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The Relations between Politics and Aesthetics in
James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*

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ABSTRACT

James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, as many other canonical modern texts, has traditionally been interpreted from strictly formal approaches first –Modernism, New Criticism, Poststructuralism–, and later from different political approaches. While most previous critics have focused on analyzing either politics or aesthetics in the novel, we have proposed to analyze both politics and aesthetics jointly. From our point of view, Joyce aims at revitalizing both his contemporary political and artistic contexts at the same time, and art and writing are indeed political tools. The function of the artist, that of the young protagonist and Joyce himself, becomes political as it involves the awakening of the artist's nation to an awareness of the present.

Keywords: *Bildungsroman*, Ireland, Joyce, *künstlerroman*, Modernism, politics.

RESUMEN

A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man de James Joyce, al igual que muchos otros textos canónicos de la modernidad, ha sido interpretado tradicionalmente desde un punto de vista estrictamente formal, primero –Modernismo, Nueva Crítica, Postestructuralismo–, y después desde diferentes enfoques políticos. Así, mientras que la mayoría de los críticos de Joyce se han centrado en analizar o bien la política o bien la estética en la novela, aquí proponemos analizar ambos de forma conjunta. Desde nuestro punto de vista, el propósito fundamental de Joyce es el de revitalizar tanto el contexto contemporáneo literario irlandés como el político al mismo tiempo, siendo el arte y las escritura herramientas políticas efectivas. En definitiva, la función del artista, que es tanto la de su joven protagonista como la de sí mismo, deviene política en tanto que trata de despertar su nación y hacerla conocedora del presente.

Palabras clave: *Bildungsroman*, Irlanda, Joyce, *künstlerroman*, Modernismo, política.

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INTRODUCTION

The work of commentary, once it is separated from any ideology, consists precisely in *manhandling* the text, *interrupting* it.

Roland Barthes

Much criticism has insisted on presenting Modernism as an ‘elitist’, out-of-date enterprise, surpassed by a much more radical and ‘democratic’ postmodern literary production. That is, Postmodernism would incorporate all those social and political aspects from which Modernism allegedly escaped. Yet, many other critics have started to revise this division, pointing out that “although one can describe postmodern concerns as different from modern concerns, one can also find roots for Postmodernism in the early part of the century” (Gaggi, 21).

Everything depends on the model of interpretation. And, certainly, when we displace canonical modern works from the contexts of interpretation to which they are conventionally related, we discover new versions of the texts, which also make us question the validity of those modern paradigms build upon them. James Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* lends itself very well to such an activity.

In this sense, there has been considerable debate on whether *A Portrait* should be read from an aesthetic or a political point of view, with critics focusing on either a formal or a political reading. And, indeed, the novel constitutes a privileged space of representation in which to think the nature and function of modern art. In line with those revisionist studies, the aim of our dissertation is to approach *A Portrait* from a broader point of view, one that engages with both politic and aesthetic concerns. And, more concretely, we aim at investigating the function of the artist. This function is to provide sense to a chaotic political scenario and to lead the artist’s nation to a better understanding of Ireland’s present situation, which is a fully political enterprise.

The idea of restoring meaning is particularly interesting in the novel as it is set in two contexts in chaos: In an Ireland that is undergoing a process of transformation, and in the turbulent cultural context of Modernism. In order to accomplish this, the artist has to

engage with diverse political speeches and complex modern literary techniques as to render Dublin in its actual complexity.

Almost unmistakably, the book is characterized by a joy of renovation, both technically and as regards political discourse. Joyce's major aim is to revitalize both the politics and literature of his time, wherein language becomes a political weapon used to defy tradition and stagnation. Yet, Joyce is fully aware of the paradoxical nature of such a task: A new culture and politics are not to be invented from nothing, but by dissecting and assembling existing culture.

This dissertation is structured as follows: we start by offering a general overview on the literary context of Modernism, as well as a synopsis of the political and social context that informs Joyce's literary production. After this contextual part, some previous literary criticism on the novel, split into formalist and political readings, is commented. Expanding on the political readings, our own investigation is developed. This is likewise structured in a political and a formal analysis.

1. STATE OF THE ART

1.1. Literary Context: Joyce the Modernist

Derek Attridge in “Reading Joyce” notes that it is impossible for readers to read Joyce “for the first time” (2). Anyone picking up a book of Joyce already possesses some familiarity with his techniques of writing and we are also indirectly reading Joyce when we engage with the past twentieth century serious fiction. Certainly, few later novelists have escaped its aftershock. In this vein, T.S. Eliot (1923) wrote of *Ulysses*: “It is a book to which we are all indebted and from which none of us can escape.”

This first section is devoted to analyze the formal characteristics that we tend to identify as modern and trace them in Joyce’s work, for this relation of indebtedness comes in a double direction. This significant cultural shift mentioned by Attridge was not reached single-handedly and all of a sudden by James Joyce. He owes his understanding of the world to a wider frame of thought which was originated before he started writing at the very end of the nineteenth century. And it is also derived from the complex roots in the social, economic, and political transformations in the world, and in Ireland in particular, that happened before and during his lifetime –as developed in the next section.

At the turn of the century, there is a radical shift in aesthetic and cultural sensibilities that extends to the post-World War I period. The Victorian bourgeois morality and a meaningful world view gives way to an intensely pessimistic one. Thinkers like Nietzsche opposed those totalizing religious and philosophical frameworks characteristic of the nineteenth century and helped sustain James Joyce’s resistance to religion and nationalism (Butler, 67).

This opposition to the beliefs of the past often results in moral relativism –particularly in T.S. Eliot and Joyce. Its symptoms are pragmatism, pluralism and, no less importantly, a sceptical irony. Paradigmatically, by the time Joyce set up to write *Ulysses*, he devised the plan “of writing a book from eighteen different points of view and in as many styles, all apparently unknown or undiscovered by my fellow tradesmen” (Joyce, *Letters I*, 167). This stylistic diversity favours an “essentially relativist attitude towards the truthful depiction of

reality” (Butler, 69), since as Karen Lawrence (2014) has noted, by adopting a “series of rhetorical masks” he is making us doubt the “authority of any particular style” (9; Butler, 69).

Very frequently Modernism is despised for abandoning the social sphere, as it offers a rather narcissistic attention to language and an investigation of form. If language will never be able to communicate objectively, the modernists will pay attention to the way language expresses our perceptions. In this way, formal experimentation with language is explicitly seen in Joyce’s *A Portrait* through the early mimicking of a child’s language in the opening pages and the representation of a young aesthete’s mind. Allusions to a character’s psychic reality rather than directly to his environment are evident all throughout. Some innovative literary techniques such as stream-of-consciousness –*Ulysses* being agreed as the exemplary instance of it–, interior monologue, as well as the use of multiple points of view contribute to this effect.

While the influence on other writers has been ably demonstrated, Joyce’s relationship to the modernist movements and authors which surrounded him is far more difficult to trace. As Joyce himself acknowledged in “The Day of the Rabblement”, he was always suspicious of groups and tried to maintain his artistic independence at a time when very diverse movements such as the Futurists, Imagists, Vorticists, Expressionists, Surrealists, and Dadaists flourished. However, he did maintain a relation with Anglo-American poets Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot. The altruistic Ezra Pound, who also supported Robert Frost, Ernest Hemingway, and T.S. Eliot, among many others, motivated and helped Joyce to publish his works. Meaningfully, this editorial genius made possible that in 1922 two of the major works of Modernism, Joyce’s *Ulysses* and T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* appeared.

Although much to the regret of Joyce, who complained that T.S. Eliot gained fame by borrowing from his *Ulysses*, Joyce and T.S. Eliot share some modern characteristics such as the use of allusions and the use of different languages, which contribute to a sense of placelessness or ‘universal’ style. Joyce’s use of allusion to different cultural periods led T.S. Eliot to write *Sweeney among the Nightingales* and inspired Pound’s *Cantos*. Also the reading and discussion on *Ulysses* might have influenced T.S. Eliot notably in his essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent”, which seems to be a manifesto of the modern vision

of the three. Here T.S. Eliot described how contemporary artists open innovative paths for the future, at the same time that they follow the lines opened by those artists of the past. T.S. Eliot also defined the “mythic method” —which he exemplifies in *The Waste Land*— in his essay “Ulysses, Order, and Myth”. The mythic method looks to the past stressing the mythical to gain an understanding for what has been lost in the present.

Finally, these essays elucidate Joyce’s problematic relation with the past. He is fascinated with innovation and sees tradition as a disease; yet as we shall see in the analysis of *A Portrait*, he is aware that he has to look at the past in order to create.

1.2. Political and Social Context: Joyce the Irishman

If Modernism is identified with disequilibrium, the specific situation of Ireland in the twentieth century is no less turbulent. Joyce was born in a country in which only forty-five years before his birth had lost half its population and its native language: mutilated sequences of war, political betrayals, a lost language, and a broken culture are the representative signs of the Ireland that preceded him. By way of illustration, the family in which Joyce was raised can serve as a microcosm of the larger context in Ireland. This was devotedly Catholic, politically divided and in bankrupt. Here, we will briefly expose some major contextual political and social circumstances that affected Joyce and can be found in his work.

According to Deane (2004), treachery and fidelity are the terms which determine the development of Joyce’s fiction. And also those that determine the Irish historical experience, which “has the fall of man deeply inscribed upon it, from the story of the fall of the High King Rory O’Connor” in 1198 to the execution of his namesake, “the radical Republican Rory O’Connor in 1923. It moves from the era of Saints and Scholars to the Devil Era of the great modern leader, de Valera” (49).

The fall of Charles Stewart Parnell and the subsequent political crisis affected Joyce profoundly in his early life. For Joyce, Parnell was a heroic spirit brought low by his own people. Parnell’s sexual affair should have never become a scandal, and it is unjustifiable

why he has not been honoured by succeeding Irish parliamentary republicans and nationalists after all he achieved for his country. He was the founder and leader of the Irish Parliamentary Party, and under his leadership he tried to abolish landlordism in order to weaken the English misgovernment. He also travelled to America in order to raise funds for famine relief and find support for Home Rule, among others.

The concern of Irish Home Rule was the main political matter of Irish politics at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries. Parnell, along with leaders of the Home Rule League, Isaac Butt and William Shaw, required a system of Home Rule, with the creation of an Irish parliament within the British government of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland. Eventually, this request led to the introduction of four Home Rule Bills, of which two were passed. Remarkably, the Government of Ireland Act in 1920 produced the home rule parliaments of Northern Ireland and Southern Ireland. And, actually, in Southern Ireland it did not function and was replaced by the Irish Free State in 1922. Along with a new constitution, this Free State came to an end and was renamed Ireland in 1937.

For all the nationalism and progressive liberation from England, on the other hand, there was a great deal of conservatism as regards religion, which also confronted Irish people. Joyce's repudiation of the Catholic doctrine is a well-known and integral feature in his writings. In this way, for Seamus Deane (2004), the worst of evils of Ireland was not its subordination towards the British system, but towards Rome, that is, Catholicism. As already said, Deane interprets the history of Ireland as a series of betrayals, and so does Joyce. Hence Ireland has an "inner spiritual void" which has been filled by the Church. "It is Rome, not London, which rules the Irish mind. London will readily use Rome for its purposes. But the Roman imperium is the more subtle and pervasive because it encroaches on the territory which should be ruled by the artist" (46). For Deane, religion is harmful in a double sense. First, because it has prevented the Irish nation from liberation at many levels: "The hostility of the Church towards almost all movements for Irish liberation, from the United Irishmen to the Fenians, Parnell and beyond, is only the most superficial manifestation of these conflicts" (46). But the most profound manifestation of religion is the one that goes against the artist. The creation of the soul of Ireland corresponds to the

artist and not to the Church. Therefore, in Joyce's fiction, we also find his own revolt, the revolt of the heretic artist against the Church. Besides, Deane notes that although the Irish nationalist movement attempted at remodeling Ireland in the sense of moving away from England, it erred in banishing Catholicism from the country, as it rather endorsed it.

Joyce believes in a necessity to remodel the national character, which was undertaken by groups such as the Irish Revival and Sinn Fein. The Sinn Fein movement was founded by Arthur Griffith and had produced notable essays in 1907 (Deane, 44). Joyce thought that the collaboration between old Fenianism and the new Sinn Fein had indeed remodeled the character of the Irish people (45). However, the Irish parliamentary party at Westminster which had overthrown its great leader Parnell in 1890 was incapable of recognizing that this improvement had happened at home; they rather believed that all change for the better came from legislative changes in the English system.

In arts, Joyce's objection to the Irish literary revival was developed in his pamphlet of 1901 "The Day of the Rabblement". The revival was for Joyce an anachronism since it tried to revive the old Gaelic culture in an effort to become more Irish and less English, while, for him, art should result from its particular contemporary historical context. In this pamphlet, Joyce also abjures the possibility of creating an art for the crowds: "If an artist courts the favour of the multitude [...] he does so at his own risk. Therefore, the Irish Literary Theatre by its surrender to the trolls has cut itself adrift from the line of advancement" (51-52). For its part, comic dramatists –Richard Brinsley Sheridan or George Bernard Shaw– were equally contemptible as they usually performed the role of "court jester to the English" (Deane, 40). Yet, for Joyce there were Irish authors in the past that deserve a better consideration. These are the poet James Clarence Mangan (1803-1849), in whom Joyce saw an emblem of the distinctive alienation of the true artist, and Oscar Wilde (1854-1900), who is worthy of his rejection to middle class culture and his dandyism. Joyce's fascination for Mangan comes from the latter's daring in telling the truth, on account of which he was out casted and victim of treachery. Nonetheless, all the writers of the past have failed to achieve a complete artistic independence. Therefore, for Joyce, Dublin is untold (Deane, 40).

1.3. Previous Work

1.3.1. Formalist Readings of *A Portrait*

As previously developed in the Literary Context section, Joyce's work, and explicitly the novel *A Portrait*, inevitably became one of the most representative works of what has been called the modern literary tradition. In this section, we aim at presenting some of the numerous critics who have promoted a conception of Joyce as a defender of 'art for art's sake', and who are, in their majority, those involved in the configuration of Modernism.

Perhaps the most influential formal reading of Joyce's work comes from his contemporary, the poet Ezra Pound. Pound considers Joyce an exponent of Modernism while he praises his cosmopolitanism. Thanks to the letters these authors exchanged, we know that Pound knew him as an emigrant, speaker of several languages, and writer of demanding prose. For Pound, Joyce is an 'international' writer rather than an Irish one, to the point that in his review of *Dubliners* for *The Egoist* in 1914, he proclaims that "it is surprising Mr. Joyce is Irish." Yet, his analysis in this review encounters a serious inconsistency: Pound's view that Joyce's stories "could be retold of any town" went against his approval of a 'Flaubertian' model of realism which he saw in *Dubliners* (Nash, 43). This way, it is not clear what he referred to by 'realism'.

Moreover, the discussions on religion and nationalism with which Joyce grew up, and that permeate all his work, are for Pound irrelevant. Pound is missing out many other aspects of Joyce's prose in a deliberate way, and as John Nash (2009) has pointed out, this could be seen as a rather "political reading of Joyce as European and 'modern' rather than Irish and 'peasant' " (44). That is, with this version of Joyce, Pound intends a criticism towards Irish literature, which is linked to provincialism, while he envisions a certain vision of modernism as cosmopolitan, a tendency that also accommodated his other protégé, T. S. Eliot.

Whereas Ezra Pound was at times ambiguous as to which movement Joyce belonged to—Realism or Modernism—, the initial critical reception of *A Portrait* is characterized by a division around the status of the novel as inheritor of the realist tradition, or, on the

contrary, as a starter of a more experimental tendency (Caneda, 117). As regards Realism, J. F. Carens (1984) points out that one of the first reactions to the novel, that of writer H.G. Wells in 1916, was actually one of the most widespread in Joyce's times: "Indeed contemporary reviewers, whether hostile or sympathetic to *A Portrait*, tended to use it as an exemplary of literary realism" (261). In this sense, Marguerite Harkness (1990) also expounds:

"Wells proclaimed Joyce's new novel by far the most living and convincing picture that exists of an Irish Catholic upbringing [...]. On the face of it, *A Portrait* is simply a realistic tale of a boy growing up in Ireland, in an Irish-Catholic family during the last part of the nineteenth century" (21).

Also, one of the first and most influential analysis of *A Portrait* is that of Windham Lewis, which stresses a continuity of the naturalist trend in the novel as opposed to "the very nightmare of naturalistic spirit" that is present in *Ulysses* (99-100).

Yet, this debate did not last for long and the modernist interpretation became the dominant one. Most notoriously, the *New Criticism* circles adopted *A Portrait* as the modern manifesto par excellence. Among the most influential studies, we found those by Roger Fry, Clive Bell, and William York Tindall. They all share an intrinsically formalist approach: "The aesthetic theory in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* is a definition of significant form" (Tindall, *James Joyce: His Way of Interpreting the Modern World*, 110). And Tindall (1959) later confirms this somewhere else: "Stephen's theory, announced in 1902, is formalist. It suitably follows Oscar Wilde's and anticipates Clive Bell's" (95-96).

A Portrait has been frequently labelled as *künstlerroman*, a specific category within the *bildungsroman* novel genre, which deals with the coming of age process of a teenager, who, in this case, is also an artist. The *bildungsroman* hero is usually represented as a young and sensitive figure whose trajectory is defined by a series of confrontations with the rigid social order, against which he feels alienated. Subjectivity and the issue of identity are intrinsically modern features. And, in this sense, some critics like Harry Levin (1960) have stated that the traditional novel genre of *künstlerroman* suits modern requirements.

Other critics who have focused their efforts on offering a formal reading of *A Portrait* as modern have dealt with the complexity of the book. Ellman (1959) and Benstock (1976) urge us to perceive the novel as a complex structural framework of images, symbols and words. In a similar spirit, Hugh Kenner's reading of *A Portrait* in his famous essay "The Cubist Portrait" explains that the novel constitutes "the first piece of Cubism in literary history" (173). This author states that the coherence between the different parts and sections of the novel is due to a relation among iterated images. At this point, it is worth mentioning that the elements of Cubism stress the separation between the image and the real world. The cubist multiperspectivism and fragmentation aim at 'presenting' an image purely through its internal coherence, that is, an image that is 'selfbounded' or 'selfcontained', while the 're-presentation' of reality is demeaned. Similarly, Daniel R. Schwarz in *Reconfiguring Modernism* (1997) is able to specifically relate the fiction of Joyce to the paintings of his contemporaries.

In a similar fashion to the approaches of the New Criticism, the poststructuralist criticism appropriates the novel to accommodate it to its 'particular' vision of Modernism. Both approaches coincide in a reading that is focused on linguistic and formal aspects, and in this regard, both end up canonizing *A Portrait* as representative of an apolitical and ahistorical Modernism. For their part, poststructuralists highlight the novel's condition of being purely constructed through language and the impossibility of language to transcend its auto-referential status. In this way, we see how Stephen's mind is structured through language: how he perceives the world as a framework of pre-existent discourse that mediatizes his own consciousness, which implies a perpetual displacement of meaning:

Joyce's writing lacks any center of this kind; it knows no fixity, and its critique is not moral, derived from some sense, but self-reflexive, a perpetual displacement of sense in a play of forms without resolution. (Heath, 36)

This is in line with Colin MacCabe (1983): "In Joyce's writing, indeed, all positions are constantly threatened with dissolutions into the play of language" (14). Heath and MacCabe's poststructuralist approaches suggest that there is not a fixed position for the reader either from which to adopt a concrete interpretation. As the different sections and

parts of the novel develop, Stephen's perception and language are modified, which also determines the reader to change his position.

1.3.2. Political Readings of *A Portrait*

As we already stated in the introduction, there exists much criticism toward those formal readings. One of the most controversial proposals is the one by Weldon Thornton in his meaningfully called book *The Antimodernism of Joyce's Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*: "Joyce never endorsed the austerities and skepticisms even of modernism, much less those of deconstruction" (21). The institutionalization of the formalist criticism affected tremendously the apolitical reception of the novel, and, paradoxically, for some authors there is nothing in the novel that is not of a political nature (Margot Norris, 6).

One of the first readings summarizing and questioning the traditional view of Joyce as an apolitical artist is *Joyce's Politics* by Dominic Manganiello. Manganiello demonstrates that there are many clues in the letters that Joyce wrote to his brother which demonstrate his close and obsessive interest in the politics of his time. The critic explains that Joyce was not a mere assiduous reader of the nationalist press, but he also shared the viewpoint that blamed Great Britain as an occupying power, while he was also in favour of the political and economic independence of Ireland. Manganiello explains that Joyce abandonment of the nationalistic cause was motivated by his hatred of didacticism, which in his words, had been previously used by writers that were "on the service of tradition, that of the Church, the State, or of social conventions" (2). That is, Joyce was just against the artistic proposals of the founders of the Irish Revival and the Gaelic League. And, in this sense, as pointed out by Manganiello, Joyce's rejection of didacticism and tradition, as well as his political indifference, rather constitute a political act:

He believed that the artist, whether progressive or reactionary, would lose his credibility by browbeating his readers into accepting his point of view. To embrace a political outlook would limit

the effectiveness of his art and expose him to the charge of presenting a parti pris about society. The political dismissal of didacticism, then was itself a political act. (3)

Also, already in 1977, in his chapter “The Politics of Aesthetics” in *The Consciousness of Joyce*, Richard Ellman refers to Joyce’s prose as explicitly political:

Joyce’s politics and aesthetics were one. For him the act of writing was also, and indissolubly, an act of liberating. His book examines the servitude of his countrymen to their masters Church and State, and offers an ampler vision. (90)

For their part, Seamus Deane in “Joyce the Irishman” and Vicent J. Cheng in *Joyce, Race and Empire* (1996) hold that language is a political weapon used by Joyce, and the linguistic transgressions that modernist see in an apolitical sense rather deserve to be interpreted under a political light. More concretely, for Cheng, Joyce’s provocative avant-garde experimentation is interpreted as a constant search for an alternative of the oppressive discourse of the British imperialism, on the one hand, and of the claustrophobic Irish nationalism on the other:

In canonizing the radically experimental and avant-garde Joyce, there is a danger in failing to contextualize his polyglot linguistic talents in the light of his historical dispossession from a native national language that allowed him neither to retrieve Gaelic as an Irish native tongue, not to feel at home in an English inflected by empire and domination. (3)

The proposals of Manganiello, Deane and Cheng were in turn revised by Pericles Lewis. Pericles Lewis (2007) concentrates on the idea of the “forging of the race” developed in *A Portrait*. He states that although Stephen does not endorse a nationalistic political program, neither the novel as a whole seems to rouse other Irishmen to political action, the book serves to the typical nationalistic aim of revitalizing the Irish nation’s race. Stephen does so, not through traditional political action, but by examining his soul and considering his being as an artist; that is, through his writing.

Lewis stresses that Joyce is very explicit in this regard, as he poses that Stephen will attempt at forging in his soul the uncreated conscience of his race. This is a peculiar

concept with theological implications in the book. In Catholicism, God is the only 'uncreated' being; therefore, Stephen would play the role of Christ in "redeeming by reshaping the conscience of his race" (453). According to Lewis, Stephen exposes two goals: he links a personal and political goal by claiming that "the forging will take place in the smithy of his soul" (453). And, with this, he is formulating a relationship between the artist and the people.

For Lewis the disagreement with other Joyce's critics lies in a difficulty to translate the contemporary meaning of the word 'race'. The critic revises the theory of Vincent Cheng (1996) who enumerates the eleven uses of the word race in *A Portrait* to come to define race mostly in biological terms. For Lewis, Stephen's conception of race is much broader and incorporates cultural factors as well as biological ones, which allows certain room for transformation. For Lewis, Stephen is indeed aware of a dialectic tension between what it has been inherited and cannot be changed and what can be remodelled. To overcome this tension, Pericles Lewis, following a religious interpretation, argues that the artist's work does not involve a *creatio ex nihilo* –which, as said before, only corresponds to God– but a remodelling of what is old (454).

2. ANALYSIS

As Seamus Deane points out in his essay “Joyce and Nationalism”, the fact that *A Portrait* contains multiple seemingly autobiographical references against politics is a strong point made by critics who supported the autonomy of modern art. Joyce’s contribution to Modernism, that of reclaiming the freedom of the artist above the impositions of ideological programs, has been indeed the most widespread vision on the Irish author. Yet, in this analysis, we will defend the opposite: that Joyce was politically committed to his nation and used his art for that purpose. This will be developed through an exploration of the political ideas contained in the novel, and later through a more formal approach which investigates how the form of the novel mirrors those political ideas.

2.1. Politics

Stephen’s central political thesis is condensed in the following statement: “When the soul of a man is born in this country there are nets flung at it to hold it back from flight. You talk to me of nationality, language, religion. I shall try to fly by those nets” (Joyce, *A Portrait*, 174). In this way, Stephen identifies three spheres that need to be remodeled. The Politics section is likewise divided into these three sections: nationalism, language, and religion.

2.1.1. Nationalism

Although *A Portrait* deals with the development of an individual and the awakening of the artist, the novel develops these processes in connection with the collective sphere. First, though Stephen does not recognize this till the end of the novel –“this country and this race produced me” (173)–, he owes much to his nation as it has raised and shaped his actual

being. Secondly, and more importantly, throughout the novel, Stephen is very troubled by the state of stagnation of Ireland.

The first pages of the novel introduce the context of a series of social and political influences for the future of Stephen, especially the context of the family life and the early Jesuitical education. At this early stage, Stephen wants to know and name everything that surrounds him: “It pained him that he did not know well what politics meant and that he did not know where the universe ended” (Joyce, *A Portrait*, 12). Each thing has a name in the world. And, names and surnames are also related to the origin or social class of people; that is, names express identity. In this way, there is a passage in which Stephen when in Clongowes relates the surnames of his classmates to their good origins. Stephen’s surname, Dedalus, is neither a mere word, and when a classmate asks him what his name is and gets confused, Stephen hastens to answer that his father is a gentleman anyway.

And one day he (Nasty Roche) had asked:

-What is your name?

Stephen had answered:

-Stephen Dedalus.

Then Nasty Roche had said:

-What kind of name is that?

And when Stephen had not been able to answer Nasty Roche had asked:

-What is your father?

-Stephen had answered:

-A gentleman. (5)

At this point, Stephen the child, although unaware of the mythological connotations, starts noticing that his name is special, and this supposes a first experience of alienation. Against this experience of displacement, at another moment, when a teacher makes him repeat his name, Stephen resorts to history as way of validating his belonging to a greater community:

Why could he not remember his name? Was he not listening the first time or was it to make fun out of the name? The great men in the history had names like that and nobody made fun of them. It was his

own name he should have made fun if he wanted to make fun. Dolan, it was like a woman that washed clothes. (45)

In this way, although father Dolan is the one exerting authority over the child, Stephen ends up placing himself above his superior in an arrogant manner by means of his imagination.

At this early stage Stephen also gets to know his parents. Logically, his parents exert an influence over the child development and opinion of the world. Yet, promptly, Stephen rejects his father because of different intellectual motivations. Especially, Stephen perceives his father as “a praiser of his own past” (207). Similarly, Stephen also rejects his colleagues who are allied to student political parties which aim at recovering the mythic Celtic as a way of affirming the Irish identity. He refers to his friend Davin as “the young peasant [who] worshipped the sorrowful legend of Ireland. [...] his nurse had taught him Irish and shaped his rude imagination by the broken light of the Irish myth (154). For his part, Stephen rejects any form of regressive nationalism as this would only eternalize the present situation.

Eventually, Stephen also gets detached from her mother, despite all the affection that he felt toward her when he was little: “His mother had a nicer smell than his father. She played on the piano the hornpipe for him to dance (3); “He longed to be at home and lay his bed on his mother’s lap” (8). Stephen ends up associating her mother, as well as other women that he knows –Eileen, Emma Clery, and an unnamed peasant– with religion and the nation. Everything is permeated by politics, even love, and when Stephen starts experiencing love toward Emma, he feels mixed feelings toward her as he starts perceiving the religious and the national in her soul. Finally, the elements of this triple identification – women, religion and nation– end up merging into one, and he uses this identification to excuse his rejection to Emma’s love.

He had done well to leave her to flirt with her priest, to toy with a church which was the scullerymaid of Christendom [...]. She was a figure of the womanhood of her country, a batlike soul waking into consciousness of itself in darkness and secrecy and loneliness. (188-189)

In this passage, the words “church” and “womanhood” are also related to the image of the “bat”, a symbol that is associated in turn with “darkness”, “secrecy” and “loneliness”. In many passages, Stephen is scared of darkness: “But O, the road there between the trees was dark! You would be lost in the dark. It made him afraid to think how it was” (13). Darkness unmistakably alludes to ignorance, and it is one of the genuine images that characterize Irishness. Irish people, and more evidently, peasant women, are batlike souls “waking into consciousness”. In this sense, to be Irish for Stephen involves a primitive state of consciousness that should be combated with learning and that contrasts with his own experience ‘illuminated’ by transitory epiphanies. From this, we infer the need for Stephen to revitalize his nation.

As seen above, Stephen emancipates from his superiors –exemplified with father Dolan–, his classmates –exemplified with Nasty Roche–, friends –Davin–, his parents, and her beloved Emma. This dialectic process of confrontation-assimilation with his nation can also be seen through Stephen’s relation with language and religion, which will be commented in the next sections.

2.1.2. Language

Davin, a friend of Stephen, finds contradiction in the fact that Stephen has an Irish name, background and origin, yet he still turns against Irish literature and the Irish language. For Davin, to be Irish, it is not only necessary to be born in Ireland, but also to embrace the language of the country. Yet, Stephen is politically committed to his nation in a different way.

Their personalities contrast starkly. Davin portrays simplicity and innocence, while Stephen possesses a singular, sceptical mind. This is why Stephen used to call Davin a ‘tame goose’, referring to his willing acceptance of all kinds of imposed ideas. In the course of Stephen’s argument in the main conversation they hold, Stephen recalls an initial concern he had about Davin: “I ask myself about you: *Is he as innocent as his speech?*” (Joyce, *A Portrait*, 173). In Stephen’s mind, Davin’s language gives account of everything

about him –his education, intentions and way of being–, and this prompts Stephen to think about how he should use language. In this respect, Stephen claims: “This race and this country and this life produced me. [...] I shall express myself as I am” (173).

At this point, a question arises: What shaped Stephen as an individual, making him so different to his peers? While Davin identifies Stephen’s behaviour as a matter of pride, Stephen considers the history and politics of Ireland to be a series of betrayals. Stephen is fully aware of the history of his nation: “My ancestors threw off their language and took another [...]. They allowed a handful of foreigners to subject them. Do you fancy I am going to pay in my own life and person debts they made? What for?” (173). As people inherit the language that Stephen considers to be corrupt, he believes that freedom can be achieved by altering language, that is, through art. Language is indeed one of the “nets” that needs to be “flown by”: “When the soul of a man is born in this country there are nets flung at it to hold it back from flight. You talk to me of nationality, language, religion. I shall try to fly by those nets” (174). Yet, Stephen uses the verb “fly” in the sense of ‘transgressing’ rather than simply ‘escaping’, probably in an allusion to the mythic figure of Icarus who flew riskily high.

As instrument of ‘transgression’, language becomes an artistic device used to reconcile Stephen with his origin and country. And, in this sense, language performs a role in representing jointly both social and artistic reality. As Seamus Deane (2004) states, Stephen “will escape false representation and, in so doing, come to terms with the medium in which this representation has been made” (37). As pointed out by Deane, language is problematic for Stephen because, as indicated above, he is fully aware that this medium of representation in Ireland first belonged to the English culture. Stephen conceives the English language as a fatal weapon serving the country whose spirit it killed. Language is for him something that needs to be revitalized. This way, Stephen himself, who is a devotee of Thomas Aquinas’ aesthetics, acknowledges that he needs a new set of terminology to keep investigating the same ideas (Joyce, *A Portrait*, 179). When recounting his aesthetic theories to Lynch, Stephen contrasts the idea of activity against inactivity. Pure forms of art such as tragedy provoke a static emotion, an “arrest of the mind”, while the contemplation of simple nature incites movement in the form of desire or repulsion (175). This is why, for

critics such as James H. Druff (1982), Stephen's view of aesthetics seems to confirm his aversion for Dublin and his despair for action (184). Stephen wants to find a language that registers his soul, while scorning a devitalized use of it.

For this reason, Joyce incorporates various dialects and versions of spoken English into his writing in order to accurately depict Dublin as a blend of the oral and the cultured. Deane (2004) indicates that the English language as used in Joyce's times was greatly transformed in its syntax, grammar and vocabulary due to the contact with the oral culture resulting from the migration of Irish speakers (42). This led to linguistic collisions and confusions as the one about the "tundish" and the "funnel" described in the novel. Stephen quickly exploited the rebellious implications of a misunderstanding, mentioning that the term he has used is not Irish, but English: "It is called a tundish in Lower Drumcondra, said Stephen, laughing, where they speak the best English" (Joyce, *A Portrait*, 161). In this way, the presence of a linguistic complexity is a way of subverting a political conquest. Finally, as the subversion of language is a means of manifesting his own being and that of the Irish nation, he, as an artist, has the commitment of revitalizing the language for his community.

2.1.3. Religion

Stephen's resolution of finding his own voice is part of a larger debate between free will and determinism, which is mainly manifested through the confrontation of religion and art. The religious idea that there is an ultimate cause behind all creation contradicts the artist's role as creator of something new. The notion that it is not possible to become as perfect as God was already established in Clongowes: Stephen is accused of heresy for his statement that the soul should endeavor to emulate the perfection of his creator "*within a possibility of ever approaching nearer*". That is why he immediately corrected himself: "I meant *without a possibility of ever reaching*" (66).

However, as Stephen is educated with Jesuits, his thoughts are built upon religious principles and his language is infused with religious terminology. In this sense, Cranly responds to Stephen: "It is a curious thing, [...] how your mind is supersaturated with the

religion in which you say you disbelieve” (206). Similarly, Stephen expresses that he is “sure that there is no such thing as free thinking inasmuch as all thinking must be bound by its own laws” (159). The development of his knowledge is based on this dialectic. Stephen aims to develop new ideas, but he can only do so after assimilating external categories. In this way, throughout the novel, Stephen acknowledges that his actions are determined by an exterior supreme cause; while, on the other hand, he believes himself free to make his own moral choices.

As already noted in the Political and Social Context section, Stephen wants to save his nation from the obscurity which religion imposes and preserves, and there is also an opposition to religion as it enters in the realm that corresponds to the artist, that of providing sense and spiritually leading a country. This way, he outright rejects priesthood. Yet, as Pericle Lewis (2007) has noted, in a way, Stephen ends up accepting the identity that has been imposed on him from birth, that of being a priest, which Stephen’s calls “a priest-ridden race” (Joyce, *A Portrait*, 30). Yet, he tries to push beyond its limits. Meaningfully, Stephen perceives himself as “a priest of the eternal imagination, transmuting the daily bread of experience into the radiant body of everliving life” (189). That is, he is a unique priest in that he is well-endowed with imagination, while he can exert the function of missionary for his people.

2.2. Aesthetics: The Modern Novel

Joyce introduces a series of formal devices, which rather than being merely aesthetic, are relevant for a political analysis. These are the use of storytelling, cyclical structures, and an unexpected ending.

2.2.1. Storytelling

In the Language section, we talked about linguistic determinism and the subsequent paradox of Stephen being an artist as proposed by Lewis. But this condition is not only evidenced through Stephen's dialogues: it is present as a technical device of the novel as well.

Language configures Stephen's mind, and, thanks to language, we can clearly see how he perceives the world and how the world mediatizes his own conscience. In this way, we trace the evolution from Stephen the child who says "he (his father) had a hairy face" (Joyce, *A Portrait*, 1) –as he has not learnt the word "beard" yet –, to Stephen the grown-up, an intellectual artist using sophisticated lexicon and proper syntax.

Relatedly, Stephen the child is introduced to the world through stories which facilitate his understanding of the world. The story of his life is told by his father, and it starts with the classic "once upon a time": "Once upon a time and a very good time it was there was a moocow (that is, cow) coming down along the road and this moocow that was coming down along the road met a nice little boy named baby tuckoo [...]. His father told him that story." (1) This "baby tuckoo" who is Stephen himself is again reinserted in the story of his life by a classmate in Clongowes:

Stephen Dedalus is my name,
Ireland is my nation.
Clongowes is my dwellingplace
And heaven my expectation. (11)

Stories place him in the world and give sense to it from various perspectives. As a scolding, he receives a sonorous proverb by his aunt: "(the eagle will) pull out his eyes, apologize, apologize" (4). And, similarly, all the knowledge from religion comes in the form of a story: the unforgettable sermons on hell tell the story of a good guy –Jesus– who sacrifices himself, while the 'baddies' rather go to hell. And the same goes as regards politics, a metanarrative with his goodies and baddies: "That was called politics. There were two sides

in it: Dante was on one side and his father and Mr. Casey were on the other side but his mother and uncle Charles were on no side” (12).

A Portrait gathers all these stories, resembling the short story format of *Dubliners*. Yet, in *A Portrait*, Stephen assembles all these fragmented narratives and makes a story of his own. In this sense, there is a process of emancipation of the artist –as well as that of the individual– rather than an everlasting confrontation of determinist and creative forces as Lewis defended (2007). Or to put it another way, the novel goes from the listening to other stories to the writing of Stephen’s own story. As Deane (2004) put it, “the ability to incorporate the words of others into one’s own particular language-system is a sign of a ‘character’, a presence on the Dublin scene” (43). Thus, Stephen’s ability to take possession of the language of others denotes a real adherence to his country.

Relatedly, another function of storytelling, in addition to that of configuring Stephen’s identity, is to render Dublin and Ireland in their complexity. Joyce does not want to offer a partial version of the Catholic Ireland, as his contemporaries and predecessors did, but to present Ireland’s complex condition to the world. In doing so, Joyce introduces Ireland’s complex linguistic condition in the novel. And, particularly, he introduces colloquialisms, features of the still-living oral tradition in the syntax, and Irish vocabulary. Also, in *Ulysses* Mulligan speaks in Latin and Greek, while he quotes Irish authors –from Wilde to Yeats– blending the cultural and the prosaic together.

2.2.2. Cyclical structures

As just commented, in Joyce’s *bildungsroman*, we encounter a sensitive adolescent who is shaped by his surroundings: he first gets to know them and then defies them to eventually become himself. More concretely, Stephen goes through a series of stages: 1) lack of awareness, to 2) awareness and confronting reality, to 3) awareness and assimilation/hiding. We say stages in plural because he confronts a number of diverse life issues (relations with family, love, religion, politics and so forth) one after another, with each chapter of the novel being dedicated to one or several of these encounters:

Chapter 1: Family life

Early Jesuit instruction and classmates

Chapter 2: Love

Chapter 3: Reinforcement of religion

Chapter 4: Detachment from religion

Art

Chapter 5: Colonialism

Nationalism: Gaelic League, Irish Revival

Aesthetics (Adapted from Williams, 103)

Since these encounters with life develop in three stages, with a clear pattern of rises and falls, we can say that the novel has a cyclical structure. This can also be interpreted in terms of pessimism –first and second phases– and optimism –third phase. By means of example, as regards politics, Stephen first does not know what politics are and he feels sad. When he gets to know what they are he opposes them: Davin proposes that individuals should work together, while Stephen answers in a pessimistic tone that nothing should be done (Joyce, *A Portrait*, 174). Yet, at the end, he accepts them.

More concretely, Joyce starts each chapter by countering the intensity of the conclusion of the previous chapter with an unexpected change to a realistic objective detail –which can be read as a frustrating experience, following the pattern of pessimism-optimism indicated above: The bad smell of uncle Charles tobacco in chapter 2, Stephen's hunger in chapter 3, or the observation of the mechanical religious discipline in chapter 4. Besides, at the end of each chapter, Joyce uses elevated language as to show that Stephen has reached a momentary insight on that life issue, an experience of communion that has come to be known as 'epiphany'.

In this way, for all the fragmentation and multiperspectivism commented in the previous section, the novel contains clues for its interpretation scattered all throughout. 'Epiphanies' are instants of Stephen's own process of awakening, which are also illuminating for the reader. Thus, *A Portrait*, as a modern novel, is composed of

fragmentary and discontinuous stories, which, rather than just leading nowhere, lead to epiphanies.

The presence of epiphanies along with the phases of assimilation have political consequences for interpretation, as all this suggests that fragments may become reintegrated, that art may be in some way therapeutic for a broken modern world. And more importantly, that Joyce is coming to terms with his nation, much in line with Tindall's (1959) idea: "Mature at last, the writer, looking into his heart and at his past with all its trials and horrors, finds it easy to celebrate heart, past, and present maturity" (51).

2.2.3. Ending

The resolution that Stephen arrives at the end of the novel has been literally read as a refusal on the part of Joyce to the links of his community:

I will not serve that in which I no longer believe whether it call itself my home, my fatherland or my church: and I will try to express myself in some mode of life or art as freely as I can and wholly as I can, using for my defense the only arms I allow myself to use- silence, exile and cunning. (212)

Yet, the ending is very revealing as to Joyce commitment to his nation. Following our analysis on a careful structural preparation of cyclical stages, the ending supposes the last logical step: a bigger assimilation. Technically, the third person singular is transformed into a first person singular in a transcription of Stephen's diary. Thus, although along the book Joyce presents Stephen as the solitary protagonist, as he idealizes him by narrating heroic individual achievements –"He was alone, he was happy and free" (59)–, all these experiences of individualism acquire meaning at the very end with a new I, that embodies him and his nation.

This final exaltation cannot be read as a mere escape from the depressive Irish life, but as a merging with Ireland, since Stephen himself describes what the function of the artist is. He first states that often in literature the lyrical –subjective– blends with the narrative – objective. And then he uses as an example the "old English ballad *Turpin Hero* which

begins in the first person and ends in the third person” (184). The genre that makes possible to blend the lyrical and the narrative is the epic, which he describes as follows:

The simplest epic form is seen emerging out of lyrical literature when the artist prolongs and broods upon himself as the centre of an epic event and this form progresses till the centre of emotional gravity is equidistant from the artist himself and from others. The narrative is no longer purely personal. The personality of the artist passes into the narration itself, flowing round and round the persons and the action like a vital sea” (184).

Precisely, *A Portrait* is conceived as an epic, since the lyrical subjective finally merges with the objective narration. With this, Joyce is reinserting the creator –Stephen– in his creation –the novel/Ireland–, and equating the artist to God: “The mystery of esthetic, like that of material creation, is accomplished. The artist, like the God of creation, remains within or behind or beyond or above his handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent, paring his fingernails” (184). Like God, the artist is contemplating his creation from behind, yet he has not escaped.

As seen, with all this, rather than limiting Stephen’s perspective, Joyce characterizes a triumphant Stephen that has overcome his own subjectivity and merged it with the bigger fate of his nation. Finally, with the synthesis of the first and third person voice, the dialectical tension of determinist and creative forces that Pericles Lewis talked about is also solved at the very end of the novel. Stephen is converted into the artist as redeemer –after having accepted his “priest-ridden condition” (Joyce, *A Portrait*, 30)–, and has embraced the idea that he can only find freedom by accepting the forces beyond his control, as his previous experience contribute to the consolidation of his current identity.

3. CONCLUSIONS

The aim of our analysis was to investigate the relations between politics and aesthetics in *A Portrait*. While most previous critics have focused on analyzing either politics or aesthetics in the book, we proposed ourselves to analyze both of them jointly. The rationale behind this is that, from our point of view, Joyce aims at revitalizing both his contemporary political and artistic contexts at the same time, and art and writing are indeed political tools. The function of the artist becomes political as it involves the awakening of the artist's nation to an awareness of the present.

In the literary context, we saw that Joyce is an author without native predecessors, from what we concluded that he intends to exert a missionary function in the representation of Ireland. He denied the possibility of being influenced by any other native writer, and, indeed, contemporary and previous writers –William Butler Yeats, Lady Gregory and the Abbey Theatre, or comic dramatists Richard Brinsley Sheridan or George Bernard Shaw– either performed the role of “court jester to the English” (Deane, 40) or portrayed an old fashion civilization in their attempt to revive the Celtic tradition. On the contrary, works such as *Dubliners* and *A Portrait* aim at representing Joyce's contemporary Dublin in its complexity.

In the historical context, we developed how problematic Joyce's historical and contemporary Ireland were. With the subjection by both the Church and the British, Joyce interprets the history of Ireland as a series of betrayals. And this issue obsessed Joyce profoundly as to propose an urgent need of political renovation. To put it simply, it is not that Joyce was disinterested in politics; he rather rejected the politics of his time. Later, in the course of our analysis, we demonstrated how Stephen is against the politics of an escapist nature, that regressive nationalism that goes back in time to recover the mythic Celtic while ignoring the immediate present of Ireland. Relatedly, for Joyce, an art that aspires to be socially engaged, as to raise people's conscious awareness, cannot elude the trouble –that of a broken culture, a lost language, and a history of political betrayals–, but should render the polyphonic nature of Irish culture with a scrupulous attention to detail.

As for literary renovation, the literature from Europe did offer possible models, but Joyce only took them to speak of Dublin. Fragmentation, multiperspectivism, or storytelling are just formal strategies to render a dynamic and plural Dublin. Indeed, all Joycean prose works are characterized by a progressive complexity –from *Dubliners* to *Finnegans Wake*–which does not obey to a universal premise, as poet and critic Ezra Pound wanted, but to the accurate representation of the local. Furthermore, these all-encompassing and complex, yet local, representations of reality also obey to Joyce’s requirement of a renovation program. This is not free of political connotations, for a ‘new’ literary model was needed for the representation of his contemporary, ‘new’ Ireland.

In the analysis of the Politics section, we also saw through Stephen’s ideas and dialogues how he went against the paralysis that he identified in Ireland. Stephen identifies three areas that need to be remodeled: nationalism, religion and language. He rejects nationalism as the Irish League and many Irish people wanted to recover the Irish traditions. Provincialism is explained as a disease, a paralysis of the will which characterized his parents, friends, and love, and that he symbolically related to ‘darkness’. He rejected language –or rather the English standard– because it involves oppression for having being imposed by the English. And, finally, he condemns religion because it enters in the competence of the artist, that of providing meaning to the Irish nation. This is why Stephen states that he “shall try to fly by” the nets of “nationality, language, religion” (Joyce, *A Portrait*, 174), a statement that has been repeatedly misunderstood as Stephen’s wanting to leave the country.

Rather, Joyce develops an artist who is politically engaged, and who is also Joyce’s himself through his writing the novel as he aims at awakening his nation to consciousness. In this way, Joyce not only speaks through Stephen: Stephen’s ideas correspond to the novel’s modern formal devices. That is, the content, so to speak, corresponds with the form of the novel. These formal devices are storytelling, the cyclical structure, and the ending.

In addition to this problematization of the function of the artist in the modern era –as selfish or politically engaged–, the novel also dramatizes the awakening of the individual consciousness as a process that is connected to the discovery of the collective history of Ireland: “It pained him that he did not know well what politics meant and that he did not

know where the universe ended” (12). In fact any step the protagonist does to try to acquire an individual consciousness appears closely linked to the collective territory, and it is also paralleled by a linguistic learning.

All kind of fragments and stories are useful to give sense to the world, hence the function of storytelling. And storytelling also serves the function of integrating all kind of reality as to accurately describe Dublin as a modern complex city with a difficult past. In this respect, Joyce renders Ireland’s complex linguistic condition by introducing colloquialisms and features of the still-living oral tradition in the syntax, while introducing utterances that provoke misunderstandings because of the coexistence of English and Irish. Thus, once more, language is used artistically as a political weapon.

Very much like any youngster, Stephen goes through a series of steps in learning, which go from a state of confrontation with reality to another of acceptance. This relation with his environment indicates the impossibility to escape history, even if it is a troubled one. Furthermore, the ending, with the confluence of the third and first person singular, confers Stephen’s life epic dimensions. Stephen has come to terms with the fact that he, as an individual, is both subject and object of Irish history. Finally, the self of the artist is not to be invented from nothing, but by dissecting and joining existing culture.

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