

“Out of Mere Words”: Linguistic Placement, Displacement, and Replacement in *A Portrait of The Artist as a Young Man*

Alexander William Barchet
Department of English & Modern Languages

Introduction:

James Joyce’s seminal novel *A Portrait of The Artist as a Young Man* has long stood as one of the earliest and most influential works in the Modernist movement. Unfortunately, outside of Joycean criticism, *Portrait* has largely faded from social consciousness. It seems as if the ostensibly simple *Portrait* has become overshadowed by the success of Joyce’s more complex works *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*. However, the subtlety and deceptive simplicity of *Portrait*’s style and structure are truly what make it a masterpiece in its own right. Due to its episodic construction, as well as the fact that the narrative focuses initially on Stephen as a child, *Portrait* provided the opportunity for Joyce to demonstrate some of his most insightful observations about the shifting nature of language and how language functions on a societal level. Through parallel incidents in each of *Portrait*’s five chapters, Joyce shows the tendency of people and institutions to “displace” Stephen through language. In this case “displace” is meant to indicate an act of attempting to position Stephen through language or to put him in a certain role, the good Catholic, the good Irishman, the good son, the artist. Following these dislocations, Stephen uses language to replace himself, most notably through his engagement in prayer and confession. It is not a spiritual relief that Stephen gains from these acts—rather the words serve to provide Stephen with a type of psychical grounding—Stephen gradually removes meaning from the words; they become static and devoid of meaning.

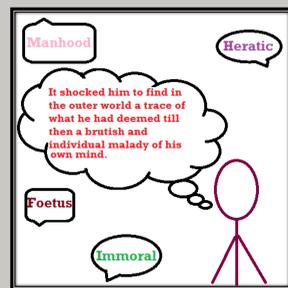
Method:

Each chapter of *Portrait* focuses on a different time in Stephen’s life and a different aspect of how language functions. As Stephen’s thoughts become increasingly complex so too do Joyce’s observations about language:

Chapter I “Sounds” Chapter II “Names” Chapter III “Confess!” Chapter IV “Words” Chapter V “Away!”



Why do certain sounds elicit certain feelings?



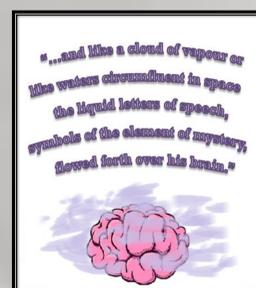
How much is the individual influenced by external discourses?



Why would Catholicism utilize its own language?



Can the individual change society through language?



Can language be used to escape an oppressive society?

Conclusion:

In this study, we see not only the specifics of how language functions in *Portrait*, but also how language functions in society at large. Clearly, people and institutions utilize language to control and influence others. But what Joyce sought to demonstrate was not a Marxist picture of institutions actively using language in order to assert power. Rather, Joyce sought to make clear that language is an inherited medium which subsumes and shapes its users’ experiences and existences. It is only through thought’s natural medium—language—that Stephen is able to understand and exert his own existence.

“His recent monstrous reveries came thronging into his memory. They too had sprung up before him, suddenly and furiously, out of mere words. He had soon given in to them and allowed them to sweep across and abase his intellect, wondering always where they came from, from what den of monstrous images, and always weak and humble towards others, restless and sickened of himself when they had swept over him.”

Abbreviated References:

- Doherty, Gerald. *Pathologies of Desire: The Vicissitudes of the Self in James Joyce’s A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2008. Print.
- Kershner Jr., R. B. “The Artist as Text: Dialogism and Incremental Repetition in *Portrait*.” *Critical Essays of James Joyce’s A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Eds. Philip Brady and James F. Carens. London: G. K. Hall & Co., 1998. 231-242. Print.
- Mahaffey, Vicki. *Reauthorizing Joyce (The Florida James Joyce Series)*. Gainesville: UP of Florida, 1995. Print.
- Naremore, James. “Style as Meaning in *A Portrait of the Artist*.” *James Joyce Quarterly* 4 (1967): 331-342. Print.
- Spoo, Robert. *James Joyce and the Language of History: Dedalus’s Nightmare*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1994. Print.

Acknowledgments:

I would like to thank Angelo State University’s graduate studies department for providing funding through the Carr Graduate Research Fellowship. I would also like to thank the contributions and support of my colleagues in the English and Modern Languages Department. Finally, I would be remiss if I failed to acknowledge the contributions of Dr. Mark Hama who introduced me to Joyce and always offered guidance and support.