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IN SEARCH OF JAMES JOYCE'S *ULYSSES*: BETWEEN HERMENEUTICS AND SEMIOTICS

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In the following paper, I shall discuss how semiotics, in conjunction with hermeneutics, can illuminate the structure of James Joyce's *Ulysses* as a literary text. First, I shall discuss how two important poet-critics evaluated *Ulysses* in terms of classical myths and literary precedents. In this way, I hope to indicate the strengths but also the limitations of traditional criticism. Second, I hope to demonstrate the function of the inter-text in the drama of *Ulysses,* particularly with respect to the relationship between Stephen Dedalus and Leopold Bloom. Here I shall suggest how the narrative problem of an "absent center" can be considered in terms of semiotic investigation. Finally, I hope to show how a dialogical reading can support the belief in the "hermeneutical self" as part of the novel's underlying content. This new reading will allow me to more fully develop the semiotic approach to literature and criticism.

Almost since its date of publication, *Ulysses* has been examined as a cardinal example of a twentieth-century work that combines two traditions of literary influence. Both influences are posited in terms of a certain reading of literary history. On the one hand, the novel has been considered from the standpoint of Symbolism and nineteenth-century aestheticism. For instance, the influence of late Romantic literature has been invoked in order to explain how the doctrine of correspondences can be used to illuminate various parallels between modern and Homeric time and even relationships between characters in the novel.[1] On the other hand, the historical approach to literature also indicates

[1]Symbolist interpretation provided the dominant code during the early period of Joyce criticism.

that Realism constitutes an equally important influence on Joyce's work. Joyce's early reading of Ibsen in the original Norwegian is important to his sole experiment in drama as well as to his basic attitude toward literary form.[2]

However, while *Ulysses* can be described in terms of either Symbolism and Realism, its actual place in literary history cannot be clarified on this basis alone. Symbolism and Realism are in deep conflict concerning the nature of art and the cultural vocation of the artist. S. L Goldberg has offered a partial combination of both approaches, which he carefully distinguishes (Goldberg: 1963; 211-247). Nevertheless, a synthetic approach becomes difficult to maintain as soon as the novel is read as an original contribution to twentieth-century literature, rather than as a continuation of "classical" tradition.

Two of the earliest critics of *Ulysses*, T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, were also creative writers whose contributions to literature required the Joycean precedent. The nature of Joyce's achievement constituted something of a "breakthrough" for both individuals, whose literary work becomes difficult to separate from the critical response that began to evolve once the novel was published (Kenner: 1971: 381). At the same time, both authors represent dominant strains in a critical discourse that was produced by two different literary traditions. Eliot's interpretation emphasizes the conservative function of myth as a central fact in determining the place of the novel in literary history. His interpretation is clearly indebted to the Symbolist conception of literature as an internal event that possesses a relatively stable meaning. Pound's interpretation more strongly emphasizes the influence of the French prose tradition on *Ulysses*. Pound is partial to the Flaubert's conception of literary narrative and adopts a "novelistic" standpoint in his critical overview.

Eliot's interpretation is overtly concerned with Joyce's use of myth as a "method" that enables him to impose unity on his subject matter. His conception of myth identifies archaic elements in literature with an ahistorical conception of order. At the same time, it represents a protest against modernity by elevating the purely cyclic aspects of life to a new position of pre-eminence. In both respects, his conception of myth pre-figures an attitude that will be developed by critics such as C. S. Lewis and Northrop Frye during a somewhat later period.[3] For Eliot, Joyce's use of Homer in *Ulysses* implies both distance and a criticism of modern life: "It is simply a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history" (Eliot: 1963; 201).

By emphasizing the element of order and control in his interpretation of Homeric allusion, Eliot asserts the importance of past literature to the on-going vitality of present literature. This assertion is inseparable from the claim that

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A work like Stuart Gilbert's *James Joyce's Ulysses*, for instance, provides some insight into the function of organic metaphors in the novel and makes use of a correspondence theory of meaning.

[2]The crucial example is *Exiles*, Joyce's sole excursion into drama. Consciously constructed according to Ibsenian principles, the play utilizes conventions of distance that typify Realism.

[3]Medieval-Renaissance scholarship has been significantly enriched by the contributions of C. S. Lewis, whose seminal work, *The Allegory of Love*, is probably indebted to early twentieth-century conceptions of myth and ritual. Northrop Frye's more recent study, *An Anatomy of Criticism*, presents a "cyclic" view of literary history that also owes much to Eliot's criticism and poetry.

literature can be evaluated as a canonical institution. Nevertheless, while Eliot's critical discourse on Joyce's *Ulysses* is overtly conservative in its assertion of canonical values, it does not preclude a new interpretation of literature. "Tradition and the Individual Talent" was composed in 1919 and represents a more complex effort to temper Romantic individualism and the aesthetics of experience with a renewed emphasis on the role of tradition and community in artistic life.

While Eliot's overt pronouncements on *Ulysses* seem to support a flight from history and contemporary reality, they can be read as well from the standpoint of a **structural** conception of canon formation. In the 1919 essay, Eliot's appraisal of tradition as an artistic resource champions historical awareness, but it also counters a merely progressive understanding of cultural achievements. His conception of structure is implied in the following statement: "The existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art among them" (Eliot: 1964; 50).

Eliot's conception of artistic structure is implicit rather than explicit in his article on *Ulysses*. As an explicit discussion of Joyce's literary method, his invocation of the ordering function of myth implies a stable conception of structure rather than a dynamic one. However, when he assigns *Ulysses* a new place in the canon of literature, Eliot implicitly "deconstructs" the usual interpretation of canon formation. If a new work of art can alter the "ideal order" that constitutes the literary canon under normal circumstances, then perhaps the very process of canon formation is inherently disturbing.

While Eliot's reflections on *Ulysses* derive much of their significance from Symbolist evaluation, Pound's early response to the same work represents something of a minority opinion in twentieth-century criticism. Joyce was clearly indebted to Realism, however, in his early ideas about art and in his basic approach to literary composition.[4] Pound openly insists on the importance of Flaubert to early and middle Joyce (Pound: 1967; 174-175). In this way, he replaces the Symbolist apotheosis of metaphoric expression with a new emphasis on metonymic hyperbole.[5]

Furthermore, Pound departs from the Symbolist tradition in his unique conception of the relationship between novelistic form and content. Traditional criticism adopts the adequacy of form and content as a basic principle in literary evaluation. On the contrary, Pound argues that *Ulysses* implicitly contests this adequacy in terms of an underlying difference. In "James Joyce et Pécuchet," he

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[4]Insofar as Stephen Dedalus is a fictional surrogate for the author, the discourse on aesthetics near the end of *The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* is consistent with what Realism recommended and provides an image of the artist that resembles early Joyce:

> The artist, like the God of creation, remains within or behind or above his handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent, paring his fingernails (Joyce: 1965: 215).

[5]Pound's emphasis on the importance of Realism to Joyce's work can be considered along linguistic lines. Jakobson stresses that Realism is opposed to both Romanticism and Symbolism in its extensive use of metonymic ellipses: "Following the path of contiguous relationships, the Realist author metonymically digresses from plot to the atmosphere and from characters to the setting in place and time. He is fond of synecdochic details" (Jakobson: 1990: 131).

suggests two different things about Joyce's novel (Pound: 1966; 89). First, his comparison of the novel to a sonata establishes a structural homology, rather than a mere equivalence. The use of a musical analogy helps us understand the structure of *Ulysses* as a relatively stable achievement. In this same essay, however, Pound's reference to the father/son relationship as an ancient theme raises the issue of content to a new level of literary complexity. Second, therefore, his insistence on the importance of this relationship acquires an epic meaning only when the "baroque" aspects of the novel are strongly emphasized. Far from sustaining a purely classical understanding, Pound's reading leads to the threshold of **semiotic** discoveries.

In *Ulysses*, the father/son relationship testifies to a peculiar process of destabilization. While Pound's allusion to an ancient theme is concerned with a chaotic background, Jean-Michel Rabaté refers to the semiotic core of this special relationship:

> To be a father, symbolically, does not imply merely a real paternity; on the contrary, it takes death, absence, and radical otherness into account. Bloom can be said to become Stephen's father only after they have parted; it is when they are closest that this relationship is impossible. Contact is the reverse side of the coin of mystical fatherhood (Rabaté : 1987; 87).

Rabaté's Lacanian analysis of the relationship between Bloom and Dedalus places the quest for paternity within the context of loss or absence. In *Ulysses*, Dedalus/Telemachus goes in search of Bloom/Odysseus. The story that Dedalus re-enacts is a "homeomorph" in the topological sense (Kenner: 1971; 33). However, his strange adventure is also an expression of psychic deferral. Stephen's real father is Simon Dedalus, not Leopold Bloom. Hence, within the space of transposition, Homer's *Odyssey* becomes an "inter-text" that defers the meaning of Joyce's novel (Kristeva: 1984; 59-60).

Stephen Dedalus intimates that paternity is inseparable from an original loss that must be endured before it can be understood:

> Fatherhood, in the sense of conscious begetting, is unknown to man. It is a mystical state, an apostolic succession, from only begetter to only begotten. On that mystery and not on the madonna which the cunning Italian intellect flung to the mob of Europe the church is founded, like the world, macro- and microcosm, upon the void. Upon incertitude, upon unlikelihood (Joyce: 1961; 207).

Dedalus argues that paternity itself is founded on a hidden absence. He suggests (in an arrogant enough fashion) that even the highest institutions rest on a symbolic journey over a semiotic field.[6] He obscurely identifies the semiotic

[6]The relationship between Dedalus and Bloom acquires its cultural meaning in terms of a semiotic field that underlies linguistic expression. In spite of his protestations to the contrary, Dedalus already indicates how the "mystical state" that coincides with paternity is a belated

process through which the Thetic emerges as the precondition of enunciation and denotation, or symbolism in general.[7]

Although Dedalus is preoccupied with aesthetic matters, he also demonstrates how "aestheticism" is an unsatisfactory response to basic human concerns. In early Joyce, he represents detachment and impersonality as artistic attitudes. Later on, however, he suggests the paradox of creativity when he dramatizes the emergence of the Thetic over and against the semiotic field. Because the Symbolic emerges in this way, Shakespeare in Joyce's novel does not need to be a tragic hero in order to produce *Hamlet*. Dedalus finds it easy to argue that the play was written in the months following a very real death (Joyce: 1961; 207). In such a situation, Shakespeare's deceased Father does not reappear as the play's most famous ghost. The author himself becomes the ghost of *Hamlet* and his own role as guide presupposes distance as well as integration. For Shakespeare as well as Dedalus, the loss of a real Father is a requirement for the scene of instruction that follows.

Nevertheless, while Dedalus remains haunted by an absence that he cannot master, Bloom requires him as a "signifier of absence" who can assist him on his long journey home (Rabaté : 1987; 97). Bloom's journey is pre-eminently a path of language: a multiplicity of styles, rather than the pursuit of any obvious goal, characterizes the space of this journey from beginning to end. The use of style as a method for suggesting the complexity of life allows Joyce to posit overlapping discourses as equally valid forms of expression. Whenever an ultimate style begins to reveal the truth that underlies appearances, the discrepancy between form and content qualifies the meaning of any particular disclosure. Within this context, truth emerges in terms of plurality:

> *Ulysses* seems to posit a **noumenal** level which does not deny the multiplicity of phenomenal interpretative ones, but which is behind and beyond them, necessary inasmuch as without it, they could not exist at all. As *Ulysses* proceeds, the phenomenal dimension discovers that it can enjoy itself almost, as it were, at the expense of the noumenal one, but only at the cost of relinquishing a denominative, or final interpretation of it (Goldman: 1967; 95).

The co-existence of these two levels or dimensions sometimes constitutes the reader's initial response to the novel. However, the inadequacy of any "final interpretation" is guaranteed by the style of the text as a semiotic chronicle.

While the relationship between Bloom and Dedalus reveals the basis for stylistic diversity in terms of a signifier of absence, this diversity is often difficult to distinguish from sheer confusion, even madness. For instance, the famous "Circe" episode is really an amazing dream sequence that culminates in a vision

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development rather than an original condition.

[7]Semiotics can interpret Frege's *Bedeutung* as an indication of how the emergence of the Thetic presupposes a break in the semiotic field (Kristeva: 1984; 53-54). Somewhat like Mallarmé, Dedalus believes that "nothingness" lies at the heart of creativity, but he also invites us to interpret his meanings as the mirror-image of an endless quest, and to invert them as "aesthetic" parody.

that combines strange wit and minimal humor. Lack of characterization as well as the atmosphere of lust and mayhem produce a "carnivalesque" moment of considerable power:

> The novel *incorporating carnivalesque structure* is called **polyphonic**. Bakhtin's examples include Rabelais, Swift, and Dostoievski. We might also add the "modern" novel of the twentieth century - Joyce, Proust, Kafka - while specifying that the modern polyphonic novel, although analogous in its status, where monologism is concerned, is clearly marked off from them (Kristeva: 1980; 71).

The modern equivalent is anterior to language (Proust, Kafka) or merely "unreadable" (Joyce). Nevertheless, *Ulysses* functions as one of the most vivid examples of the "dialogical imagination" in recent times.

Bloom's unclear relationship to Dedalus culminates in the vision of a small boy lost in childhood. The apparition of Rudy Bloom momentarily flares in our minds at the end of the "Circe" episode, as if in response to his Father's sudden exclamation (Joyce: 1961; 609). The name of Rudy, as pronounced by the Father, suddenly returns us to the words of Dedalus on the name in general as a personal and literary inscription:

> What's in a name? That is what we ask ourselves in childhood when we write the name that we are told is ours. A star, a daystar, a firedrake rose at his birth. It shone by day in the heavens alone, brighter than Venus in the night, and by night it shone over delta in Cassiopeia, the recumbent constellation which is the signature of his initial among the stars (Joyce: 1961; 210).

As Bloom nears the end of his journey, the name of his son (which is also that of his Father) becomes an image of his own rebirth. Just as our most highly celebrated dramatist "read" the heavens as a genotext for traces of his own future, Bloom's allusion to paternity places him at the threshold of semiotic experience (Kristeva: 1984; 86-87).

In truth, names both reveal and conceal. They do not merely refer as Realism assumes, nor do they simply allude to an invisible and underlying order as Symbolism implies. In the past, literary criticism has tended to evaluate *Ulysses* in terms of Realism or Symbolism as historical movements, or has assigned the work a "synthetic" meaning. However, this novel does not derive its value from its relationship to an earlier literary period, nor does it reconcile disparate elements and produce a mixed form of literature.[8] Its principal character, Leopold Bloom, may function as the "middle term" between symbolism and

[8]Arnold Goldman summarizes the inadequacy of the traditional approach in the following terms:

> Neither the approach from 'fact' nor the approach from 'myth' can alone satisfy our experience, nor can an approach which pretends to a comfortable synthesis - the celebrated 'fusion', **correspondance** or parallelism (Goldman: 1966; 107).

semiotics, Stephen and Molly, but he is neither more nor less real than his poetic double. The tension between logic and ecstasy places Bloom's voyage in a semiotic framework and establishes the limits of a new kind of literature.[9] Within this framework, Bloom approaches the signs of his paternity in a way that instates his absence/presence as a semiotic agent. Dedalus, in turn, interprets his relationship to Bloom on the basis of an on-going hermeneutics of the self, rather than as a purely "aesthetic subject" whose artistic reveries are often little more than socially amusing.[10] Dedalus/Joyce can finally become the writer of immanence rather than the fabulous artificer when the difference between aesthetics and self-understanding has been effectively overcome (Gadamer: 1991; 97). Hence, by placing the artist within a semiotic framework, criticism ceases to refer to a purely subjective performance and acquires the ability to articulate the shape and form of poetic truth.

[9]Kristeva refers to the appearance of a new kind of literature that dramatizes the subject's dialectical immersion in language. She argues that this new literature began to emerge at the end of the nineteenth century. Hence the more recent literature of Joyce and Bataille surpasses madness and realism but maintains the tension between "delirium" and "logic" (Kristeva, 1984: 82).

[10]The notion of a "hermeneutical self" is implicit in early and late Heidegger. Paul Ricoeur provides a useful summary of how a hermeneutics of the self emerges alongside Heidegger's critique of the **cogito** as an absolute starting-point for most philosophies of consciousness (Ricoeur: 1974; 223-235).

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