

JOYCE STUDIES IN ITALY

21

**LANGUAGE
AND LANGUAGES
IN JOYCE'S FICTION**

Edited by
Serenella Zanotti

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ANICIA

Volume pubblicato con il contributo di The James Joyce Italian Foundation

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Direttore responsabile: Franca Ruggieri

Registrazione Num.R.G, 1885/2016, Tribunale Ordinario di Cassino

ISSN 2281 – 373X

© 2019, Editoriale Anicia s.r.l. - Roma

<http://www.edizionianicia.it/store/>

info@edizionianicia.it

Single copy price: €18.00

Subscription rates (one issue annually):

Personal: €18.00

Institutional: €30.00

The journal will be published on the following website:

<https://thejamesjoyceitalianfoundation.wordpress.com/>

Purchases can be made by directly contacting the publisher and then completing a bank transfer covering the price of the book and postage costs (this is €5.00 within Italy, but varies according to the country of destination).

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MATERIAL LANGUAGE AND SITUATED COGNITION IN
JAMES JOYCE'S *A PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST AS A
YOUNG MAN*

In January 1904, Joyce composed in just a couple of weeks a short essay titled “A Portrait of the Artist”, which he submitted to the Dublin review *Dana, A Magazine for Independent Thought*. While the essay was praised by Joyce’s brother Stanislaus as a “spontaneous overflow of genius” (Gabler 2018: 14), the editors of *Dana* rejected it on the grounds of its incomprehensibility. If it is true that the essay is riddled with enigmatic sentences and obscure ideas, it provides an important blueprint for *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and marks, as Hans Walter Gabler has convincingly shown, a crucial moment in the passage from the unfinished and unpublished *Stephen Hero* to the final form of Joyce’s semi-biographical novel. As Gabler asserts, the essay was “an effort to break the pattern set up by the seven first chapters as read out in the summer of 1903, an attempt to work out an alternative way of writing the novel Joyce wanted to write” (Gabler 2018: 15). In 1904, Joyce gradually abandons the original plan of writing 63 chapters “numerologically related to the periods of life of a man” (Gabler 2018: 13), in favour of five chapters giving a much more distilled account of the same life. One of the keys to understanding this radical revision might be traced to the author’s conception of artistic subjectivity, and is to be found precisely in “A Portrait of the Artist”. At the beginning of the essay, Joyce presents his conception of a growing subject, alongside the description of the kind of portrait that he wishes to present:

the past assuredly implies a fluid succession of presents, the development of an entity of which our actual present is a phase only. Our world,

again, recognises its acquaintance chiefly by the characters of beard and inches and is, for the most part, estranged from those of its members who seek through some art, by some process of the mind as yet untabulated, to liberate from the personalised lumps of matter that which is their individuating rhythm, the first or formal relation of their parts. But for such as these a portrait is not an identificative paper but the curve of an emotion. (*CP* 211)

According to this quite cryptic description, literary portraiture is not meant to render the subject through facts of physical and physiological growth (“characters of beard and inches”), as initially is the case in *Stephen Hero*, but through a mode of artistic scrutiny which recognises and emphasises the rhythms at the heart of the subject’s psychological development. To bring these rhythms to the fore and delineate the portrait of Stephen Dedalus, main character of Joyce’s first published novel, Joyce focuses on the workings of the mind, scrutinising different stages of apprehension and perception which frame the subject’s development. As the division between external and internal realities is tested and challenged, what emerges from Joyce’s novel is a subject whose cognitive processes are inextricable from the realities which could be defined as external to the character, but that become much more than an inert environment surrounding him.

Inward turn and extended mind

The attention which Joyce and other modernist writers give to the inner life of their characters might be seen as a turning away from the external realities in which the subject is placed. The phrase “inward turn”, first coined in the 1970s by German critic Erich Kahler and often used to characterise modernist writing, undoubtedly contributes to this impression. However, the modernists’ psychological inspection does not seem to lead to a dismissal of external realities, but rather to a renewed interaction with them. In Kahler’s view, the “inward turn” involves a “progressive internalisation of events, an increasing displacement of outer space”, as “the world is integrated into the ego, the illuminated self” (Kahler 1973: 5-6). According to David Herman, the idea of an “inward turn” as con-

ceived by Kahler develops on the premises of a Cartesian mind seen as an internal space which is entirely separated from the external world. As he challenges this model of the mind, Herman claims that modernist narratives by James, Joyce, and Woolf “allow the mind to be imagined as a kind of distributional flow, interwoven with rather than separated from situations, events, and processes in the world” (Herman 2011: 255). If we follow this idea, the mind of the subject does not integrate external realities into a self-enclosed and independent entity, but is in continuous contact with them, as the separation between outer and inner space ceases to be so clear-cut.

In order to develop his argument, Herman draws on a relatively new trend in cognitive science which considers the mind as situated in and distributed among its surroundings. Questioning the Cartesian split of mind, body, and external world, research on so-called situated and distributed cognition creates a “picture of mental activity as dependent on the situation or context in which it occurs” (Aydede and Robbins 2008: 3). According to Murat Aydede and Philip Robbins, editors of *The Cambridge Handbook of Situated Cognition* (2008), three main models of mind can be gathered under the umbrella of situated cognition. First, the embodied mind, which claims that “without the cooperation of the body, there can be no sensory input from the environment and no motor output from the agent”. Thus, “perception, thought, and action are [...] constitutively interdependent” (Aydede and Robbins 2008: 4). The second model is the embedded mind, which sees cognition as a partial result of “causal processes that span the boundary separating the individual organism from the natural, social, and cultural environment” (Aydede and Robbins 2008: 6). Lastly, the more radical vision is the one of the extended mind, which claims that the mind is not simply embedded in the world but “leaks out into [it]” as “cognitive activity is distributed across individuals and situations” (Aydede and Robbins 2008: 8). Embodied, embedded, and extended mind are all built on what philosopher Andy Clark called the “porous” model of mind, which develops on the idea that “thinking, cognising, and feeling may all (at times) depend directly and non-instrumentally upon the ongoing work of the body and/or the extra organismic environment” (Clark 2012: 276). As a consequence, “the actual local operations that make cognising possible and that give content and character to our mental

life include inextricable tangles of feedback, feedforward, and feedaround loops that promiscuously criss-cross the boundaries of brain, body, and world” (Clark 2012: 277).

As these models of the human mind gain traction, literary critics are beginning to detect a certain similarity between them and Joyce’s attempts to render the working of the human mind in his writing. Dirk Van Hulle asserts that “Joyce intuited much of what in the last few decades has come to be known as ‘distributed cognition’” (Van Hulle 2016: 3). According to Van Hulle, “the extended mind theory not only applies to Joyce’s own daily practice as a writer. It also applies to many of his characters” (Van Hulle 2016: 35). If, as Clark claims, “sustained attention to embodiment and action renders the bounds of skins and skull increasingly transparent, revealing processes running through body and world as integral parts of the machinery of mind and cognition” (Clark 2012: 288), Joyce’s “inward turning” shows how the subject interacts with the material environment and is shaped by it. As the personal thoughts of the artist are put into words and reflected upon, a particular type of thinking begins to emerge, one which reveals a subject who is emotionally and cognitively affected by the material world he inhabits. Blurring any clear-cut boundary between internal and external realities, language becomes one of the key elements which helps to situate the character’s cognition in his material environment.

The material language of *A Portrait*

In *A Portrait*, language goes from a system of representation to a position in which words are not simple denotative entities, but become themselves a source for physical, mental, and emotional response in the subject. Critics and readers noticed the unusual intensity and physicality of the novel’s language from its publication in 1914. Several early reviewers commented on its direct, unsettling effect, observing how “coarse, unfamiliar words are scattered about the book unpleasantly”, remarking that “certain phrases would be intensely repugnant to some readers”, and that “even his most casual descriptions haunt the mind by their vividness” (Demin 1970: 85-89). Throughout the novel, Stephen glances at words, explores

the variety of literal and symbolic meanings that they bear, ponders on their texture and consistency as he wonders about their colours and marvels at their beauty. As they occupy the mind of the character, their meaning gradually changes and develops, as it does so modifying the subject's perceptions of events. Language is both refashioned by the subject and part of that material reality the subject observes, an object amongst objects, placed in a hybrid space where interior and exterior realities meet. Thus, language becomes a way to situate cognition in the physical body and the material environment. As Clark claims

coming to grips with our own special cognitive nature demands that we take very seriously the material reality of language: its existence as an additional [...] structure in our internal and external environment. From sounds in the air to inscriptions on the printed page, the material structures of language both reflect, and systematically transform, our thinking and reasoning about the world. As a result, our cognitive relation to our own words and language defies any simple logic of inner versus outer. (Clark 2008: 59)

In *A Portrait*, Stephen enters more or less consciously in continuous contact with similar sounds and inscriptions, developing a particular relationship with language which will in turn determine his way of thinking and acting in the world. Stephen never stops at one single meaning or abstract definition but approaches words as things to interpret and gradually discover, entities pertaining to, and encompassing, mind, body, and external realities. An instance of Stephen's college life, characterised by the scrutiny of the word "suck", might help to clarify this idea.

We all know why you speak. You are McGlade's suck. Suck was a queer word. The fellow called Simon Moonan that name because Simon Moonan used to tie the prefect's false sleeves behind his back and the prefect used to let on to be angry. But *the sound was ugly*. Once he had washed his hand in the lavatory of the Wicklow hotel and his father pulled the stopper up by the chain after and the dirty water went down through the hole in the basin. And when it had all gone down slowly the hole in *the basin had made a sound like that: suck*. Only louder. *To remember that and the white look of the lavatory made him feel cold and then hot*. There were two cocks that you turned and water

came out: cold and hot. He felt cold and then a little hot: and he could see the names printed on the cocks. That was a very queer thing. (*P* 8-9, my emphasis)

Stephen starts by associating the word with a tangible lived experience in order to understand its meaning. Soon, however, the event that could explain the meaning of the word “suck” as denoting “a school boy who curries favour with a teacher” as the OED would have it, is interrupted by a shift from meaning to sound. Seizing on a material aspect which goes beyond mere denotative function, Stephen focuses on the qualitative character the word has for him, as he remarks that “the sound was ugly”. Leaving signification aside, the word is linked to the not-so-pleasant experience of seeing dirty water going down the drain. In turn, the memory of the white lavatory brings back the feelings of hotness and coldness, which Stephen relates to the action of turning the “hot” and “cold” taps of the basin so that water streams out of them. Similarly to the ugly sound of “suck”, the labels “hot” and “cold” printed on the taps seem to have a direct role in the sensations produced by the water, as the being “hot and then a little cold” is linked with the visual experience of “the names printed on the cocks”. Words become connotational rather than denotational. To borrow the words of cognitive scientist and linguist Didier Bottineau, language seems to be “reconsidered in terms of sensorimotor interactions with an environment”, as words are “reconstructed from a phenomenological point of view” (Bottineau 2010: 267, 281). The communion between signifying potential and personal experience produces bodily reactions in Stephen. As he is “strongly affected by the word’s physical, acoustic properties” (Attridge 2003: 133), Stephen constantly re-evaluates the meaning of the word against the events of his life, considering the effects that language in its phonetic materiality, and not as a simple collection of abstract symbols, might have on him.

A similar process is put into place as Stephen reflects on the expression “Tower of Ivory”, part of the “litany of the Blessed Virgin”. While he acknowledges the religious context from which the idiom originates, Stephen links the epithet to a much more personal experience, attempting to understand the meaning of the words through the bodily sensations and qualities they suggest.

Eileen was a protestant and when she was young she knew children that used to play with protestants and the protestants used to make fun of the litany of the Blessed Virgin. Tower of Ivory, they used to say, House of Gold! How could a woman be a tower of ivory and a house of gold? Who was right then? [...] Eileen had long white hands. One evening when playing tig she had put her hands over his eyes: long and white and thin and cold and soft. That was ivory: a cold white thing. That was the meaning of *Tower of Ivory*. (P 29)

Linking the word “ivory” with the colour white and the sensations produced by Eileen’s hands, Stephen develops a definition for the expression “Tower of Ivory” based on bodily perceptions rather than on the mystical signification of the epithet. A similar reasoning is reiterated a couple of pages later, as Stephen reflects once more on Eileen’s hands in relation to the word “ivory”.

Eileen had long thin cool hands too because she was a girl. They were like ivory: only soft. That was the meaning of *Tower of Ivory* but protestants could not understand it and made fun of it. One day he had stood beside her looking into the hotel grounds [...] She had put her hand into his pocket where his hand was and he had felt how cool and thin and soft her hand was. She had said how pockets were funny things to have: and then all of a sudden she had broken away and had run laughing down the sloping curve of the path. Her fair hair had streamed out behind her like gold in the sun. *Tower of Ivory. House of Gold*. By thinking of things you could understand them. (P 35-36)

In the passage, the actual meaning of “Tower of Ivory” is once more “explained” through a lived experience and through recollected impressions. As Stephen fails to give a definition or to explain the symbolic meaning of the epithet, his remark that “by thinking of things you could understand them” appears rather comedic. Yet, while Stephen has not advanced in his conceptual or mystical understanding of the words, he has managed to ground them in the recollection of a lived experience. Finding the meaning of expressions, “thinking about things” in order to understand them, is for Stephen a cognitive experience which is far from abstract, dependent as it is on lived moments and the sensations generating from them. The expressions “Tower of Ivory” and “House of Gold” become

synonymous with Eileen's "long thin cool hands" and "fair hair stream[ing] out behind her like gold in the sun". According to cognitivist scientists Raymond W. Gibbs Jr and Ana Cristina Pelosi Silva de Macedo, "concepts arise in context from a tight coupling of cognitive and motor processes that are most relevant in that situation" (Gibbs and Pelosi 2010). Stephen does not approach symbolic expressions such as "Tower of Ivory" and "House of Gold" as "amodal symbols" which are "context-independent and disembodied" (Gibbs and Pelosi 2010). Rather, he folds them into his personal lived experience, showing once more how language can generate bodily sensations which in turn suggest the ascription of meaning to words, in a process of speculative trial-and-error which mobilises mental and bodily experiences at once.

Words Inscribed

The effects that words have on Stephen, and the role they play in his cognitive processes, become even more apparent as they are impressed on actual material surfaces. The moment they are inscribed, words become even more explicitly a part of the material world surrounding the subject. It is during a trip to Cork with his father that Stephen first experiences the force of inscriptions. The material world assaults him in the form of a single word engraved in the anatomy theatre of Cork university, sculpting his thinking process while it redefines the relation with his surroundings.

On the desk before him he read the word *Foetus* cut several times in the dark stained wood. The sudden legend startled his blood: he seemed to feel the absent students of the college about him and to shrink from their company. A vision of their life, which his father's words had been powerless to evoke, sprang up before him out of the word cut in the desk. (P 75)

Defining the engraving as a "textual object", Gregory Castle considers its effect as "a potent lyrical outcry from the world of objects" as "this carved fragment alters narrative direction and utterly changes Stephen's perceptions" (Castle 2017: 275). More effective than his father's spoken words, the word carved on the desk shakes Stephen's senses as it feeds his imagination, summoning memories which he has not lived in first

person. Stephen sees “a broadshouldered student with a moustache [...] cutting in the letters with his jackknife” while “other students stood or stay near him laughing at his handiwork” (*P* 75). Not only does the written inscription stimulate Stephen’s imagination and create very vivid mental images, but it seems to have a much deeper relation with his thinking process, and a more direct effect on his body. The word cut in the wood “stared upon him, mocking his bodily weakness and futile enthusiasms and making him loathe himself for his own mad and filthy orgies” (*P* 76), producing the same guilt which Stephen starts to feel as a consequence of his desire for E.C. and the disgust he will experience after his encounter with the prostitute. Bodily and mental states find resonance in one another, as “the spittle in his throat grew bitter and foul to swallow and the faint sickness climbed to his brain so that for a moment he closed his eyes and walked on in darkness” (*P* 76). In his analysis of the passage, Hunter Dukes asserts that the letters carved on the desk “mediate the way in which Stephen views himself—making him loath his past actions. They even cause an involuntary response, affecting Stephen’s glands, taste buds, and optical perception” (Dukes 2017: 1).

Stephen’s Composition to E.C.

Shifting from observation to active production, the last section of the article looks at Stephen’s own written experiments in the novel, to consider to what extent these writings can be seen as a way for Stephen to concentrate on an inner and spiritual dimension detached from his body and the material world. The main example of Stephen’s own writing in the novel is the villanelle he composes in the middle of the last chapter. On the morning of the composition, the moment of inspiration is described in a highly abstract and disembodied way. Soon, however, the abstraction is gradually integrated in Stephen’s physical body. “The verses passed from his mind to his lips and, murmuring them over, he felt the rhythmic movement of a villanelle pass through them” (*P* 183). From a state of pure ecstasy, portrayed in lyrical prose, the simple rhymes of the villanelle start to call Stephen’s body into play, as his murmuring lips attempt to catch their movement, going “on stumbling through half verses, stam-

mering and baffled” (*P* 183). According to David Spurr, this hesitation, quite common in Joyce, attests to “a language that calls attention to its own materiality, as well as to its source in the body as the physical origin of the spoken utterance” (Spurr 2011: 122). As Stephen’s body cannot quite keep up with the rhythm of the villanelle, the verbal creation finds itself stuck in a moment of corporeal hesitation, until the rhythm “died out at once”. In order to prevent the full interruption of the verses’ rhythmic movement, Stephen writes them down.

Fearing to lose all, he raised himself suddenly on his elbow to look for paper and pencil. There was neither on the table; only the soup plate he had eaten the rice from for supper and the candlestick with its tendrils of tallow and its paper socket, singed by the last flame. He stretched his arms wearily towards the foot of the bed, groping with his hand in the pockets of the coat that hang there. His fingers found a pencil and then a cigarette packet. He lay back and, tearing open the packet, placed the last cigarette on the windowledge and began to write out the stanzas of the villanelle in small neat letters on the rough cardboard surface. (*P* 184)

The process is described in meticulous detail, and while it helps preserve the “instant of inspiration”, it also grounds Stephen’s thinking in concrete actions. The objects which occupy Stephen’s everyday life, from the soup plate to the candlestick and the cigarette packet reinsert Stephen’s disembodied moment of ecstatic inspiration in the quotidian realities of the room. As “the mind was awakening slowly to a tremulous morning knowledge”, Stephen’s body executes its first movements as he “stretched his arms wearily”, his hands groping and his fingers finding “a pencil and then a cigarette packet”. What appeared as an inward movement of the mind and the soul is connected with the material surroundings, in the same way as the “small neat letters” which compose the verses of the villanelle encounter the “rough cardboard surface” of the cigarette packet.

It is at this point, as the first verses are written down, that they seem to drive Stephen's thinking to the remembrance of past experiences. “Having written them out he lay back on the lumpy pillow, murmuring them again” (*P* 184). As he softly recites the verses he has just written, going over them once more without stuttering, “the lumps of knotted

flock under his head reminded him of the lumps of knotted horsehair in the sofa of her parlour on which he used to sit" (*P* 184). Stephen's memories are prompted by his words and stirred by a physical sensation produced by a material object. In turn, the act of remembering awakens in Stephen "rude brutal anger" (*P* 185), eventually producing "bitter and despairing thoughts" (*P* 186) as he ruminates on his past encounters with E.C. The fourth and fifth verses of the villanelle are thus produced, and while the first verses "passed from his mind to his lips", these new verses follow the opposite direction: "He spoke the verses aloud from the first line till the music and rhythm suffused his mind, turning it to quiet indulgence; then copied them painfully to feel them the better by seeing them; then lay back on his bolster" (*P* 186). Starting from the movement of his lips, Stephen feels the rhythm of the verses taking shape in his mind, while he gives them material substance, in a process which crosses body, mind, and material environment. In "Modernism and the Wiring Hand", Steven Connor states that "the linking of hand, eye, and letter in the act of writing by hand intimates the translation from mind to eye and hence from the inward and invisible and spiritual to the outward and visible and physical" (Connor 1999). While following this structure, the process of composition of the villanelle does not appear to move in one single direction, from an abstract to a concrete state. Rather, it involves loops which encompass internal and external dimensions, mental and physical at once, creating an interconnection in which the mind translates itself in the written verses while the written verses influence the mind and the body from which they originate. Moreover, the act of writing seems to have direct consequences on Stephen's thinking process. According to Robert Scholes, the villanelle "leads Stephen to 'new understanding and pity' for innocent E.C. whom he has previously misjudged" (Scholes 1964: 480). After having written his verses, Stephen "began to feel that he had wronged her. A sense of her innocence moved him almost to pity her" (*P* 187). The villanelle seems not simply to mirror Stephen's emotional states, but to contribute to their development. In "Extending the Extended Mind: The Case for Extended Affectivity", Giovanna Colombetti and Tom Roberts build the case for the possibility of extending emotional states and processes to the surrounding environment. In the article, they point out how

occurrent moods and emotional episodes, unfolding over time, can be realised and structured through acts of musical or written expression, for example, in such a way that it does not make sense to single out the neural constituents as the privileged locus of the episode in question. The agent's capacities for emotional feeling are enhanced in such an encounter; emotional experiences of hitherto-unattainable forms, depths, and clarity are made possible by an individual's world-engaging performances. (Colombetti and Roberts 2015)

In a similar way, Stephen's villanelle is able to generate "self-stimulating loops" which expand Stephen's cognitive processes from an affective point of view, helping him to reconsider previous emotional states.

The diary entries

The last example of Stephen's own composition is the series of twenty-one diary entries at the end of the novel. Appearing out of nowhere and drastically changing the narrative focus from third to first person narration, these writings differ from the written words and personal creations which the reader has encountered so far. However, this final form of writing is illuminating in understanding the kind of portraiture which the novel offers, and the subject which emerges from it. Susan Sniader Lasner claims that "now we have Stephen's words and thoughts in a language which itself seems to embody the search of self-definition that is the focus of *A Portrait* as a whole" (Sniader Lasner 1979: 420).

If throughout the novel Stephen is, as Zack R. Bowen claims, "shaping previously encountered words and experiences [...] into new perceptions of his status in the world" (Bowen 1979: 486), in the diary entries he continues to re-evaluate past moments, using writing to try and understand their relevance and meaning. In several passages of the entries Stephen tries to assess personal behaviours or emotions ("Am I alarmed? about what?", "This mentality [...] is indeed bred out of your mud by the operation of your sun. And mine? is it not too?", "A troubled night of dreams. Want to get them off my chest", "Read what I wrote last night. Vague words for a vague emotion. Would she like it? I think so", "Yes I liked her today. A little or much? Don't know" (*P* 209-211)). According

to Weldon Thornton, Stephen “is using the diary as a means of reviewing, replaying, coming to terms with, early experiences” (Thornton 1994: 135), such as the conversation with Cranly, or the argument with the dean of studies, or an encounter with E.C. As critics have noticed, however, the personal recollection which Stephen offers often contradicts the account previously given in the novel, bringing about a clash that can undermine the veracity of the entries and point to a manipulation of events from Stephen’s part. In so doing, the entries can easily change the reader’s perspective of Stephen and his experiences, casting an ironic light on his efforts to become an artist, and on the several moments of revelation he has experienced in the novel. The entries offer an idea of an evolving subject who has to constantly readjust his focus, a subject that cannot simply be defined for what it is but has to be taken into account in a process of development and interaction with his surroundings and experiences. According to Michael Levenson, “the reader does not need to ‘take’ Stephen — to wrench him from the dense web that surrounds him, to appropriate him to a single mode, to assimilate him to a controlling myth — but to *place* him, to situate him within a set of concurrent possibilities and to embed him in several modes” (Levenson 1985: 1033). As suggested in the 1904 essay, the author is trying “to liberate from the personalised lumps of matter that which is their individuating rhythm, the first or formal relation of their parts” (*CP* 211). What is asked of the reader as the exploration of the character’s mind unfolds, is to recognise the rhythm linking different parts to each other, to recognise the relation between Stephen and a language which is embodied into physical sensations and lived experiences. As he savours its material consistency, Stephen’s encounters with language, being it a simple sound, an inscription, or a series of written verses on a cigarette packet, testify to a mind which opens itself up to the world surrounding it in a perpetual and unavoidable interchange.

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