

JAMES JOYCE ON ART, POETICS AND PORNOGRAPHY

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ABSTRACT

James Joyce, in his *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, elaborates on the definition of art and illustrates what he had in mind about proper and improper art. Questions of art, poetics and pornography had been central to his mind for a long time. As early as *Portrait of an Artist*, he quotes Aquinas on the subject of "proper" and "improper" art. Proper art has to do with aesthetic experience, which is static, and it doesn't move the audience/reader to anything. It is aesthetic arrest. Although his theory is largely built upon Aristotle and Aquinas, Joyce, as a modernist, "turns his mind toward unknown arts" using the figure of Dedalus as his pioneer and creates a system which he will best examine and apply in his later work such as *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*. This paper will focus on Joyce's ideal model of art as mimetic and static and discuss the validity of the proposition today where everything is so pornographic (i.e. kinetic and diegetic).

Keywords: James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist*, aestheticism, Joycean poetics.

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A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man (1916) is Joyce's famous semi-autobiographical novel written to transform his manuscript of *Stephen Hero* into a totally experimental narrative style. The protagonist Stephen Dedalus reappears in *Ulysses* after these two books. "Joyce's early fiction", as Riquelme states, "moves from the episodic fragments of *Stephen Hero*, through the realistic stories of *Dubliners*, to the discontinuous narrative and flamboyant narration of *A Portrait*. The shift is from either fantasies or seemingly objective, realistic presentations to recollections or other moments of mental activity, structured like memories, that mingle the imaginative and the ostensibly objective in ways that enable a judgement and movement forward" (2009: 111).

A Portrait can be taken as the outline of his succeeding masterpieces *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*. Besides being a Künstlerroman written in modernist style as a literary portrait of a man who wishes to be an artist, it can also be taken as Joyce's treatise on art and esthetics.

As a revolutionary writer Joyce shows almost all the symptoms of modernism in art. Best and Kellner give us a good summary of the main aspects of modernism. For them “Modernism took shape as a tendency in the arts that articulated new artistic styles and techniques and new ideologies about the function of art and the role of the artist in society”. Modernist art sought innovation, novelty, and contemporary thematic relevance, rejecting tradition by negating old aesthetic forms and creating new ones. A Primary characteristic of modernism is its belief in the autonomy of art, involving an active attempt by the artist to abstract art from social ideology in order to focus exclusively on the aesthetic medium itself. Belief in art for art’s sake and the autonomy of art ultimately decentered the aesthetic project from representation and the imitation of reality to a concern with the formal aspects of art. (Best& Kellner, 1997: 126) Hence we have Cézanne, Proust, Picasso, Pound, Baudelaire, Joyce etc. The common point of modernists is their rejection of tradition and therefore problematic relationship with history, their preoccupation with the present moments, and their obsession with innovative styles.

Joyce today however is not a writer who is categorised as modernist only. He is, for many literary scholars like Ihab Hassan, the creator of the monumental texts of the postmodern. Hassan, in *The Postmodern Turn* (1987) refers to Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake* as the pioneer of postmodernism.

However, the poetics of Joyce, his understanding of a work’s artistic purpose owes, quite suprisingly, a lot to Aristotle and Aquinas.

Towards the end of *A Portrait*, Stephen defines art as “the human disposition of sensible or intelligible matter for an esthetic end” (207). By “esthetic end” he means “beauty”, and to clarify what he means by beauty and the aim of art, he refers to Aquinas and Aristotle. The theoretical formulation of Joyce’s aesthetic rigidly followed Thomistic principles neglecting the metaphysical (i.e. Catholic and teleological) aspects of them. His understanding of poetic composition, on the other hand, followed Aristotelian poetics neglecting the didactic and moralistic views of them. Joyce, we might say, was the agnostic Aquinas and amoral and sceptic Aristotle of the 20th century who fictionalized himself as the reincarnation of Daedalus, the inventor artist of Greek mythology. When we open *A Portrait*, the first thing we see is a sentence in Latin: “*et ignotas animum dimittit in artes*: and he turns his mind into unknown arts”. This line is from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* where it refers to Daedalus, the great master craftsman who fashioned the labyrinth in Crete. King Minos, the ruler of Crete, tries to keep Daedalus as a kind of serf, but he determines to fly from Crete with his son Icarus. So Daedalus turns his mind into unknown arts, makes two sets of waxen wings, and they do fly. The opening motto, then, refers to Joyce’s decision to make wings of art. Icarus flew too high, the wax on his wings melted and he fell into the ocean. But Daedalus did not fall. Joseph Campbell states that “Daedalus escaped from Crete to the mainland, Joyce escaped from the provincial culture of Ireland to its great mainland source. He also flew from the symbolism of the Roman Catholic Church to the universals that Jung calls the ‘archetypes’ of which Christian imagery is an

inflection. He escaped from his own spiritual provincialism into the total humanity which is our deep shared heritage.” (2004: 8-9)

In *A Portrait*, after defining art as “the human disposition of sensible or intelligible matter for an esthetic end”, Stephen subdivides it into three forms progressing from one to the next:

These forms are: the lyrical form, the form wherein the artist presents his image in immediate relation to himself; the epic form, the form wherein he presents his image in immediate relation to himself and to others; the dramatic form, the form wherein he presents his image in immediate relation to others (213).

It is the dramatic form of art; that is, mimesis and not diegesis (two terms contrasted by Plato in *The Republic*, Book III) which is the highest stage of artistic creation. Contrary to Aristotle who considered epic as the highest form by virtue of being a mixture of diegesis and mimesis, Joyce puts mimesis, the dramatic form at the highest level:

The esthetic image in the dramatic form is life purified in and reprojected from the human imagination. The mystery of esthetic, like that of material creation, is accomplished. The artist, like the God of creation, remains within or behind or beyond or above his handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent, paring his fingernails” (214-215).

“It is the highest form because the artist finally refines himself out of existence, impersonalizes himself, so to speak.” (214) This deistic view of artistic creation, as we know it, is what Joyce proposed and outlined in *A Portrait* and then applied in *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake* by his technique of direct interior monologues and/or stream of consciousness.

As Block states “clearly the classical two-fold end of art, to instruct and delight, has no place in Joyce’s critical theory. Practical morality goes the same way as political propaganda, and art is justified completely on the basis of sheer aesthetic pleasure *per se*” (1950: 179). After defining art and subdividing it into its kinds, he develops his discussion with the aim of art. For Joyce the key element which makes art genuine is its ability to “arrest”. In this respect we might say Joyce differs from the avantgarde modernist “art for art’s sake” dogma and creates his own by the formula of “art for arrest’s sake”. Stephen in *A Portrait* interprets the Aristotelean concepts of pity and terror so as to explicate what he means by “arrest”:

Pity is the feeling which arrests the mind in the presence of whatsoever is grave and constant in human sufferings and unites it with the human sufferer. Terror is the feeling which arrests the mind in the presence of whatsoever is grave and constant in human sufferings and unites it with the secret cause. (204)

Then he elaborates more on the term “arrest” by adding:

You see I use the word *arrest*. I mean that the tragic emotion is static. Or rather the dramatic emotion is. The feelings excited by improper art are kinetic, desire or loathing. Desire urges us to possess, to go to something; loathing urges us to abandon, to go from something.

The arts which excite them, pornographical or didactic, are therefore improper arts. The esthetic emotion is therefore static. The mind is arrested and raised above desire and loathing. (204-205)

This esthetic arrest, as Campbell aptly notes, is like Dante first seeing Beatrice opening his third eye. *A Portrait* follows the example of Dante in *Vita Nuova* and *The Divine Comedy* (2004: 19). Pornographic art is art that excites desire. It is not proper art. Campbell here illustrates it with an example: If you see a picture of a dear old lady and you think ‘What a lovely old lady! I’d love to have a cup of tea with her’ –that is pornography because you are exciting desire for a relationship to the object. Or you open a magazine and see a picture of a refrigerator and a beautiful girl standing beside it and smiling you think “I would love to have a refrigerator like that”. This is pornography. The language of all commercials is pornographic in that respect. Improper art as such excites desire for the object depicted; our reaction then is not a reaction to the artwork itself. For Campbell, another type of improper art is art critical of society, art in service of sociology. In that respect we might call Orwell’s dystopic fiction pornographic as well. Such art excites loathing and Joyce calls it “didactic art”. The writer of didactic art is a didactic pornographer. For Campbell, then, most of the novels since Zola’s time are didactic pornography. The esthetic experience as implied by Dante’s seeing Beatrice opening his third eye is a kind of waking. This waking can be reached by only a specific type of construction in an artwork.

The esthetic end of the static art is beauty. For Stephen,

Beauty expressed by the artist cannot awaken in us an emotion which is kinetic or a sensation which is purely physical. It awakens, or ought to awaken, or induces or ought to induce, an esthetic stasis, an ideal pity or an ideal terror, a stasis called forth, prolonged, and at last dissolved by what I call the rhythm of beauty (206).

Joyce’s keenly developed poetics then takes on the discussion of the structure of a genuine artwork which is capable of presenting beauty. Here he refers to Aquinas’s definition of beauty: “*Pulcra sunt quae visa placent*/That is beautiful the apprehension of which pleases.” (207) Three things are needed for beauty, *integritas*/wholeness, *claritas*/harmony and *quidditas*/radiance.

Wholeness means that the thing rendered is to be seen as one object set off from everything else in the world. (Campbell, 21) The artwork becomes a unique thing adding its existence to the world as a thing it is and not any other thing. Harmony means coherence and unity, the rhythm of beauty. The radiance means that once the work of art is well achieved, when the object in its wholeness and harmony is fortunately rendered, it fascinates. If it is a radiance that does not overwhelm you, we call it beauty. But if its radiance overwhelms you diminishing your ego that you are in an almost transcendent rapture, this is sublime. (22)

The whole function of the artwork, says Joyce, is to hold you to that rhythmical arrangement. Then you see that it is that thing which it is and no other thing. You witness the quiddity/essence of art. In this type of experience you are not moved with desire, fear or

loathing. You are simply held in “esthetic arrest” by the beautiful accord. Pure object, that is the artwork, turns you in to pure subject. You are simply the eye, the world eye, regarding beyond desire and loathing just as God beholds the world on the seventh day. (22) Didacticism for Joyce is not necessarily teaching. It is putting forth a program, imposing an ideology. For Joyce, great art does not instruct. Great art only radiates, it does not teach a lesson. The term esthetic means having to do with the senses. What the artwork does is present you with a balanced organization, and while you are looking at it in esthetic arrest, for a moment you are in balance and breakthrough to transcendence. This is not instruction. This is revelation; in other words, “epiphany”. (Campbell, 278)

The concept of epiphany in art is the great invention of Joyce. By an epiphany he meant “a sudden spiritual transformation whether in the vulgarity of speech or of gesture or in a memorable phase of the mind itself”. When we examine the concept of epiphany with a closer look we see that the incident or the object can be insignificant, but the experience has to be a significant, awakening, transforming one. There is also an abruptness in the incident, obviously the thing causing the experience of epiphany is not a process, time does not flow there, and it is fixed, because the transformation is a sudden one. As a result epiphany or the poetic revelation should be experienced and analyzed synchronically. The distinction between past, present and future is nullified in epiphanies. If we put it in Virginia Woolf’s terminology, they are “moments of being”. As Sciralli notes: “For Joyce a conversation overheard on the street, a gesture that a person might make unawares, an event in which he himself had participated –all might reveal in an instant some insight into a larger reality of which it was a part, if perceived with a keen selective faculty. Joyce believed that it was for the man of letters to record these epiphanies with extreme care, seeing that they themselves are the most evanescent of moments.” (1989: 45). The artist’s task is to depict these moments and present them in a language and form which are suitable for the task. Epiphany is a part of an object or an event so characterized by the artist as to express much more than that which meets the eye (Shiralli, 46). Since epiphany is not a kinetic, didactic project then the writer of epiphanies is not writing “something”. He is just purely writing. This is how, with reference to Roland Barthes we might say, “the verb to write becomes intransitive” in modernist fiction. (Barthes in White: 2000: 37-38). This is how we might approach Joycean texts as “writerly texts”. Or, to put in Umberto Eco’s words as “open works”. Kinesis means movement. We like to be moved, in traditional realist fiction the action moves from one point to another, time is perceived as chronological and events happen in the domain of causality. For Joyce this becomes pornography since in pornography the key is its ready-made images. Pornography does not seek the exaltation of intellectual faculties, but pursues the ones related to the body, the materiality. Pornographic imagination as Sontag states, results from pornographic works which distort reality and imagination through the manner in which they are shown and through the fact that pornographic imagination prefers ready-mades. (Sontag, 2009: 35) In this respect, texts which are delivering direct messages, putting forth specific programs or imposing certain ideologies in a mode which pacifies the reader with their

ready-made images are for Joyce the opposite of genuine art, they become pornography; or, in Barthes's terms, they are readerly texts.

Umberto Eco in *The Open Work* notices that *Finnegans Wake* is its own poetics. We can say this for *A Portrait* and *Ulysses* as well. For Eco, "In modern art, from Romanticism to our own day, poetics has not been only considered as a project aiming at the production of an artistic object. On the contrary, it has become art's main subject matter, its theme, its reason d'être. Works of art have become treatises on art. Poetry of poetry, poetry about poetry. Mallarmé wrote poetry to discuss the possibility writing poetry. Joyce wrote novels to discuss the possibility of writing novels. A cubist painting is a discourse about the possibilities of a new pictorial space. For Eco, there are some tendencies in contemporary art:

- 1- The work of art becomes the concrete enunciation of its own poetics (and of all the theoretical problems that a poetics generally and, more or less consciously entails: a vision of the world, a notion of the function of art, an idea of human communication, etc)
- 2- The most relevant way of approaching a work of art is to acknowledge the procedures that it exemplifies
- 3- These procedures can themselves be reduced to a model and therefore to an abstraction. Since they can be both described and explained. As a result, there will no longer be any need to speak of a beautiful or ugly work since the success of the work will have to do solely with whether or not the artist has been able to express the problem of poetics he wanted to resolve (1989: 169-170).

Joycean poetics on stasis and radiance, harmony and wholeness in an artwork is based on the concept of epiphany. It is both the content and the form of his art. Parallel to what Eco states, Joyce, by epiphanies both proposes a procedure and exemplifies it through the artwork. *A Portrait* thus becomes the concrete enunciation of its own poetics. At the end of each of *A Portrait*'s five parts, Joyce uses the elevated language to suggest that Stephen achieves a momentary insight and intensity through a transforming experience: his communion with nature and his fellow students after complaining to the Rector at the end of Part I; his sexual initiation in the encounter with a prostitute at the end of Part II; his post-confession, pre-communion peace at the end of Part III; his commitment to art climactically presented as an encounter with an idealized woman at the end of Part IV; and the exclamations about hopes for the future in mythic and racial terms at the end of Stephen's journal. Joyce narrates the story of Stephen by abandoning narrative continuity to make moments that are separated in time contiguous in the narration. (Riquelme, 2009: 116-117)

What is the relevance of Joycean poetics today? How can Joyce, the incruable innovator of modernism be also the pioneer of postmodernism? It is known to most of us that Ihab Hassan puts Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* at the center or the very basis of postmodern fiction in his essays on postmodernism. And he is right doing so, since Joycean fiction involves parody, pastiche, self-referentiality, fragmentation of word and image, open-ended narrative, and multiple points of view. (Attridge, 2009: 1) Joyce takes the name of Dedalus to underline his

tendencies in turning his mind into unknown arts. He wanted to be an inventor of styles. His experimentalist fiction has been a headache to us all. He was such an incurable experimentalist that after *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake* we can tell whether there are any untried, undiscovered expressions in writing left. However, although he was a modernist, inventor of styles and experimental narratives Joyce owes his modernism to his deep connection to the classicists like Aquinas and Aristotle. In this attitude, he reminds us of T.S. Eliot, the other modernist who insisted on the importance of tradition. Both writers acknowledged the importance of tradition on one hand, and tried to approach to past, present and future synchronically on the other. As he makes Stephen say in *A Portrait*: “This race and this country and this life [had] produced [him]” (170). Joyce’s extraordinary fidelity to past time thus means that the ideas he presents in his books are not those of the modernist avant-garde. He does not suffer “the dissolution of sensibility”. That’s why he was praised by T.S. Eliot for his rewriting of myth in *Ulysses* as a modern text. It is through his style that modernism is implied. The roots of *Ulysses* are in *A Portrait* in every phase of the soul its own special language; *Finnegans Wake* is a logical conclusion from that premise. For Butler, a futurist modernism without past and without future was not Joyce’s purpose. It is the synthesis of the past and present, rather than a merely ironic juxtaposition of the classic and modern that seems to be the one of Joyce’s most distinctive achievements. (2009: 77) Memory is never just personal in the novels of Joyce. It is always also cultural and historical.

To conclude, Joyce had written his own poetics, his ought and ought not to be’s and opened new horizons for the fiction which came after. His use of the cinematic technique of montage, his concept of time and space, his way of reincarnating past, history and myth in his texts in the form of parody and pastiche, his understanding of intertextuality, his revolutionary treatment of language, self-referentiality are today the underlying features of postmodern fiction as well. “His stylistic diversity enshrines an essentially relativist attitude towards the truthful depiction of reality.” (Butler, 2009: 69) We might say that Joyce created his poetics as a new but absolutely Einsteinian universe, he imagined a chaosmos of art for us and presented a new ontology for the contemporary fiction. Since then he has remained behind, beyond or above his handiwork, invisible, refined, out of existence, indifferent, paring his fingernails.

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