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*WOMEN AND RACE IN THE LAST TWO CHAPTERS  
OF "A PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST AS A YOUNG MAN"*

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This paper sets out to show the close relation between the female characters in the last two chapters of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and post-colonial theories. Psychoanalytic interpretations interwoven with political analyses have been at stake in many other studies concerning the role of the mother (i.e. of Stephen Dedalus' mother). The identification of this fundamental female character with Mother Ireland, with Mother Nature, with the Great Mother (and so forth) is as complex as hoary. Since this theme has been discussed at length in Joyce scholarship, the present paper, purposefully, will not deal with this aspect of the matter.

### **I. Stereotypes: the empire strikes back**

There is a well-known picture of James Joyce together with Sylvia Beach; the front page of Vincent Cheng's book, *Joyce Race and Empire*, uses this image, cutting out Sylvia Beach and pasting behind Joyce the picture of a blackface minstrel singer-dancer, so creating an evident opposition/parallel between these two post colonial gentlemen. Both the Irish and the African represent colonised people. The picture is a metaphor: it suggests the fact that the empire needs to identify all colonies as a single identity and as a stereotype in order to create an opposition. In his books, Vincent Cheng (Cheng, 1995, 2004) states that not only did Joyce understand the tricky strategy lying behind the false dichotomy between empire and colony – which implies all other dichotomies like black/white, city/country, civilised/savage, identity/otherness, gentleman/peasant – he even used the same trick in his turn to reverse, refuse and mock such stereotypical, false and dysfunctional dichotomy.

Cheng illustrates two relevant concepts adopted between the 19<sup>th</sup> and the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries contributing to maintain a certain identification of the Irish race and thus to associate class status to race. First he shows how in the last decades of the Nineteenth century Irish people were identified by imperialistic and racist propaganda with Paddy (the stereotyped Irishman), a man descending from a cross between a white negro and an anthropoid ape.<sup>1</sup> Then, according to disputable anthropological studies of the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Cheng adds to the list of stereotypical dichotomies mentioned above a further one associated to gender and describing the Celts as a belonging to a feminine race in contrast with the Anglo-Saxons whose race would be masculine. On the Irish side of the dichotomy we have a list of stereotypical, imperialistic and chauvinistic characteristics such as femininity (intended as weakness and submission), ruralism (uncivilised in contrast with urban civilization) and blackness (interpreting the word in a clearly racist sense<sup>2</sup>). With such premises, Irishmen could not be thought of as gentlemen because Ireland was on the wrong side of the dichotomy. This is why Joyce refused revivalisms and the Celtic revival: it implied and accepted the function and the subtle implications of these dichotomies described by Cheng as “binary traps”. Nothing new under the sun. Anne McClintock writes: ‘the *term* post-colonialism nonetheless reorients the globe once more around a single binary opposition: colonial-postcolonial.’<sup>3</sup>

True Joyce understood and refused this ‘binary trap’ in the name of the internationalism of art and of a cosmopolitan view of history (*Ulysses* is a *Summa Anthropologica*<sup>4</sup> while *Finnegans Wake*’s main character’s name stands for “Here Comes Everybody”). Yet either there is a contradiction in Cheng’s analysis, or at least there is an omission in its conclusions. Perhaps what I consider here as an omission/contradiction is simply something Cheng takes for granted. Nevertheless, to confirm the fact that something is

<sup>1</sup> See Curtis, L.P., *Anglo-Saxons and Celts: A study of Anti-Irish Prejudice in Victorian England*. Bridgeport, CT: University of Bridgeport, 1968 and Curtis, L.P., *Apes and Angels, the Irishman in Victorian Caricature*. Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1971.

<sup>2</sup> Roddy Doyle would reverse the dichotomy implied in this word in a famous passage of *The Commitments*: “The Irish are the niggers of Europe, lads. An’ Dubliners are the niggers of Ireland [...] An’ the northside Dubliners are the niggers o’ Dublin – Say it loud. I’m black an’ I’m proud” (Roddy Doyle, *The Commitments*, Random House, London, 1989, pp. 8-9).

<sup>3</sup> Ann McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest*, New York: Routledge, 1995.

<sup>4</sup> See also Giorgio Melchiori, 1994. Pp. 118-119.

missing, in this perspective, Gregory Castle warns: “the binary inscribed in the term haunts postcolonial theory, but recent work in Irish studies tends to problematise binarity by focusing on contradictory, multiple and fluid historical conditions and social spaces.” (Castle 2009. P. 100). The point is that as Gregory Castle pointed out [Castle 2001], refusing revivalism Joyce had to use the same devices Revivalism used, though with the intention of parody. Often Joyce’s descriptions of Irish people are not even parodic but just mark a distance and a distinction between the author and the object described. Joyce often does not deny a behaviour or characteristic typical of the Irish people: he just states he does not accept it. In so doing he chooses isolation and exile. The so called ‘binary-trap’ is effectively a producer of stereotypes, but not all dichotomies and distinctions are implied by stereotypes inspired by a binary trap. Stephen is not the redeemer of his own race, nor do Joyce’s female characters necessarily give a false and distorted image of Irishness. Stephen is trying to redeem himself from the narrow attitude of some of his compatriots represented by the fascinating, attractive and sympathetic female characters he meets.

## II. Women and Empire in Joyce’s view

Going back to the front page of Vincent Cheng’s book, we see a sort of collage. An image is cut out (Sylvia Beach) and substituted with another image (the black gentleman). If we rescue Sylvia Beach’s image and create a bigger tableau we have the representation of the point I try to make in this paper. Joyce is stuck between two “monsters”: a woman and a presumably un-educated African gentleman. These two monsters have exactly the same function. They are the decoy to take the protagonist back to the perils represented by the imperialistic dichotomies.

What I have said so far is the first assumption to bear in mind while investigating the function of the female characters of the last *Portrait*. The other preliminary assumption consists in the following quote:

The novel is narrated through the protagonist’s subjective perspective, none of the other characters is significant in his/her own right. They exist as manifestations of Stephen’s inner struggles, concerns, and desires. This is especially true of the women that populate Stephen’s world: his mother, Eileen (his idealized beloved), a prostitute, the Virgin Mary, and a girl he sees at the seaside. (Margaroni. 2003, p. 234)

As a result of these assumptions it is possible to state that in the novel there are no female characters but one single character with many names (or even with no name sometimes) and many manifestations, “the sweeping female who subsumes the various emanations of herself.” (Greyson. 1982 p. 121). The title “A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Misogynist” (Henke 1982) chosen by Suzette Henke for her study on women’s role in Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, is undoubtedly appropriate; women are not treated well in the novel. Actually most of the time they represent an obstacle. They play the same role as the three main institutions<sup>5</sup> which, according to Joyce, are the cause of Irish paralyses, and they are associated to them: in particular they stand for Ireland itself. They share the same nature as the mythical figure of Cathleen Ni Houlihan, representing the ruin of the men they seduce. All of them can be described by the famous quote, as “the old sow that eats her farrow”. (p. 220)

### III. ‘Davin’s women’

Davin is the first key character in this investigation because he represents the stereotype Stephen is fighting against. He is a good boy and a friend of Stephen but at the same time he is the paradigm of the dichotomy empire/colony, so he is depicted as “the young peasant [who] worshipped the sorrowful legend of Ireland” (p. 195). Davin is wholly engaged with the opposition between Irishness and English identity; thus he misses every other possibility which goes beyond the boundaries of the British Isle. He introduces two female characters. There is just a short hint at the first, his nurse: “His nurse had taught him Irish and shaped his rude imagination by the broken lights of Irish myth.” (p. 195) Davin’s nurse helps create the stereotype Joyce wants to destroy.

Davin introduces one more female character. He meets her on the way back home after the hurling match. Davin misses his last train and is forced to go back home on foot, through the countryside. It gets dark and, tired of walking, he knocks on the door of a cottage for some rest and for a glass of water. A young woman opens the door. He asks for water and is offered a big mug of milk. This is highly significant: the scene reminds us of the milk woman in the first episode of *Ulysses* and consequently of Cathleen Ni

<sup>5</sup> As Stephen will state at the end of the novel: “My home, my fatherland or my church” (p. 268)



Houlihan in Yeats's play (Cathleen Ni Houlihan is offered milk by the family in which she is going to find her new 'lover').<sup>6</sup> The woman is described as very attractive, seductive, and provocative. She wears her hair long and loose and is half undressed. Her breast and shoulders are bare. By a strange look in her eyes Davin deduces she is expecting a baby. She fixes her eyes on Davin's face and stands so close to him that he can hear her breathing. Then she approaches him physically taking him by the hand and inviting him to spend the night in the cottage. Nobody is there but herself, she offers him a bed for the night and one might infer it is not in the guest room. Thus, she is sexually attractive, she offers a shelter and she can provide nourishment; all these positive and reassuring characteristics are the symbol of mother nature. For Stephen this woman becomes the symbol of mother Ireland; the narrator points out that she has not a single identity because she is "reflected in other figures of the peasant women whom he had seen [...]" (p. 198)

She clearly stands for the Irish stereotypical peasant woman, and plays a negative role. However Stephen does not blame her for her nature; he just describes what she represents:

A type of her race and of his own, a bat-like soul waking to the consciousness of itself in darkness and secrecy and loneliness and, through the eyes and voice and gesture of a woman without guile, calling the stranger to her bed.<sup>7</sup> (p. 198)

Like Cathleen Ni Houlihan she is a seductress who condemns her lovers to death; moreover she represents her race.<sup>8</sup> She is dangerous because she could seduce Stephen too, taking him back to the Irish stereotype. She is "a type of her race", but also "a type [...] of his own [race]". Joyce admits the logic of the 'binary trap' and resists not because this logic is false, but because it is dangerous (it would prevent him from crossing the boundaries imposed

<sup>6</sup> For the correspondences between the female images in Joyce and the figure of Cathleen Ni Houlihan, see also Luppi 2009.

<sup>7</sup> The fact that later on in the novel Joyce uses the same periphrases – "bat-like soul" – to describe Emma, is highly significant.

<sup>8</sup> It is significant that here the woman calls "the stranger to her bed" assuming the incautious role of the historical/mythological characters of Dermot and Dervorgilla (cfr. also Yeats' play *The Dreaming of the Bones*) while for instance in *Ulysses*, in a rather confused reference to Cathleen Ni Houlihan an alarming sentence reads "Strangers in my house" [*U.* 4578]. Cathleen is the mythological character who is required to right the wrong done by Dermot and Dervorgilla.

by the binary trap) and because it is hegemonic (it includes all people without distinction, and takes no account of the position Stephen is going to take). Stephen wants to show that there is an alternative choice to the binary trap and not that the binary trap does not exist or that it is artificial.

#### IV. **The flower seller and Stephen's beloved: England and authorities**

Another female figure is the poor girl selling flowers in the street. She is no exception: she is another perfect representation of the stereotyped Irish peasant, seen from the Empire point of view. Stephen "left her quickly" (p. 199) because he did not want to see her "offer[ing] her ware to another, a tourist from England or a student of Trinity." (p. 199) The mention to these two possible spectators reveals that Joyce is aware of the fact that the problem lies in the stereotypical transfiguration created by the empire and in which the Colony is entrapped. The flower girl would be seen by the "usurpers", that is to say the student and the tourist, as a typical picturesque character.

However the character of the flower girl exists. Stephen cannot, and does not, deny the existence of this figure. He just does not want to see the patronising behaviour of the empire which takes advantage of an unfair confrontation (a poor girl versus educated and wealthy people). Stephen is not like her. He would react to the empire's presumptions of superiority with his most valuable weapons ("silence, exile, and cunning", p. 269).

Throughout the novel Stephen refers to another female character which is definitively more complex than those seen before: his beloved girl – in *Stephen Hero* she has a name, Emma Clery, while in the last *Portrait* her name never appears. The description of this character proceeds associatively with the passage of the 'flower girl'. She is also described with the same periphrases used for the half dressed woman Davin meets in the country. Both of them are "bat-like souls" (p. 268) meaning that they bring men to their ruin. Their attitude towards men is absolutely innocent, in a way, because it is natural: they simply represent the Irish race and "figures of the womanhood of their country." This is why Stephen enumerates Emma's stronger relations: "a priested peasant" and "a brother, a policeman in Dublin" (p. 240). These two represent the institutions of Irish paralyse colluding with the empire (and are the counterpart of the English tourist and of the Trinity College student evoked in the flower girl scene). These figures are part of the dichotomy Stephen wants to deny.

## V. The Villanelle: nightmare and erotic reverie

Emma's image blends into the erotic reverie in the Villanelle passage. The girl Stephen is thinking of when writing his poem, must be Emma. She is here much too womanly<sup>9</sup>, since there is a clear reference to menstruations: Stephen refers to "the strange humiliation of her nature" (pp. 241-242) and to the "dark shame of womanhood." Once again Stephen's misogyny comes out; he puts women in a disadvantaged position or in a threatening one. In particular the word "womanhood" appears only twice in the novel (the first time it was referred to women as prototypes of the Irish race in the passage quoted above). Joyce intends to imply natural imperfections in both cases.

Immediately associated to that image there is a references to masturbation, leading Stephen "from ecstasy to languor." (p. 242) Apparently Stephen is imagining remote-control sex between himself and Emma since it is said she must be "conscious of his homage"<sup>10</sup>. Thus, Stephen thinks they are in spiritual (and I would say physical—or at least in Stephen's imagination) communion with each other. The creation of the Villanelle is linked to this physical act ending in Stephen's "languor." The woman of the poem presents the same characteristics of the previous ones: she is treacherous since she keeps men in her power (like Cathleen Ni Houlihan, since the poem reads: "your eyes have set man's heart ablaze / And you have had your will of him"). She is the "temptress" (the word is used by Joyce) like the woman met by Davin, *a belle dame sans merci* (in the mood expressed by the naughty 90's) like Cathleen ni Houlihan.<sup>11</sup> These last two characteristics are typical of the Villanelle's poetical pattern: in fact the Villanelle was usually associated with country life and adopted in England by the decadent poets.

The Christian reference to the "the chalice flowing to the brim" (p. 243) may suggest further implications. The chalice in a mass should have Christ's blood in it (transubstantiated in wine). Two references to blood are in the words "bat-like"—the vampiric attitude of the woman—and in the above-mentioned allusion to menstruation (blasphemy and misogyny, go hand in hand). Furthermore 'blood' and 'race' are deeply interrelated words. They can be used as synonyms too. The word 'bat-like' applied to the two girls is a direct reference to the vampiric habit of these women.

<sup>9</sup> This suggestion is by Day 1987.

<sup>10</sup> See Day, 1987.

<sup>11</sup> The reference to Keats and to the reception of the Romantic poet by the Decadents is not casual.

Stephen thinks of his own land and of his own race once again later and “feels the thoughts and desires of the race to which he belonged flitting like bats across the dark country lanes, under trees by the edges of streams and near the pool-mottled bogs” (p. 259). This is his third reference to bats and it is always associated to Irish identity; the next sentence marks the difference between Stephen and Davin in relation to the customs of their race. Not only would Stephen’s reaction have been different in a similar situation; he would never have been given the chance to enter the woman’s house because he is not of that kind “that might breed a race less ignoble than their own, [...] for Davin had the mild eyes of one who could be secret. But him no woman’s eyes had wooed” (p. 259).

## VI. Stephen’s reactions: looking for a way out

Stephen finds it difficult to have a real, direct confrontation with women. He feels he is forced to run away from them. Similarly he refuses to answer the question posed by Cranly: “Tell me, for example, would you deflower a virgin?” (p. 268). Stephen answers with a question. Although it is an ironic rhetorical question, he does not answer directly and says: “Excuse me, [...], is that not the ambition of most young gentlemen?”. Apparently, it is not his own ambition. He stresses another difference between himself and most Irish gentlemen. Moreover he says ‘most’ gentlemen and not ‘all’ gentlemen.

Their reaction to the various women, as to Ireland, is the same: Davin goes away, Stephen does not want to see the flower girl meeting other people and passes by quickly. The Villanelle poem too expresses the need to be set free from this seductive kind of woman; it is a sort of imploration in the naughty nineties’ style. Stephen is resolute: he will never see his beloved again. He decides to leave both Ireland and Emma: “Well then, let her go and be damned to her! She could love some clean athlete who washed himself every morning to the waist and had black hair on his chest. Let her”. (p. 254) This concept is reiterated in a few lines when Joyce explains: “Bah, he had done well to leave the room in disdain. He had done well not to salute her on the steps of the library! He had done well to leave her to flirt with the priest, to toy with a church which was the scullery-maid of Christendom”. (p. 239)

In the end Stephen’s mind has built up a whole female image with the bits taken here and there from the women he meets accidentally, from those

he knows personally (Emma), from those invented for his art (the Villanelle woman) or from those he is told about by his friends. After Davin's story Stephen comments:

The last words of Davin's story sang in his memory and the figure of the woman in the story stood forth reflected in other figures of the peasant women whom he had seen standing in the doorways at Clane as the college cars drove by, as a type of her race and of his own, a bat-like soul waking to the consciousness of itself in darkness and secrecy and loneliness and, through the eyes and voice and gesture of a woman without guile, calling the stranger to her bed. (p. 198)

Finally, in anger with Emma he thinks of her, and her image breaks up into pieces melting with all the other female characters:

Rude brutal anger routed the last lingering instant of ecstasy from his soul. It broke up violently her fair image and flung the fragments on all sides. On all sides distorted reflections of her image started from his memory: the flower girl in the ragged dress with damp coarse hair and a hoyden's face who had called herself his own girl and begged his handsel, the kitchen-girl in the next house who sang over the clatter of her plates, with the drawl of a country singer, the first bars of *By Killarney's Lake and Fells*, a girl who had laughed gaily to see him stumble when the iron grating in the footpath near Cork Hill had caught the broken sole of his shoe, a girl he had glanced at, attracted by her small ripe mouth, as she passed out of Jacob's biscuit factory, who had cried to him over her shoulder [...] (p. 239)

And then there is a long list of women met by Stephen blended into a larger figure. I am adding a table showing all the cross-references scattered throughout the novel and discussed in the paper. It clearly demonstrates this final assumption: all female characters combine to produce one single presence or several bits of a single hostile, scaring, seductive, dangerous character, an obstacle to the artist's identity, a woman with many faces and different names.

## VII. Conclusion: the Bird-Girl, not a solution

It has been pointed out that there is an exception to this negative representation. There is a female figure in sharp contrast with those presented insofar: the bird-girl at the end of the fourth chapter. It is true. However, the bird-like girl is not related to any woman met by Stephen. She could be compared to the Villanelle woman, and from this point of view she presents the same characteristics as that imagined figure. Moreover both women are represented in the same metaphorical way: they are creatures, rather than human beings. One is a bat-like soul, the other a bird-girl. Apparently Joyce wants us to match the two figures and to compare them in order to trace back all the opposite references that are hidden in their descriptions. The moment of the reverie and of the writing of the Villanelle is closely connected with the scene of the bird-girl. Stephen thinks of her as a bird; later on, after writing the Villanelle he gazes at the sky and sees birds flying away. Several pages are dedicated to this moment. He repeats twice: "What birds were they?" (p. 243-245) And then, the fatal question: "Symbols of departure or of loneliness?" Stephen's mind wanders "from Swedenborg on the correspondence of birds to things of the intellect" (p. 244): birds have a double meaning: "A sense of fear of the unknown moved in the heart of his weariness, a fear of symbols and portents, of the 'hawk-like' man whose name he bore [...]" (p. 244) His name too is related to a flight, to a 'hawk-like' man. It is clear that the bird-girl represents the same symbol. She is described twice as "*alone* and still, gazing out at sea" (p. 186; p. 185). Before that Stephen too is "*alone* [...] *alone* and young and wilful and wildhearted, *alone* amid a waste of wild air [...]" (p. 185) His soul too "brood[s] alone [...]" (p. 185).

True, the bird-girl represents the solution to the difficult relation with women. She is a symbol, she might even be Stephen himself; more likely she is the perfect image of the woman aspiring to the same ideals as the protagonist. In fact in a way she invites him to fly away from the beach, to cross the sea and find another life. Like the birds migrating from the island, like Daedalus escaping from the labyrinth, the girl apparently indicates a direction, her eyes pointing towards distant places. In so doing she gives also an answer to the Irish man: Ireland is not suited to him. Irish women will not lead him anywhere.

However she is an image, not a presence in Stephen's life. They do not even talk to each other. The Villanelle woman, who should be the counterpart of the bird-girl is a vision too, a figment of the poet's imagination,

but this vision refers directly and explicitly to a real presence: Emma. The Villanelle woman and the bird-girls are both transfigurations through art of a material concept, and become ethereal figures. However the bird-girl has nothing to do with Emma and nothing to do with Stephen's acquaintances. She is like a product of the protagonist's imagination that comes out of the blue. She may in fact be merely an omen, Stephen's wish to go beyond his negative experience with women. The fact is that the bat-like souls, and likewise the Villanelle, are at present the only product of a real experience.

The bird-girl bears the same characteristics as every other woman: Joyce lingers over the description of the look in her eyes, as he had done with the other temptresses:

“when she [the bird-girl] felt his presence and the *worship of his eyes her eyes* turned to him in quiet sufferance of his *gaze*, without shame or wantonness. Long, long she suffered *his gaze* and then quietly withdrew *her eyes* from his and bent them towards the stream [...]” (p. 186)

The eyes of the Villanelle woman, “dark and with a look of languor, were opening to his eyes.” (p. 242) She holds “our longing gaze with languorous look” (p. 243); also the flower girl's “blue eyes seemed to him at that instant images of guilelessness” while the bird-girl's eyes were “without shame or wantonness.” So, the bird-girl is without shame, while, as we have seen before, shame is a typical characteristic of womanhood (“dark shame of womanhood”). Correspondences are clear enough.

However, at the end of the novel, a positive solution has yet to be found. No really positive female presence exists in Stephen's life.

HALF DRESSED WOMAN (MET BY DAVIN)	FLOWER GIRL	EMMA CLERY	VILLANELLE WOMAN	CATHLEEN NI HOULIHAN / IRELAND
I thought by her figure and by something in the <b>look of her eyes</b> that she must be carrying a child.	<b>her young blue eyes seemed</b> to him at that instant images of guilelessness,	The secret of her race <b>lay behind those dark eyes</b>	“ <b>Her eyes</b> , dark and with a look of languor, were opening to his eyes”  <b>Your eyes</b> have set man's heart ablaze	

“she had <b>her eyes</b> fixed on my face”		“Her eyes were a little averted”  “her eyes seemed about to trust him”	“You hold our longing gaze with languorous look”	
“A type of her race and of his own.”		“Figure of the womanhood of their country.”		She represents Ireland.
“ <b>a bat-like soul</b> waking to the consciousness of itself in darkness and secrecy and loneliness”		“ <b>a bat-like soul</b> waking to the consciousness of itself in darkness and secrecy and loneliness”		“She is the sow that eats her farrow.”
“calling the stranger to her bed”		“You are a great stranger now.”  “dancing lightly and discreetly, giving herself to none.”		“never set out the bed for any”  “too many strangers in the house”
“A woman without <b>guile</b> ”	“[...] her young <b>blue eyes</b> seemed to him at that instant images of <b>guilelessness</b> ”			
She offers milk				She is offered milk

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