A vision of their life, which his father's words had been powerless to evoke, sprang up before him out of the world cut in the desk" (p. 78). Suddenly the room is filled with the phantoms of sniggering, jostling students; Stephen becomes so lost in this vision that his father must shout out his name to recall him to the present.

In chapter V Stephen witnesses a cold manner in his beloved E. C (Emma Clery), and the casual sight from her sets up a profound historical reaction in him: he "allowed his mind to summon back to itself the age of Downland and Byrd and Nash" (p. 210) "Beating the stone softly" with his ashplant/augur's rod, he conjures up an Elizabethan scene:

> Eyes, opening from darkness of desire, eyes that dimmed the breaking east.
> What was their languid grace but the softness of chambering? And what was their shimmer but the shimmer of that mantled the cesspool of the the court of a slobbering Stuart. And he tasted in the language of memory ambered wines, dying falling of sweet airs, the proud paven: and saw with the eyes of memory kind gentlewomen in Convent Garden wooing from their balconies with sucking mouths and the pox-fouled wenches of the taverns and young wives that, gaily yielding to their ravishers, clipped and clipped again (p. 210).

Here Stephen becomes Peter Parley in a doublet, not in this case stumping along the road to ancient Greece with stick in hand, but entering imaginatively into a previous age, "summoning back" the ghosts of that time, as he taps his ashplant on the stones of the library colonnade and silently incants "old phrases, sweet only with a disinterested sweetness" (p. 210). Stephen conjures up several such historical scenes in *A Portrait*, which designate at and point toward a more insistent use of verbal potentiality of language in representing historical knowledge in Joyce's later fiction.

2.2 Language as a key to history

Language is the key that opens doors of history to Stephen. He communicates with the phantoms of the past, as he is unable to do with the living Emma Clery, by conjuring with the words and images of a prior age, mixing them with his own language and historical moment and

reaching out to the past in an endless effort to meet it on its own term. In the Elizabethan passage in *A Portrait*, Stephen weaves a picture of sixteenth-century England from such verbal curiosities as "chambering," "mantled," "ambered wines," "paven," "poxfouled," and "clipped," mingling these unrefined terms that further situate his language along the sequence of historical events. Similarly, Stephen's vision of Viking Dublin depends heavily on the final word of the passage, the strange word "thingmote." This link between word and world, between the internal and external, subject and object, is the key to Stephen's historiogrphic method. By pondering an unfamiliar word like "thingmote," he gains access to the historical "other," eventually weaving provisionally from such words his historical tapestries in order to close the hermeneutic circle.

This is possible because language, as Stephen silently observes toward the end of chapter IV, is "manycoloured and richly storied" (p. 149). "Storied" is a crucial word here, turning as it does on two senses: (1) having a history, celebrated in legend or history; and (2) decorated with designs representing scenes from story or history. As Dettmar (1996) points out, here are the two "coordinates—spatial and temporal, pictorial and diachoronic"—that Stephen consistently associates with history in *A Portrait* (p. 9). Language is essentially both historical and imagistic, storied and poetic, so that Stephen can privately mock the English dean of studies with the Anglo-Saxon word "tundish," intimating that the dean's rejection of his culture and his past, of his personal "etymology," is reflected in his ignorance of his own tongue. Ironically, however, the dean holds a linguistic advantage over Stephen, for whom words such as "*home, Christ, ale, master*" are "an acquired speech," alien to him as a result of centuries of usage (p. 169).

The method by which Stephen brings words into historical pictures is Saint Ignatius of Loyola's "composition of place," a preparatory exercise to meditation with which Stephen has been familiar since Clongowes. The term "composition of place" is defined by Robert Spoo as "the mental elaboration of a scene, not just any scene prompted by

piety or caprice but one rooted in history and visible reality" (1994, p. 54). Saint Ignatius's exercise, which is intended only for those whose imaginative power are highly developed, has the two historical dimensions that has attracted Stephen's attention deeply: pictoriality and textual basis. It is as much a composition of time as of place. Words such as "thingmote" and "chambering" are for Stephen what the Cross and the Garden of Gethsemane are for the pious mediator: they compose the place and the period. The historical pictures they build up appeal to the mind's eye and the historical sense equally. In his sermon on hell in chapter III, Father Arnall urges the boys to "imagine" graphic scenes of suffering in the infernal regions: "Imagine all this and you will have some idea of the horror of the stench of hell" (106). Father Arnall, who assumes that seeing is believing, horrifies his auditors by composing pictures that pass unpleasantly before their mind's eyes.

2.3 Hayden White's contextuality in *A Portrait*

Stephen's pictures of history in the latter part of *A Portrait*—like Joyce's own fictions—are related to the mode of historical explanation that Hayden White in his *Matahistory* has called "Contextualist" (1973, p. 212), according to which events can be explained in the context they take place. The reason of their occurrence is to be explained in relation with other events in a historical space. The contextualist chooses some elements of the historical field as the subject of his study, whether these isolated elements be as large as the French Revolution or as small as one day in the life of a specific person. This approach, according to White, leads to "synchronic representations of segments or sections of the process, cuts made across the grain of time as it were" (ibid., p. 118). In short, the contextualist deals with tentative representation of historical events rather than with definitive meaning of those events.

Accordingly, Stephen's idealist attitudes toward history and his composition of history is profoundly contextualist, as is his skeptical attitude toward meaning in general. Where the historical contextualist avoids universal laws of cause and effect, his counterpart in fiction

writing eschews traditional modes of storytelling and the controlling presence of an omniscient voice, thereby allowing narrative elements to play an important role in relationship to other elements in the text. The skeptical attitudes of the contextualist toward historical meaning, as experienced by Stephen, in fact, results from his/her rejection of a totalized picture of the historical process and from this idea that history can be experienced only as a text, in an ironic process of weaving and unweaving. Thus, it is not surprising that threads and textiles are recurrent metaphors in the writings of contextualist historians. In his own descriptions of contextualism, Hayden White speaks repeatedly of "threads" and characterizes the historical field in this mode as a "rich fabric" and "richly textured arras web" (ibid., pp. 217-19).

The contextualism of Stephen, like that of Joyce himself, reflects a profoundly *a*historical attitude toward the temporal process, an attitude that leads to an intellectual ambivalence regarding historical knowledge. Rooted in an ideal of aesthetic stasis (though that ideal would be modified over the years), Joycean narrative, as Milesi (2003) holds, inevitably moved away from traditional diachronic (kinetic) models and toward provisional, ironic renderings of isolated segments of life: unexplained epiphanies, short stories with enigmatic conclusion, a novel consisting of eighteen slices of a single day, a bildungsroman in which the subgenre's traditional developmental model is exchanged for a succession of portraits of the artist arranged in a structure that offers minimal or merely implicit transition from portrait to portrait. Joyce had defined bildungsroman as early as 1904 in his essay "A Portrait of the Artist":

> The features of infancy are not commonly reproduced in the adolescent portrait for, so capricious are we, that we cannot or will not conceive the past in any other than its iron, memorial aspect. Yet the past assuredly implies a fluid succession of presents, the development of an entity of which our actual present is a phase only (pp. 8-9).

The passage actually implies two very different ways of representing historical change and personal growth. The phrase "development of an entity" coexists with the antidevelopmental phrase "fluid succession of presents," which reflects not only Joyce's simultaneous use and abuse of the developmental model in his fiction, but also his conflicted attitude toward history itself—a desire "to fly past history's nightmarish nets" (Kreshner, 1987, p.119).

3. Conclusion

In conclusion, a "fluid succession of presents" clearly describes the contextualist trend and its tendency to discrete, self-sufficient tapestries, "cuts made across the grain of time," to use White's metaphor (1973, pp.18-19). But it also sketches out an *a*historical assumption that is central to contextualism, or at least appears as one of its unexpected consequences, for these series of portraits that avoid the usual developmental conception of life and suppress the narrative patterns that reinforce that conception, may risk, in fact, erasing the past, or a sense of the past, from its narrative structure. Moreover, the modernist insists on the priority of subjective experience and tends to encourage the representation of isolated elements rather than collective experiences which can be defined within their historical context. At one point, in *A Portrait*, Stephen confronts this dilemma directly, wondering whether he receives more pleasure from "the reflection of the glowing sensible world through the prism of a language manycoloured and richly storied than from the contemplation of an inner world of individual emotions mirrored perfectly in a lucid supple periodic prose" (p. 149).

Similarly, Joyce's flight from the past in "its iron, memorial aspect," like Nietzsche's rejection of what he called "monumental history" in *The Use and Abuse of History* (1879) entailed the risks inherent in all rebellions against established forms. In short, Stephen's sensitive historical consciousness, internalized in the form of narrative patterns thought the application of textile and fabric images, acknowledges Hayden White's theory of metahistory and his insistence on the role of

language and its figurative character as a way of representation of reality in a typical modernist novel. As a result, we can assume that the emergence of figurative and fictive elements in the novel vindicate the always already textual nature of the past and our relation to it. In fact, the narrativization of past events depicts Joyce's prolonged attempt in achieving a coherent and ordering process of narrative thought an essentially aesthetic act that constitutes history's content as well as the concepts and categories deployed to order and explain historical evidence through the linguistic power of figuration, a notion introduced by White's theory of history, by which young Stephen assembles words into historical picture and then expresses history as a text.

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