

A Centenary Portrait

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Abstract: *This article is about the quite turbulent editing history of A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man and the importance of Harriet Weaver as Joyce's editor. It also points out some characteristics of this novel, such as the presence of epiphanies.*

Keywords: *Harriet Weaver, epiphanies, English language, Catholic church.*

In December, 1916, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, the first novel by James Joyce (1882-1941), was finally published in its entirety by Benjamin W. Huebsch in the United States. Before this, though, chapters of the book had appeared in 1914 and 1915 in the avantgarde periodical *The Egoist*, edited by Harriet Weaver, an Englishwoman and Joyce's great benefactress, who financed some of his publications. Weaver anonymously injected money of her own into the periodical in order to be able to pay the author for the publication rights of his novel in a serial form. Under Weaver's administration, *The Egoist* was later transformed into the publisher *The Egoist Limited*, which would launch the first edition of *A Portrait* in England on February 12, 1917.

The novel had a quite turbulent editing history. According to Richard Ellmann,

The serial publication of *A Portrait* should have facilitated its publication in a book, but it did nothing of the sort. Grant Richards rejected it on May 18, 1915, on the grounds that it was not possible to get hold of an intelligent audience in wartime. Pinker, beset by Joyce, offered the book in July to Martin Secker [...]. When Secker turned it down, Pinker offered it to Duckworth, who held the manuscript for several months. It became clear that English publishers were not enthusiastic [...]. (400)

The publishing house of Gerald Duckworth refused to publish the book. The motive was, according to a report by Edward Garnett, written January 26, 1916:

James Joyce's "Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man" wants going through carefully from start to finish. There are many "longueurs". Passages which, though the publisher's reader may find them entertaining, will be tedious to

the ordinary man among the reading public. That public will call the book, as it stands at present, realistic, unprepossessing, unattractive. We call it ably written. The Picture is “curious”, it arouses interest and attention. But author must revise it and let us see it again. It is too discursive, formless, unrestrained, and ugly things, ugly words, are too prominent [...]. (qtd. in Ellmann 403-404)

In the summer of 1916, though, Joyce received some good news: Weaver, who once again entered into action, decided to let the recently founded *The Egoist Limited* publish his book. On August 26 of the same year, the author sent the following letter from Zurich to his benefactress:

Dear Miss Weaver: I am very glad to receive your letter of 19 instant and to hear that the novel [*A portrait*] is at last about to be published. I hope that Mr Huebsch has my corrections. I have had no letter from him nor have I signed a contract with him nor has my agent written to me on this matter for several months past. But since you speak of writing for copies I suppose that the book is in course of printing. I am sure you are rather tired of the whole business though I am quite accustomed to it: after eleven years *ci ho fatto il callo*. I hope that the sales will repay you in some measure and I shall try to do something to that end. (Joyce, *Letters* 382)

The origin of the novel is quite dramatic, I'd say: its kernel is in the voluminous *Stephen Hero*, thrown into the fire by the author in an attack of fury provoked by the difficulties in publishing *Dubliners*, but partially saved by a family fire brigade, as Joyce used to say. The author re-wrote *Stephen Hero* in its entirety and gave this new manuscript the definitive title *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Both versions, the old one and the new, are characterized by their autobiographical content.

Among many other biographical allusions, *A Portrait* tells about the financial failure of Stephen's father, an inveterate nationalist who lost his money betting on the incompetent Irish leader Charles Stewart Parnell: “He knew, however, that his father's property was going to be sold by auction, and in the manner of his own dispossession he felt the world give the lie rudely to his phantasy” (87). In this passage there is a clear allusion to the financial ruin of Joyce's father, John Joyce, and to the writer's reaction on the bankruptcy of his progenitor.

At that time, Joyce probably didn't even dream that his rejected novel would gain so many translations through the years. *A Portrait* was translated into Brazilian Portuguese by José Geraldo Vieira (1945), Elton Mesquita (2013), and Guilherme da Silva Braga (2014), and by Bernardina Pinheiro (1992) and Caetano Galindo (2016), both renowned Joyce scholars and translators of *Ulysses*.

A Portrait is an excellent introduction to James Joyce's works. Its language is extremely clear when compared with his later fictional works, although quite daring. In addition, the book takes up themes that would recur in Joyce's writings and be taken

up again in *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*. Among these themes are the Irish question, religion and the counterpoint between the Irish and the English languages.

The Catholic Church was seen by the Irish nationalists as a traitor to the nation because she had contributed to the downfall of their great leader Charles Stewart Parnell:

- Let him remember too, cried Mr Casey to her from across the table, the language with which the priests and the priests' pawns broke Parnell's heart and hounded him into his grave. Let him remember that too when he grows up.
- Sons of bitches! cried Mr Dedalus. When he was down they turned on him to betray him and rend him like rats in a sewer. Low-lived dogs! And they look it! By Christ, they look it! (33-34).

Moreover, the Catholic church, which Joyce regarded as threatening and a great oppressor of the soul and of human liberty, is presented exactly like that in his novel. In a sermon to the young, among them Stephen Dedalus, the Father sentences:

- O, my dear little brothers in Christ, may it never be our lot to hear that language! May it never be our lot, I say! In the last day of terrible reckoning I pray fervently to God that not a single soul of those who are in this chapel today may be found among those miserable beings whom the Great Judge shall command to depart for ever from His sight, that not one of us may ever hear ringing in his ears the awful sentence of rejection: *Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire which was prepared for the devil and his angels!* (124)

It is well known that Ireland in Joyce's time was a fervently Catholic nation. And Joyce, like Stephen Dedalus, had been educated by Jesuit priests. And yet both of them, one in real life and the other in the novel, renounced religion. In spite of this, though, Joyce was burdened for the rest of his life by an enormous regret for not having prayed at his mother's death bed.

About the English language, Stephen Dedalus coined the famous phrase: "His language, so familiar and so foreign, will always be for me an acquired speech. I have not made or accepted its words. My voice holds them at bay. My soul frets in the shadow of his language". (189).

Concerning *A Portrait*, one should emphasize a long discussion on esthetics that resulted in a daring and fascinating mixture of fiction and critical essay:

[...] Plato, I believe, said that beauty is the splendour of truth. I don't think that it has a meaning, but the true and the beautiful are akin. Truth is beheld by the intellect which is appeased by the most satisfying relations of the intelligible; beauty is beheld by the imagination which is appeased by the most satisfying relations of the sensible. The first step in the direction of truth is to understand the frame and scope of the intellect itself, to comprehend the act itself of intellection. Aristotle's entire system of philosophy rests upon his book of psychology and that, I think, rests on his statement that the same attribute

cannot at the same time and in the same connexion belong to and not belong to the same subject. The first step in the direction of beauty is to understand the frame and scope of the imagination, to comprehend the act itself of esthetic apprehension. Is that clear? (208)

Umberto Eco begins *The Definition of Art*, an essay on photography and “the problem of casual art”, citing precisely one of the worries of Stephen Dedalus, who “applying his casuistic genius on esthetics, asked himself: ‘[...] if a man in an attack of fury cuts a piece of wood and sculpts the image of a cow, is this image a work of art? And if it isn’t, why not?’” (181, my translation). Thus the protagonist of *A Portrait* takes up to discussion a great theme of modern art, a discussion that seems to be still going on.

Stephen Dedalus, James Joyce’s *alter ego*, is a young, aspiring artist, erudite, fully conscious of the necessity of breaking with his family and Ireland to liberate his anguished spirit.

The novel is full of epiphanies, always very dear to Joyce. Here is one example:

Once he had washed his hands in the lavatory of the Wicklow Hotel and his father pulled the stopper up by the chain after and the dirty water went down through the hole in the basin. And when it had all gone down slowly the hole in the basin had made a sound like that: suck. Only louder. To remember that and the white look of the lavatory made him feel cold and then hot. There were two cocks that you turned and water came out: cold and hot. He felt cold and then a little hot: and he could see the names printed on the cocks. That was a very queer thing. (11)

Joyce never defined exactly what he meant by epiphany, but we can have some idea of what it means from the way in which the character Stephen Daedalus defines it in *Stephen Hero*, the early version of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*: “a sudden spiritual manifestation, whether in the vulgarity of speech or of gesture or in a memorable phase of the mind itself” (211). Stephen also defends that “it was for the man of letters to record these epiphanies with extreme care, seeing that they themselves are the most delicate and evanescent of moments (211). And Joyce did so, between 1901-02 and 1904, as the “forty brief prose works” (157) in Richard Ellmann’s edition of Joyce’s *Poems and Shorter Writings* can prove. Joyce’s explication of epiphanies goes on in *Stephen Hero*:

For a long time I couldn’t make out what Aquinas meant. He uses a figurative word ... but I have solved it. Claritas is quidditas. After the analysis which discovers the second quality the mind makes the only logically possible synthesis and discovers the third quality. This is the moment which I call epiphany. First we recognize that the object is one integral thing, then we recognize that it is an organized composite structure, a thing in fact: finally, when the relation of the parts is exquisite, when the parts are adjusted to the special point, we recognize that it is that thing which it is. Its soul, its whatness, leaps to us from

the vestment of its appearance. The soul of the commonest object, the structure of which is so adjusted, seems to us radiant. The object achieves its epiphany (213).

Thus the invitation stands to enter the world of Joyce through the centenary *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* – beautiful, dense and actual.

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