

A Portrait of the artist as a young man.
James Joyce
Semblance and Departure from Realism.

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“And yet what is Modernism? It is undefined.”

John C. Ransom

Modernism is indeed a very difficult concept to define, even if merely because it has an effect on a domain of mammoth size. There is no sphere of art left where modernism has not left a lasting mark. Even if we restrict ourselves only to Literature, definition of modernism remains elusive. It can, at best be seen as an attempt to break away from the classical techniques of the bygone ages. Though it succeeds in this attempt to a large extent, it is imperative that completely redefining anything if one has a preconceived notion is not only difficult, but impossible. After careful study of the Modernist texts, it has become apparent how Modernism is in suite with the larger law of all things, i.e. changing of the present. Its roots have been traced back to its immediate ancestor, Romanticism. Joyce’s critics have also been able to draw the same connections very well.

However, it appears that the Realist aspect of Joyce’s text has not been dealt with in sufficient detail. Ellmann and Feidelson regard Realism as an intrinsic part of Modernism in their codification of the concept. Also, as this novel is an epitome of Modern Literature, and also authored by one of the torchbearers of Modernism, it forms a perfect subject for a study which attempts to link Modernism to Realism.

1 Roots of the novel

The novel was crafted as an essay for an Irish Literary magazine *Dana*. It was completed on 7th January, 1904 but, fortunately perhaps, it was never published because the then editors were unable to assign a genre to the text. It loosely described the development of an artist in a young man. The essay had the themes which would be the basis for the chapters 4 and 5.

Joyce then decided to form the essay into a complete novel named *Stephen hero*, only parts of which he completed. The novel then was framed, by Joyce, in a *Naturalist* manner.¹ However, Joyce found the novel’s chronological flow too *rigid* for the ideas he was trying to depict. This sowed the seeds of the technique which we would come to recognize as *streams of consciousness*. Nevertheless, he digressed from this venture of making the essay a novel because he was concurrently working on his collection of short stories, *Dubliners*.

In 1907, he finally took up again the novel he had stopped working on in 1905 and, instead of continuing where he had left, he reformatted the entire text

¹Dirk Van Hulle, University of Antwerp

from the original linear naturalist style to a more intense and flexible ‘running thoughts’ format. Also, he did away with most of the quotation marks of the text, making most of the sentences in the dialogues a little difficult to tell from the thoughts of the narrator, thereby bringing the novel closer to the streams of consciousness that humans can relate to. Joyce spent nearly a decade over this work of his and finally, after he gave the novel its final shape, published it in 1916. Large parts of original text were simply copied without much change into the present novel whereas, some other subtle edits were made.² Thus, it is clear that the novel was formed on an realist ideology.

2 Symbolism and Realism

“For Ellsmann and Feidelson modernism and symbolism are nearly synonymous.”

Marjorie Perloff

True to the statement symbolism is the most easily accessible feature of the text which brings it the closest to the throes of Modernism along with the unconventional employment of techniques of consciousness. The following symbols, among innumerable others occurring at almost every turn of the page are indeed very much perceptible throughout the text.

- **Water**

“ . . .like drops of water in a fountain falling softly in the brimming bowl.”

as Baptism, Life giving

“Oh God, I am drowned.”

as Death

- **Birds**

“If her life were a simple rosary of hours, her life simple and strange as a bird’s life, gay in the morning, restless all day, tired at sundown?”

as Freedom and Innocence of birds

- **Virgin Mary**

²An interesting omission is no mention of the name of E C in the published text, while the name is clearly Emma Clery, mentioned in the original text of *Stephen Hero*

“Tower of Ivory they used to say, House of Gold! How could a woman be a tower of ivory or a house of gold?”

Symbol of perfection, including a lover’s perfection

However, Joyce has also been heralded as being a very ‘honest’ realist writer, and the same is evinced in his writing. The Symbolism basically forms a part of the convoluted realist text. Only an artist of Joyce’s stature could have maintained both Realism as well as Symbolism in the same text. As an example, the incident of the homely strife over the Christmas dinner incident is explained completely as what Stephen saw happening, and the narrator does not attempt to attach any meaning to the incident, apart from considering it important enough to mention in the novel. Callous language of Mr. Casey and the untamed aggression of Dante is mentioned with equal disinterest, as if from the eyes of an spongy but non-resilient observer. We understand this to be a symbolic reference to the strife in Ireland and, among the first reasons (though cause and effect have been effectively eliminated from the narration, a departure from Realism) why Stephen discovered the futility of both, blind devotion to the church and aggressive nationalism.

All the five senses of Stephen are very sensitive and their description while show how receptive Joyce’s senses were themselves, also reflects strongly upon his control over the language. While presenting things as they are perceived by the human senses of Stephen, Joyce, with an overwhelming power of imagination innocently weaves the threads of Symbolism into it. This symbolism is inevitable in the hindsight, when it reveals why only these epiphany like moments in Stephen’s life were chosen to be narrated. We need not go deep into the text to find the occurrences of Realism and Symbolism being effectively mixed, they are visible since the first chapter itself,

“When you wet the bed first it is warm then it gets cold.”

The incident is remembered perhaps because this at once reveals the positive as well as negative connotations of ‘water’. The innocence of childhood is fully exploited by Joyce to show his skill in writing realist text. The language used is devoid of most refinements and is very crude and realist, but still is fairly difficult to follow owing to the unconventional style of narration.

The loss of a chronological time-line and, partly owing to this, a loss in cause and effect are the places where Joyce has distanced himself from Realism. The events depicted here, however, are solidly grounded in reality. There are very visible signs which point at how this intermixing of symbolism and realism initiated by Joyce would, by later writers, be transfigured into surrealism. Amongst the most susceptible incidents would perhaps be the assault in Stephen by his

friends under the pretext of convincing him that Tennyson is a better poet than Byron and the aftermath of the incident on Stephen.

“While he was still repeating the confiteor amid the indulgent laughter of his hearers and while the scenes of that malignant episode were still passing sharply and swiftly before his mind he wondered why he bore no malice now to those who had tormented him.”

Stephen finally disregards the insult done unto him. One can imagine easily how the later writers, notably Kafka, could have worked upon this particular incident and made it surrealistic and Zola Naturalist. However, Joyce is content in just providing a realist account of the incident. He lets the readers mark out the symbolism, allowing them to read into the text and determining that it is indeed another attempt for forcing submission on Stephen.

3 Romanticism and Realism

At many places, Romantic notions are made a travesty of, similar to the previous incident where the Romantic notion of heroically defending ones honour is dismissed. However, the impression of Romantic writing cannot be completely eliminated from Joyce’s text. So far we have seen distinctive presence of Realism in the initial portions of the text. Analysis of the latter part of the novel reveals signs of Romanticism, though under a subterfuge.

Its easy to notice that Joyce’s realism is of a very peculiar kind; he is not interested in depicting the *banal and routine activities* of Stephen Dedalus. Instead, he resorts to a Realist description of the part of Stephen’s life that he himself (Joyce) and, subsequently, Stephen finds relevant. We are told about the declining fortune of the Dedalus family, but are never clearly told their exact source of income. The once cheerful Uncle Charles is, in the second chapter mentioned only in the beginning, and left as a mere symbol of paralysis of Ireland. During the course of the novel, *nothing* around Stephen remains constant, but we are seldom in knowledge of the change; his peers slowly disappear into oblivion. Eileen is first replaced by Emma Clery and then she too vanishes towards the later part of the novel. It is noticeable that the name of E C is not mentioned anywhere in the novel, and rather is from the original text of *Stephen Hero*. This adds to the Symbolism of the novel as E C now becomes merely a symbol of a lover, like Merediths, for the readers. Similarly Dante, who had a profound effect of Stephen’s early life features nowhere in his later life, neither do his brothers or sisters. Moreover, we are told almost nothing about Stephen’s day to day life. Whatever we come to know of it is via inference;

right from his stay at Clongowes to his life with Cranly. This form of narration would have been taken to be a failure on the part of the narrator if this were to be merely a realistic text. Nevertheless, it does not feel as if the description has become a Romantic one over a stretched period. Though poetic language is often used, it usually followed by a realistic prose description.

“ The ivy whines upon the wall,
And whines and twines upon the wall,
The yellow ivy upon the wall,
Ivy, ivy up the wall.
Did anyone ever hear such drivel? Lord Almighty! Who ever heard
of ivy whining on a wall? Yellow ivy; that was all right. Yellow
ivory also. And what about ivory ivy?”

Notable exceptions are the lengthy discourse on hell, in the third chapter and the description of Stephen’s aesthetic theory. However, they are dialogues and, hence, in a way, Joyce absolves himself, as a narrator, of any responsibility of the moral content therein. Joyce exposes his Romantic background while slyly declining to embrace it.

The language seldom explicitly never tells the reader what to feel, it just states what Stephen felt. The language is never judgemental. It treats similarly all emotions that Stephen feels. It defeats the sublimity by trying to conjure an objective view of reality from Stephen’s perspective while maintains it by keeping strong Symbolism and Myth alive in the description itself. There are no moral values in the text and the hollowness of religion is showcased here, though Stephen never aims to provide any reasons against it. Nevertheless, along with showing the weakness of religion, Joyce does not forget to point out mercilessly the indeterminate nature of humans too; and does not settle on anything less than as an artist as the prime recluse of the superior mind. Also, there is little modesty seen as Stephen deems himself to be superior.

“His mind seemed older than theirs: it shone coldly on their strifes
and happiness and regrets like a moon upon a younger earth. No
life or youth stirred in him as it had stirred in them. He had
known neither the pleasure of companionship with others nor the
vigour of rude male health nor filial piety. Nothing stirred within
his soul but a cold and cruel and loveless lust. His childhood was
dead or lost and with it his soul capable of simple joys and he was
drifting amid life like the barren shell of the moon.”

The language used, is brimming with metaphors and sublime references, but a certain optimistic spirit, the trademark of Romanticism, is missing. The

euphoria of a symbolic victory of Stephen is never discovered to be lasting. Each chapter introduces a new rise in form of an epiphany, and a new shaken belief as the epiphany of the previous chapter is shown to be hollow. The novel lacks, hence, a classical plot with a crescendo, climax, etc. It is more like a running commentary. All the events of the novel, whether banal or sublime, have been granted the same treatment, with the age of Stephen being the only bar for the language. This is yet another reason to believe that the text is Realist, as the novel only explains what a character in it is feeling, through his eyes, with the narrator not taking any part in the text.

4 Conclusion

Modernism, in my opinion as judged by this book is very close to Romanticism, only with the values thinned into a false veneer and to Realism, with only the axiom of continuity of time and space challenged.

Its an intensive reading for the reader but a careful reading reveals various instances where we start to see how Joyce extended the principles of Realism, played masterfully with the rules and finally rendered his own realist text into something so novel and revolutionary that it almost started a genre of its own.

Hence, I believe that it would not be very difficult to see that this novel is a perfect link from the earlier techniques of Realism to Modernism.