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Repetition, Failure, and the Ethical Absolute in James Joyce

Macy P. Todd

Much in the same way James Joyce wrote the stage on which signifiers are allowed to encounter each other, the criticism that followed his texts has eagerly taken these signifiers as the grounds on which to base claims of universality. Joyce's characters and work are segmented and lifted from their contexts in order to represent categories as variegated as gender construction ("the figure of woman starts to turn against the very same patriarchal conventions that ground her construction"¹ in the Circe episode of *Ulysses*), false dialectics of nationalism ("After the Race" depicts "the simultaneous desire . . . for cosmopolitan refinement . . . and nativist fear of the foreign"²), and allegories of mythical illumination ("Stephen Dedalus plays the dissolute bard . . . Leopold Bloom plays, not willingly, the cuckold of classic farce"³). This reverse critical synecdoche, in which the whole of the particular is taken as a model for a portion of the absolute, demonstrates the violent function of the signifier that Joyce exposes in his fiction. Instead of grouping subjects into convenient and impractical clichés (liberated woman, false Irishman, satirical hero, etc.),⁴ Joyce's

1 Elam 82

2 Cheng 24

3 Kenner *Voices* 40

4 Kenner does emphasize the prestige of the function of the signifier when he identifies how Joyce's work "appeals to a subliminal sense of ours . . . that somewhere, for everything that wants expressing, a single apt word exist like

work focuses on the fall from explanatory signification that amounts to the experience of the subject. By focusing on those categories so frequently examined in Joyce's texts (femininity, nationality, masculine family relations, etc.), one can distinguish a theory of the absolute that denies the hegemony of the function of the signifier by universalizing its failure; positing, in its place, a unanimity dependent on the repetition of that failure.

Perhaps Joyce's most troubling feminine character, Anna Livia Plurabelle, vacillates between modalities of singularity and feminine unity. Towards the conclusion of *Finnegans Wake*, Joyce has his aqueous narrator foretell—in the moment of her departure—the coming of another to take her place. The other is difficult to tell apart from the narrator, who addresses a “sonhusband” and refers to her successor as a “daughterwife from the hills again” (*FW* 539). The translocation of the words “son” and “husband,” as well as “daughter” and “wife,” purposefully convolutes the action of differentiation and reveals conventional oppositional understanding insufficient to determine identity. The fact that Joyce describes the “sonhusband” as “changing” (*ibid.*) only further emphasizes the linguistic play he has set before us, for the sign “sonhusband” can only appear to us as a constant state of changing—a perpetual vacillation between the two potentials of meaning. The same holds true for the “daughterwife,” who comes “again,” much in the same way the invented noun anticipates in its solidarity the passage from daughterhood to wifeness. Yet this simple cyclical explication misses the moment in which the two are the same thing, and the incestuous sexual relation implied when the narrator describes the perceived daughter as “Swimming in my hindmoist” (*ibid.*). Here the demarcation of single bodies is troubled further, as the act of giving birth (a potential relation between as many as three bodies within the daughterwife dialectic: midwife, wife, and daughter) is connected to the sexual act by means of the excretion of genitals, or moist hinds, as the text would have it. In this way the separation and the conjoinment of bodies are regarded as two sides of the same moist coin—neither heads nor tails when everyone is swimming in the same river.

a name bestowed by Adam” (Kenner *Voice* 33).

The subjective void implied by this ritualized blurring of demarcations is traced by Anna Livia to an important moment in her infancy where Joyce perfects the trope of the water cycle as narrative device by describing the process of condensation and precipitation as potential birth and consciousness. Readers of *Finnegans Wake* will be struck by the uncommon conventionality of the phrasing:

For she'll be sweet for you as I was sweet when I came down out of me mother. My great blue bedroom, the air so quiet, scarce a cloud. In peace and silence. I could have stayed up there for always only. It's something fails us. First we feel. Then we fall. (Ibid.)

The passage moves from the clarity of the singular “I” into the confusion of the anonymous mass that precedes it with the sonhusband and daughterwife figurations. The first sentence can be interpreted to speak of generation as self-contained: does Anna Livia come from her mother (which would interpret “me mother” as a colloquialism of *my* mother), or does she in fact come from herself, a mother (interpreting “me mother” as “me, mother”)? In either case, the descent is predated by the “peace and silence” of a “great blue bedroom” where “scarce a cloud” exists to pall the seraphic scenery. In fact, what is striking about this vision of heaven is its solitude—reinforced by Anna’s insistence that she “could have stayed up there for always *only*”—the “only” not only anticipating a solitary smear (like a cloud) that will inevitably do in the heavenly isolation, but also connoting the isolation itself, as in the case of the only child.

It is here that Anna agrees to pure unanimity, in the terms of a universal failure. The admission involves two pertinent shifts: the first from sexually diverse significations of inclusion (as Margot Norris notes, in *The Decentered Universe of Finnegans Wake*, “ALP is identified with all female characters” (Norris 64), hence the distinction between sonhusband and daughterwife that begins the passage), and the second from the roles associated with the gendered identification. What fills the hole remaining after the crossing out of these displaced identifications is the fall out of oneself; the subject’s fall out of the “me mother.” John Bishop, in *Joyce’s Book of the Dark*, recalls the “fall into exteriority” which forces the subject “to begin making increasingly elaborate distinctions between his own and physical

nature, between himself and others” (Bishop 199). Following from Vico’s *New Science*, where the excess signification of a lightning crash causes this separation in the subject, Anna’s view of universality is the recognition of the self and therefore the other. A view of universality that, to put it in Joyce’s terms, amounts to the failure of feeling and falling.⁵

A universality that is broken by the recognition of the other would seem to be an impossibility, a contradiction in terms. What is really taking place is another bit of homophonic play—this time between unanimity and anonymity—that presents the only ontologically sustainable vision of being-as-one. To wit, the only subject that can attain unanimity is the subject that maintains anonymity; a double anonymity that both resists the urge to know the other and to be known itself. The resulting unanimity is perplexing in that it preserves being-as-one not in its openness with regard to the other, but in its self-sustained isolation. René Girard tackles the position of the fallen subject in his work *Violence and the Sacred*, where he argues that all human unanimity is inherently violent. In the exploration of sacrificial social structures, Girard finds that any *fallen* being-as-one is dependent on an Other that grants the group identification: “each member’s hostility, caused by clashing against others, becomes converted from an individual feeling to a communal force unanimously directed against a single individual” (Girard *Violence* 79). Girard’s claims are echoed by Freud in *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, in which he argues even “the religion of love must be hard and unloving to those who do not belong to it” (Freud 39). This is the heart of the fallen sense of group identity, a unanimity that depends on a difference. In *The Wake*, Joyce asks the question of what it would mean to be a “daughterwife,” then quickly reassures us of the answer: to not be a “sonhusband.”

5 The play between the three semi-homophones fail, feel, and fall receive plenty of attention in Joyce, even at his most sentimental, where in the poem “A Prayer” the narrator equates a “silent love” (feel) with “[his doom]” (fall) and “dare[s] not withstand the cold touch that [he] dread[s]” (fail) (*PP* 21). In the context of crossing between the texts of the *Wake* and the poem it is important to note that two of the poem’s three stanzas begin with the ejaculation, “Again!”

The fallen collective cannot be divorced from the operation of the signifier; in fact, it may define it. The signifier collects traces of one-ness (singularity) under the grouping article of the letter, which in turns guarantees a (re)presentation of the materials as unanimous *in their distinction against other signifiers with the same purpose*. As such, the signifier is a sign of a violence which is enacted in a temporal shift when it is placed in space by (and places in space) its brothers.⁶ The operation of writing, as far as what is written operates as language, is a social function—the function of a fallen subject in its relation to its Other and its being-as-one against that Other. To put it in simpler terms, the fall of the subject into exteriority is mirrored in the fall of the signifier *qua* One. This is why, in *Finnegans Wake*, characters do not receive proper names except through anagrams produced through strings of words (“Hispano-Cathayan-Euxine” [227], “Horkus chiefest ebblynuncies!” [324]) or homophonous deconstruction (“Ear! Ear! Weakear!” [490], “Alla tingaling pealabells!” [491]); Joyce is acutely aware that the “feel” (the Derridean trace) which causes the “fall” of the signifier is *mirrored in the subject who always belongs to that signifier*.

The issue of “the fall,” prevalent all over *Finnegans Wake*, never reaches a level of clarity equal to the above passage, in which the previously described transition from the singular to the general is so systematically outlined. It is in this context that the “fall” in Joyce can also be seen from a uniquely Irish context, in which the split subject receives a semi-postcolonial reading. Following Lacan’s insistence, in “Seminar on ‘The Purloined Letter,’” that the structuring quality of repetition (much like the Vicoan “daughterwife from the hills again” above, or, as Joyce perhaps jokingly⁷ suggests in a letter to Jacques

6 See Derrida, *Of Grammatology* 70

7 Although with Joyce, the determination of ironic or sincere intent is often missing the point. With the constant crossing-out of difference and parade of cross-referential phonemes in *Finnegans Wake*, Joyce not only makes the joke but also reveals the mechanism that allow its affective apparatus to function. Linda Hutcheon, in *A Theory of Parody*, calls the *Wake* “not a temporary legitimate *inversion*,” that subverts known forms to momentarily draw self-reflective attention to them, but “closer to a permanent *perversion*” (Hutcheon 83) of those forms that render all affective processes raw.

Mercanton about the Russo-Finnish war, “le Finn Again Wakes” [*L III*, 463]), ensures us that “the symbol’s order can no longer be conceived of as constituted by man but must rather be conceived of as constituting him” (Lacan *Écrits* 34), Joyce’s vision of Ireland has the Dubliner captive to constitutive foreign mechanisms of representation (the English language, the Catholic Church). As Seamus Deane notes in “Joyce the Irishman,” the oft cited struggle in Joyce that is portrayed as “the revolt of the artist heretic against official doctrine” is really “even more painful,” as it entails

A conflict between his son and his parents—cultural, religious, biological—and a desperate attempt to go beyond the terms set by such a conflict by producing a theory of *the self as its own parent*, or, less desperately, a desire of the self for alternative surrogate parents who would permit the imagination to live its necessarily vicarious existence. (Deane 46, emphasis mine)

As the son who falls out of himself (me, mother) revolts against the very conditions of his engendering,⁸ so too the Irish subjects revolt against the forces that structure meaning “in the heart of the Hibernian Metropolis” (*U* 115). When Stephen remarks of the English priest, “the language in which we are speaking is his before it is mine. How different are the words *home, Christ, ale, master*, on his lips and on mine! I cannot speak or write these words without unrest of spirit” (*P* 189) he speaks of the twin languages of English⁹ and Catholicism which both offer the possibility of identity (“how different” Stephen perceives himself) and confines him to a foreign process of symbolization (the “unrest of spirit”). The “soul of that hemiplegia or paralysis which many consider a city” (*L I*, 55) is therefore not the feeble willful ignorance of a national (or metropolitan) character, but the spirit of a people inured to exterior systems of identification and representation

8 The state of revolution against one’s own conditions of being receives a formal reading where critics like Paul de Man note that Joyce’s novels, in their self-reflexivity (the perspective of observation possible once one has fallen out of oneself) “question the novel’s *possibility of being*” and imply “the failure of the fictive” (de Man 62). In this light, the series of novels produced by Joyce could be interpreted as the process of the novel falling out of itself.

9 Kenner 421

that give them meaning. Thus, as Mark Shechner notes in his *Joyce in Nighthtown*, “Stephen’s real fall from grace, it seems, was effected at the moment of his conception” (Shechner 29). Like Anna Livia, Stephen falls out of himself and into the limitations of subjective positioning—and in particular the conditions of an arbitrary, structure-giving national discourse.

It is in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* that Joyce offers us the clearest narrative of this fall out of oneself, in Stephen Dedalus’s passage from youth to early adulthood. The paradoxical reading of this maturation as a fall is provided by Joyce in the epigram that precedes the action of the book, Ovid’s “Et ignotas animum dimitit in artes” (*P*, 5). The line describes Daedalus’s attempts to escape his forced exile on the island of Crete through the air, and is translated by Rolfe Humphries as “He turned his thinking toward unknown arts” (Ovid VIII, 188). What complicates the phrase though, is what follows it; a look at the context from which the line is plucked reveals Joyce’s penchant for cross-textual play:

. . . et ignotas animum dimittit in artes
 naturamque novat. Nam ponit in ordine pennas,
 a minima coeptas, longam brevior sequenti,
 ut clivo crevisse putes.¹⁰ (Ovid VIII, 188–91)

The word that immediately follows *Portrait*’s epigram, “naturamque,” is the one that complicates any possible reading. The word’s meaning in Latin includes its most common translation in many English versions of *Metamorphoses*, “nature,” but further includes a connotation to an “order” or “sequence” whose connection is lost in the English translation. The movement of the signifier towards “order” becomes important as Daedalus’s “unknown arts” manifest themselves in the mimetic reproduction of a bird’s wings. Furthermore, “naturamque” derives from “natura,” or “birth”—while birth certainly introduces something “new,” it is always a preconceived form, always a copy (of a sort) of what (re)produces it.

Daedalus’s inventions cannot be conceived, then, as a subversion of nature, but rather a re-ordering of a constant *a priori* order.

10 “and [he] allowed his thoughts to scatter and spread through unknown arts/ giving birth to new nature. He set feathers in order/ first small, larger next,/ in ascension he sorted them.”

This process receives a semiological treatment in Derrida's "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," where the necessity of language provides "the necessity of borrowing one's concept from the text of a heritage which is more or less coherent or ruined" (Derrida), hence the ubiquity of Levi-Strauss's *bricolage*. From this perspective, Daedalus is a master *bricoleur* and Joyce is his mimetic double, providing in this moment a sly gesture to the constraints of subversion when one operates in any preconceived form.

Icarus and Stephen, then, stand in an important contrast to their respective makers. Whereas Daedalus perceives his wings as the subversion of constraint, as the loophole which allows him to erase his captivity, Icarus interprets the warning of his father, "moneo, ne, si demissior ibis, /unda gravet pennas, si celsior, ignis adurat./ Inter utrumque vola"¹¹ (Ovid VIII, 204–6), not as a potential path to freedom, but as the doubling of the boundaries of the island they are attempting to escape. Like Icarus, Stephen has no interest in new forms of restraint, and as Cranly remembers Stephen's aim, wishes "to discover the mode of life or of art whereby your spirit could express itself in unfettered freedom" (*P* 246). This dedication to freedom manifests itself as a hatred of old forms, in Stephen's diary entry where he explains "I desire to press in my arms the loveliness which has not yet come into the world" (251). Both Icarus and Stephen "deseruitque ducem"¹² (Ovid VIII, 224), abandoning a model of behavior only to inevitably fall out of themselves and back into the structure of representation they struggle to evade.

Hugh Kenner elaborates on this reading by noting that "the prose surrounding Stephen's flight" causes one to recognize the whole operation as "a meticulous pastiche of immaturity" (Kenner *P* 425). He elaborates:

The dark intensity of the first four chapters is moving enough, but our impulse on being confronted with the final edition of Stephen Dedalus is to laugh; and laugh at this moment we dare not; he is after all a victim being prepared for a sacrifice. His shape, as Joyce said, can no longer change. (439)

11 "I remind you, if you float too low,/ the waves will weigh down your wings; too high and they will burn./ Fly between the two."

12 "abandoned a leader [father]"

Kenner is supported in this reading by the events of *Ulysses*, specifically where Stephen presents his theory of Shakespeare as the fallen king/father in Hamlet. The audience that Kenner implies at the close of *Portrait* is doubled in Eglinton and his crowd in the library who are caught between laughing¹³ at and pitying Stephen as he forwards his biographical account of Shakespeare's foundational cuckoldry. When finally Eglinton challenges him by asking, "do you believe your own story?" Stephen responds "promptly" with "no" (*U* 211). He is summarily dismissed as a humorist and is first encouraged to write his theory as a comic Platonic dialogue "like . . . Wilde wrote" (*ibid.*) before he is completely replaced when Eglinton introduces "Herr Bleibtreu" whose actions are more pressing and interesting because "he believes his story" (*ibid.*). Stephen has here fallen from his dream of artistic singularity back into the dominant ideology of those around him, led in this fictitious example by Eglinton, a Dublin intellectual.

Yet, as René Girard has noted in *A Theater of Envy*, Stephen's denial of belief in his theory is not his final word. Just after Eglinton's dismissal Stephen's thoughts continue from where his denial left off: "I believe, O Lord, help my unbelief.¹⁴ That is, help me believe or help me to unbelieve? Who helps to believe? *Egomen*. Who to unbelieve? Other chap" (*ibid.*). Girard claims "as soon as the mimetic pressure is gone, *Egomen* comes back to life; the essential self lies beyond the reach of the lynchers" (Girard 263). In essence, although Stephen's denial of himself, of *Egomen*,¹⁵ amounts to a fall back into the dominant subjective position, it also always allows for another

13 In *Stephen Hero*, Stephen encounters "laughter" when he presents a paper of "downright protest" (*SH* 33) against *Othello*.

14 Mark 9:24

15 Another bit of evidence as to the role of "*Egomen*" in this section of *Ulysses* that Girard may have overlooked occurs in *Stephen Hero*, after Stephen is laughed at on account of a paper he authors attacking Shakespeare. After considering why he continues his project, rather than give in to the pressure of his peers, Stephen determines, "it was part of that ineradicable egoism which he was afterwards to call redeemer" (*SH* 34). Thus it is the dependence on the self as structuring force that allows Stephen to continue "on and on and on" through the omnipresence of failure. See also Rabaté 40.

challenge to the ideology that demands entropy. Unlike Icarus, Stephen has survived to test the boundaries established by his father (country, language, church, etc.) again and again. Perhaps Kenner underestimates Stephen's guile when he dubs him a "victim being prepared for a sacrifice."

In Hugh Kenner's long-influential reading, Stephen's ultimate resistance to homogeneity—to the prescribed path made obvious by the example of Eglinton and the rest of the critics in the library—is a touchstone of his immaturity. However, the alternative to this immaturity constitutes a sacrifice of freedom in deference to proscribed norms—ultimately presenting themselves in one or another form of hemiplegia. Kenner's mistakes are twofold where he reads Joyce's "on and on and on and on" (*P* 172) as the "inescapable mold" (Kenner *P* 439) of Stephen's future: first assuming that Stephen's immaturity earns a *de facto* pejorative reading and should engender both disdainful mirth and pathos, and second that the doomed failure of any attempt to escape enfoldment into a dominant system of representation is by extent also tragic. This second assertion includes a reading of repetition illustrated in the platitudinous metaphor of the needle skipping on a record: both the sonic failure and the inevitable cyclical return to that failure are summoned. Yet one might rightly ask, why must repetition always be illustrated pejoratively? Why can't it be, as Perry Meisel suggests, "a basketball game that doesn't end?"

Stephen, as early as the *Portrait*, recognizes the realm of possibility regarding repetition and failure and is thrilled by its availability. A close look at the section from which Kenner pulls his "on and on and on and on" reveals the duplicity of meanings Stephen has already come to recognize in that repetition. After the vision of the transformation of the girl on the strand into a bird, Stephen interprets this experience as a means to a potential true freedom:

Her eyes had called him and his soul had leaped at the call. To live, to err, to fall, to triumph, to recreate life out of life! A wild angel had appeared to him, the angel of mortal youth and beauty, an envoy from the fair courts of life, to throw open before him in an instant of ecstasy the gates of all the ways of error and glory. On and on and on and on! (*P* 172)

Already the semiological play that will highlight the *Wake* presents itself in this passage from the *Portrait*. The succession of “to live, to err” recalls the possibility of “to live, to *air*,” a possible connection to flight, especially when taken in the context of the girl on the strand’s transformation into a bird. When this pairing is followed by “to fall,” Icarus’s doomed flight is undoubtedly the connotation. Yet the flight itself, in the pairing of air/err, is already a mistake, a failure, and thereby calls into question the status of the duplication of the failure when it is followed by “to fall.” Therefore, to air is to err and to fall is to fail. When one replaces “to live” with its translation, “to feel,” we find one predecessor (among many) of Anna Livia Plurabell’s fail, feel, fall triumvirate. Yet the second intonation of a failure (“to err” being first and “to fall” being second) is followed immediately by “to triumph.” Hence, the answer to the question of what follows a duplicated failure may be, quite simply, success. Of a sort, anyway. Or so the confusing “to recreate life out of life”¹⁶ would suggest. How can one recreate something out of itself except by repeating it, by setting it next to its double? Error and glory are then paired conclusively, before a visual whirlwind of repeated words closes the passage with an exclamation mark. If anything is romanticized at the end of this ejaculation, it is repetition and error.

It would be unfair to say that Kenner is completely oblivious to positive readings of repetition and the play that these repetitive gestures give birth to. He is responsible for the observation that “each chapter in the *Portrait* gathers up the thematic material of the preceding ones and entwines them with a dominant theme of its own” (Kenner P 431) and adroitly notes that “the whole book is about the encounter of baby tuckoo¹⁷ with the moocow” (419). However, he

16 This line in *Portrait*, more than any other, assures me that Joyce was well aware of the intransigent status of his epigram and the many meanings one could derive from a translation of the Latin. “To recreate life out of life” maintains the birth referent of “natura” in Ovid’s “naturamque” while drawing attention to the idealized notion within the English translation of “changing the laws of nature.” Making new nature, Joyce understands, is always an act of *bricolage*.

17 The opening lines of *Portrait*, in which Stephen’s father tells the tale of “a moocow” that, while strolling down a road, meets “a nicens boy named

doesn't give credit to the way that every meaningful symbol within the book undergoes transformations, through repetition *and* failure, which can be traced back to the action on the book's first two pages. Where Stephen, wallowing in his own guilt, imagines himself "helpless, perturbed and human for a bovine god to stare upon" (*P* 111) we must naturally track this image back to that of baby tuckoo encountering the moocow, while at the same time anticipating Davin's tale of the young woman who brought him a "big mug of milk" when he asked for water and sexually advanced on him. Stephen's interpretation of Davin's tale immediately recalls this process of reification:

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 his own, a batlike soul waking to the consciousness of itself in darkness and secrecy and loneliness. (183)

The image of Irish womanhood is satisfying enough, with its connections to the experiences of baby tuckoo—yet when Emma Clery disappoints him with her interaction with Father Moran, the image is re-invoked and re-examined through the context of failure:

He had told himself bitterly as he walked through the streets that she was a figure of the womanhood of the country, a batlike soul waking to the consciousness of itself in darkness and secrecy and loneliness, tarrying awhile, loveless and sinless, with her mild lover and leaving him to whisper of innocent transgressions in the latticed ear of a priest. (221)

The notion of a cunningness, of a deceitful performance of sincerity as a portion of Irish womanhood burns Stephen not in its mendacity but in the humiliation of his having believed in it. It is easy to see, then, that the Emma Clery incident recalls the unjust pandying Stephen receives at Clongowes. In this way Joyce makes it clear how symbolic repetition structures the potentialities of meaning in the present.

baby tuckoo" (*P* 7) not only acts as a *mise en abyme* for the entire repetitive narrative structure of the novel, but also offers opportunity for further inspection of the role of storytelling at large. Stephen's first act of critical reading occurs concurrently with the moment where he first identifies himself: "he was baby tuckoo" (*ibid.*).

Yet the structuring works both ways, and Stephen's past is reified along with the present. When the mug of milk becomes the "whisper of innocent transgressions in the latticed ear of a priest," the moocow interlocutor adds a sexual reading to the experience of baby tuckoo, *as well as* an explicit sexual reading to the experience of the Catholic Church. This process of reification recalls Samuel Beckett's narrator in *Malone Dies*, who remarks, "I remind myself that since I last went through my possessions much water has passed beneath Butt Bridge, *in both directions*" (Beckett 250, emphasis mine). The translation of the "water under the bridge" cliché corrects it, as Joyce makes clear, in that the experiences of the past not only structure the present, but the experiences of the present further structure and reveal meaning in the past. As Derrida notes, in *Of Grammatology*, a theory of meaning as derived from temporally linked signifiers must contain "an historical strategy" (Derrida *Grammatology* 70).

Reading the approximation of Irish womanhood within this context allows one to expand on the appearance of the adjective "bat-like," which re-evaluates yet another trope—that of the "eagles" that "will come and pull out his eyes" (*P* 8). Through the methodology of historical reification Stephen learns to add surplus meaning to recycled tropes through their very reappearance. This process of interpretation leads to a glut of potentialities within signification that connect such disparate elements as the mother, breast-feeder, prostitute, and redeemer.¹⁸ This ideological approach to interpretation constitutes a specific reading method¹⁹—Stephen accepts all signs as fundamentally linked and able to be read concurrently against one another. Through the continued failure of a sign to demarcate its own independence,

18 As evidenced above, the enjambment of conventional gender roles, which is obvious in *Finnegans Wake*, has its genesis in Joyce's work long before. In *Chamber Music*, for example, in Poem XIV, a narrator begins with the sexually charged image of "nightdew" which rests "upon my lips and eyes" before calling out to "My sister, my love" and promising "my breast shall be your bed" (*CM* 18). See also Norris 64–5.

19 Stephen employs this method very early on in *Stephen Hero*, where he is described as walking about Dublin with a "deliberate, unflagging step piecing together meaningless words and phrases with deliberate unflagging seriousness" (*SH* 31).

such as the moocow transfigured into the innocent milkmaid and the scheming whore, there can therefore be no reliably stationary signified produced. Stephen's reading method provides him with a kind of surplus-enjoyment²⁰—a language made out of another²¹ (nature made out of nature) that operates alongside its model while simultaneously *questioning that model's viability*. As Lacan says when alluding to the relation of knowledge and *jouissance*, “everything hinges on failure” (Lacan *Seminar XVII* 85).

The failure at the library illustrates this point perfectly, as it is Stephen's radical reading of *Hamlet* that so upsets the group of critics led by Eglinton. Where Eglinton tries to stick to conventional modes of interpretation (textual glossing, etc.), and adhere to an image of Shakespeare as god-the-father to his works (“After God Shakespeare has created most” [U 210]), Stephen refuses to cease repeating his “error” in taking the biography of Shakespeare equally with the dramatic works he produced, claiming flatly that Shakespeare is reflected in every character, “all in all . . . he acts and is acted upon” (ibid.). Derrida's thoughts, in *Acts of Literature*, on a Joycean reading of coincidence describe Stephen's method: “With Joyce, luck is always taken in hand by the law, by meaning, by the program, according to the overdetermination of figures and ruses” (Derrida *AL* 258). Even in the moment Stephen recants his denial of his theory he is already back to this reading method, mixing interpretation of scripture (“I believe, O Lord, help my unbelief” [211]) with an immediate interpretation of his exchange with his interlocutor (“Who helps to believe? *Egomen*. Who to unbelieve? Other chap” [ibid.]). In this way, in failure, Stephen is prepared to continuously challenge the boundaries placed before him. Although the boundaries still exist, they exist in a state of transparency, i.e., they have been revealed for what they are—arbitrary. Whereas Eglinton's anecdotal tale about “Herr Bleibtreu” and his genealogical claim to authorship may have passed unnoticed prior to Stephen's presentation, it is justly determined to be driven produced by ideological limitations on play surrounding traditional discourse on Shakespeare.²²

20 Zizek 202

21 Adorno 35

22 Another example of trite interpretation of Shakespeare in the works

The exchange between the two cannot be divorced, either, of the context of nationality that runs through it. In the midst of Stephen's presentation Eglinton draws explicit attention to the question of Ireland and England (already made obvious, perhaps, by the presence of Haines) and makes Stephen an offer, in a sense:

—The bard's fellowcountrymen, John Eglinton answered, are rather tired perhaps of our brilliancies of theorizing. I hear that an actress played Hamlet for the fourhundredandeighth time last night in Dublin. Vining held that the prince was a woman. Has no-one made him out to be an Irishman? (*U* 196)

Eglinton asks a question of Stephen, tempting him with the opportunity to appease his crowd with a nationalist interpretation of *Hamlet* rather than continue to rankle them with his cross-referential treatise on *eros*. This offer is different, yet at the same time similar to the one he makes when asking Stephen whether or not he believes in his own theory. It is similar in the sense that it offers him a chance to join the majority, i.e. the critics in attendance at the lecture, who are all additionally suspect of the dedication given to an English subject. It is different in the sense that it fails. Perhaps its failure is reliant on the fact that Stephen has encountered an offer like it before. In *Portrait*, Davin attacks Stephen's nationality, encouraging him to "try to be one of us" (*P* 203), and asking "are you Irish at all?" (202). Stephen's reply to Davin may as well be doubled and addressed to Eglinton as well: "This race and this country and this life produced me . . . I shall express myself as I am" (203).

of Joyce is the case of "Father Butt" in *Stephen Hero* who "read a series of papers at a total abstinence club to prove that Shakespeare was a Roman Catholic; he had also written against another Jesuit father who had very late in life been converted to the Baconian theory of the authorship of the plays" (*SH* 25). The interplay between Catholic limitations and the rigorous restrictions on literary interpretation are clear here, as the language of the church (one is "*converted* to the Baconian theory") structures the realm of possibility within Shakespeare scholarship. That the papers are presented by a "Butt" reveals the ways in which Stephen's reading method will later begin to test these limits, as (w)hole other oppositional meanings can be read into this passage through the name of the priest. See also Joyce's article, "Shakespeare Explained" (*CW* 137–8).

The role Ireland plays in any question of unanimity, or being-as-one, will inevitably degenerate into oppositional opportunities for identification. The question posed is, are you Irish like us or are you the subject that defines us as Irish? Are you “one of us” or are you our necessary other? Stephen’s answer, that the race and country produced him, ultimately ends in the distinction that he, more or less, is what he is and nothing more. By refusing to play the game, as it were, Stephen mirrors Icarus’s violation of the law of father; he becomes neither Irish with Davin nor the recalcitrant other that opposes the Irish. This violation results in the inevitable fall back into the system—Davin has no choice but to order Stephen as the other in his schema. Yet doubt must remain as a participle to any distinction made by Davin, as Stephen’s methodology teaches him to at all costs *avoid signification*. This lesson is learned early in *Portrait* where young Stephen is interrogated by his peers:

—Tell us Dedalus, do you kiss your mother before you go to bed?

Stephen answered:

—I do.

Wells turned to the other fellows and said:

—O, I say, here’s a fellow says he kisses his mother every night before he goes to bed.

The other fellows stopped their game and turned round, laughing. Stephen blushed under the eyes and said:

—I do not.

Wells said:

—O, I say, here’s a fellow says he doesn’t kiss his mother before he goes to bed.

They all laughed again. (*P* 14)

The game of group identification and sacrifice could not be made clearer. Its role as foundational game is made obvious by the way the “other fellows” eagerly abandon their game to take part in this one. Repetition as foundational factor (in its arbitrary role) is accounted for as Wells repeats verbatim his accusation with only a positive or negative flip (e.g. “kisses” or “doesn’t kiss”) in order to give the process meaning. His message to Stephen is: “if you are the subject who kisses his mother, we are that subject that doesn’t kiss; if you are the subject who doesn’t kiss his mother, we are that subject that kisses.”

The lesson of the function of identification through violent difference is fundamental to Stephen. Although he perceives it through confusion, it is his confusion that leads to a failure to accept the game as a necessary function. The above passage continues:

They all laughed again. Stephen tried to laugh with them. He felt his whole body hot and confused in a moment. What was the right answer to the question? He had given two and still Wells laughed. But Wells must know the right answer for he was in third of grammar. (Ibid.)

Stephen's attempt to join the laughter is already determined to fail. In his belief that a law (in this case the function of the signifier represented by his faith in Wells's position in "third of grammar") will account for all phenomena, he is given strength to resist the impulse to implicate himself in or repeat the game he has been an unwilling party to. He cannot release himself from the prestige of a belief in games with logical rules, and is therefore forced into the uncomfortable position of the other which grants identity.

In spite of encountering intractable opposition, Stephen refuses to stop believing there is a correct answer. He never claims to have given every possible answer, but instead just "two" out of what become a cryptic collection of potential answers—seeing as how "Wells must know the right answer." What will develop is the understanding of the potential for an answer beyond a "yes" or a "no." This "third" answer (mirrored in the observation that Wells is in the "third of grammar") is represented in Wells's inquisition of Stephen; a systematic avoidance of any single identification.

When Cranly interrogates Stephen on his religious belief he repeats Wells's question in as many words: "Do you love your mother?" (240). Stephen answers, "I don't know what your words mean" (ibid.). The question, which demands knowledge of the other subject, is a means by which two may become one (in the case of the subjects' agreement on the love of their mothers) or two may become two (in the case of a difference which will grant each an identification within the game, i.e. the subject that loves/does not love its mother). Stephen denies Cranly his necessary signification by rejecting it absolutely. It is the action of the subject who wishes to stay "up there for always only," the same consistent methodology he will use when

his nationality is challenged by Davin; for, really, how different in the rhetorical context of an early twentieth century Ireland is the love of one's mother from the love of one's country?

Stephen's proclamation, "I shall express myself as I am," blatantly refuses to allow Davin the pleasure of beginning to formulate what or where the "I" could be. Pleasure, too, must not be lost from the picture that is being painted, as it is ultimately a vision of *Eros* that always coincides with a fallen demand for being-as-one. Davin's entreaty to "try to be one of us" is not the demand of a master, but instead the desire of a parallel subject who wishes for the signification that will allow it to cross into its desired partner. The lack of definition demands, however, that it remain in symbolic limbo, signifying only its reluctance to be signified. In other words, maintaining a vision of unanimity in its anonymity.

This relationship begins to explain how Lacan, in *Encore*, approaches love first and foremost as a symptom of the One. By stating "*Y a d' l'Un*," Lacan confirms if not the existence of a universal, at the very least the existence of the appearance of one. After asking whether or not *Eros* is simply "a tension toward the One" (*Encore* 5) he responds by noting that "love is impotent, though mutual, because it is not aware that it is but the desire to be One, which leads us to the impossibility of establishing the relationship between . . . them-two sexes" (6). What is being said, at first glance, is nothing more than a reflection on narcissism—the idea that, as Lacan himself says, the object of *eros* is nothing more than the remainder of the desire itself. Kurt Cobain, in "On a Plain," manages this revelation when he sings, "[I] love myself better than you/ I know it's wrong, but what can I do." The subject here knows his feelings are wrong because he understands the imperative of love: to never give up on the illusion of the presence of the One as the intermediary between "them-two."

What has yet to be accounted for is how the signifier accomplishes this apparition of the One. Returning to the episode in which Stephen is ridiculed for kissing and not kissing his mother. As "Stephen tried to laugh with them" (*P* 14), the signifier manifests itself—just below our perception—as the function of the One; this is the moment that Stephen begins to ask what it is that makes them "them" and him "Stephen." The work of the signifier, in this

case, is the same as when Douglas Hyde remarks that “in spite of the little admixture of Saxon blood in the north-east corner, this island *is* and will *ever* remain Celtic at the core” (82–3). Without the very function of language, how is everything Celtic to be collected and presented in two syllables, in all contrast to everything Saxon? What is the difference, then, between this function and the function of the words man and woman? Does anything change when the words are not spoken, but instead when a man who considers himself such meets something he believes to be a woman? As much as the subject’s fall is an acceptance of its role in relation to the signifier, it is at once a denial; as much as this fall is the appearance of other subjects, it is the birth of the self as a relation to the Other as well.

In this context Stephen is left little choice. In a sense, the signifier demands that its sadistic game be played simply by the oppositional possibilities its structures imply. Therefore, when Stephen curses his own ignorance in assuming Emma Clery to be a “figure of the womanhood of the country” (*P* 221), he curses his faith in the process of symbolization—the problem is never Emma Clery but instead the very notion of something as ludicrous as a universal Irish womanhood. Stephen here is stuck in the mode of his childishness, still the one who kisses and does not kiss his own mother before bed. What lies outside this frame is, in as many words, “the third of grammar” (*P* 14) that Wells is in—the reading method that allows Stephen to play the signifier’s game before the signifier has a chance to. Here is the opportunity to succeed in failure, repeatedly, by turning the inherent failure of signifying functions inside out: to strive towards existence in the “great blue bedroom” (*FW* 539) of anonymous unanimity, to declare ““I don’t know what your words mean” (*P* 240) to every attempt to establish the Other.

The question of Stephen’s maturity comes to a head where the invocation to “try to be one of us” is revealed as the mimetic copy of the parent’s injunction to the misbehaving child. It is the failure to accommodate oneself to “mature” limitations on play that marks immaturity, rather than a deficit of intelligence or cultural understanding that dooms one to failure. Following the example of Anna Livia in the *Wake*, Stephen’s fall out of himself—and out of the influence of any “parent,” national or otherwise—allows him the

position of never being indebted to a model, of never having to try to be like one among a group. The construction of his fall implies agency in the question of maturity; from this perspective, Stephen is liberated from the invocations of a communally accepted adulthood and makes his project an unraveling of the conditions of that maturity. In the process Stephen recognizes the failure of signification as the failure of the self—as the inevitable fall from grace that any fixity demands. By addressing the superfluity of representations, Stephen manages to destroy the isolated significations accepted by those around him. In *Stephen Hero*, after procuring an etymological dictionary, Stephen finds himself amazed at the potential limitlessness of language and regards others as “strangely ignorant of the value of words they used so glibly” (SH 26). When Lacan, in *Encore*, says of Joyce that he is “unreadable” (Lacan *Encore* 36), he refers not to the well-documented hardship encountered with some of the English language’s most obtuse texts, but rather the non-existence of a master reading that will explain away the text:

What happens in Joyce’s work? The signifier stuffs the signified. It is because the signifiers fit together, combine, and concertina—read *Finnegans Wake*—that something is produced by way of meaning that may seem enigmatic, but is clearly what is closest to . . . slips of the tongue. It is as slips that they signify something, in other words, that they can be read in an infinite number of different ways . . . [giving] a different reading to the signifiers that are enunciated than what they signify. (Lacan *Encore* 37)

Lacan entreats us to read *Finnegans Wake*, but what he misses is that he describes Stephen’s reading method, available to us as early as *Portrait of the Artist*. The multi-lingual play of enjambment and explosion of words in *Finnegans Wake* is only the end product of a lifetime of recognizing and exposing the violence of language. It is in *Portrait of the Artist* that Joyce begins to imagine the broken chain of signification as the father that creates a labyrinth for himself, his own son. There that the repetition of error and failure can constitute a moment of glory. There that the “mememormee!” first goes “a way a lone” with a promise to “Finn, again” (*FW* 540) in an endless cycle of rebirth, “on and on and on and on.”

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