

Joyce's Vision of Realism: A New Source

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In his *Studies in European Realism*, Georg Luckàcs mentions Joyce as an anti-realist, claiming that the “transformation of human beings into a... flow of ideas destroys... [the] possibility of a literary presentation of the complete human personality”¹. However, this is what Joyce himself thinks about his own technique: “There is also the intellectual attitude which dissects life instead of puffing it up with romanticism [...] In my Mabbot Street scene I have... approached reality closer than anywhere else in the book... since sensation is the object heightened even to the point of the hallucination which is the exalted vision of the mystics”². It appears that Joyce considers *Ulysses* to be faithful to a realist spirit, and “Circe” – his most visionary, even mystical episode – as the output of his will to “approach reality”. Blurring the distinction between the physic and the psychic – which cannot be water-tight in a post-freudian universe – the stream-of-consciousness novel widens the scope of Western realism, as Erich Auerbach acutely perceives.

After Plato the mirror has traditionally been a metaphor for mimesis: while in 1906 Joyce compares *Dubliners* to a “nicely polished lookingglass”³, when referring to the *Portrait* he says to Frank Budgen that the artist’s mirror must acknowledge a “limitation of viewpoint” and that “something of objective truth gets lost in the process”⁴ of representation; in *Ulysses*, then, Joyce foregrounds a “cracked lookingglass”, to which a vivisection tool – the razor – is paired. An evolution of the categories of imitation and realism took place in Joyce’s aesthetics between the completion of *Dubliners*, the rewriting of the *Portrait*, and the early stages of *Ulysses*. The articles, lectures, and examination papers that Joyce wrote during those years of study and self-refashioning, were of special significance in bringing to a reconciliation early dichotomies.

In a recent article, Luca Crispi describes Joyce’s “Early Commonplace Book”, which “had been thought to consist of two distinct copybooks, the *Paris Notebook* and the *Pola Notebook*”⁵, and whose unitary presentation was reassessed only in 2008. On page 24r, Joyce compiled a list of “Books” on various topics – such as Ireland, cancer, or the English drama. The list, extending until 1912, portrays Joyce as a journalist, a lecturer (on

Hamlet from November 1912 to February 1913⁶) and an examinee at the University of Padua (from April 24th to April 30th, 1912), where, for instance, he was requested to “give a short account of the rise of the Drama in England”⁷.

However, the exceptional fact that “Joyce returned to this manuscript at least 9 years after he first started using it”⁸, also points to the fact that around 1911 Joyce may have wished to go back to his early aesthetics. The only book about artistic theory in the list is *De la Laideur Dans l’Art – On Ugliness in Art* – by E. Lesnes⁹, which came out in 1911, and whose influence can be strongly perceived both in *The Universal Literary Influence of the Renaissance*, and in *Realism and Idealism in English Literature*, which were composed the following year. Establishing this filiation allows us to see the two Italian compositions as an ideal prosecution of Joyce’s aesthetic theory.

Although Lesnes’ starting point is neo-platonic, he provides a definition of idealism which is deviant from the sentimental “romantic temper” with which Joyce had hitherto associated the term, and explicitly declares the need to reconcile Idealism and Realism. In order to appreciate the turning point which Joyce’s 1912 papers represent, it would be useful to follow the evolution of the joycean categories of Realism and Idealism before that time.

Notably a slippery category, realism first appears in Joyce’s writings in 1899 as “the realistic illusion”, which Joyce elucidates as “the sense of life”¹⁰, substantially equating it with the dramatic. Joyce distinguishes realism from mimetic fidelity, from “the execution of faultless form”, praising “the infusion of life” more than the mere “copy” of nature. Secondly, Joyce progressively refines his notion of reality and the real, widening the very foundation on which any definition of literary realism could rest. In the first essay on Mangan, the artist’s attention to the “present things” is not sufficient unto itself, but should allow “the quick intelligence to go beyond them to their meaning” (*OCPW*, 53). Joyce’s “beyond” does not designate a metaphysical foundation from which reality draws its truth, nor is it to be read sociologically – like in French Naturalism. Rather, it refers to those “dreams” which, for the artist, are no less existent than actuality; poetry “may seem unreal” only to those who have lost the power of a simple, non historical intuition¹¹. In both essays on Mangan, reality is contrasted with a more authentic experience of the Real, which only art can offer. Such a expansion of the category of reality was bound to result in a renegotiation of literary realism.

If Joyce tries to reconcile the artist’s attention to actuality with the spiritual realities, it is because art must be faithful to the ontological status of humanity. In his critical

writings the problem of realism and idealism mirrors an ontological hierarchy of being, from which a division of literary genres descends. In “Drama and Life” the real is identified with the portrayal of “men and women as we meet them in the [actual] world”, and, as such, it is opposed to their aggrandized representation as creatures of “the world of faery” (*OCPW* 28) or of the “chivalrous” universe of romance (*OCPW* 57). Realism is faithful to humanity as the intermediate realm between the “angels” and the “monkeys” (*OCPW* 27), between “spirituality” and “animalism”. As such, it is neither concerned with the subhuman, the “monstrous”, nor with the “heroic” (*OCPW*, 72); Muncacksy’s “Ecce homo”, for instance, provides a “real presentment” in that “the artist’s view of the event is *humanistic*”: accordingly, Christ has “nothing divine, ... nothing superhuman” (*OCPW*, 21), but is in harmony with “the *baser* passions of humanity” (my emphasis). In the same way, Defoe’s Devil, “has little in common with the strange son of Chaos”; rather, he resembles “a dealer in hosiery who has suffered a calamitous financial setback” (*OCPW* 170-171). Following the tradition of biblical realism, Joyce praises the treatment of universal sublime truths in a *sermo humilis*, because it is faithful to humanity as a constitutively intermediary region of being, one which is equally inhabited by sublimity and baseness¹².

Finally, Joyce’s realism defines a commitment to authorial sincerity. In 1902, “realities” designate the courage of an “uncompromising truth” (*OCPW*, 45), regardless of any possible affront to traditional morality; this implies that no aspect of humanity which Joyce deemed to be true would be alien to his project, including “the dream”, or the “exalted vision of the mystics”. Idealism could be a suitable concept to express the reconciliation of the visible world with the epiphanic experience of Being, provided that it were not considered as the dishonest attitude which portrays men as ontologically different from what they are, as angels or beasts.

However, at the outset of his career, Joyce equates “idealism” with a set of censorious tendencies. In “Drama and Life” (1900), the first opposition between realism and idealism occurs: “this doctrine of idealism in art ... has fostered a babyish instinct to dive under the blankets at the mention of the bogey of realism” (*OCPW* 27-28); the conventional expectation that art be “the glass where [man and women] may see themselves idealized” amounts to an unacceptable limitation of the scope of artistic expression to the elements which testify man’s “affinity with the angels” (*OCPW* 27). By contrast, the representation of “the human comedy”, no doubt a reminder of Balzac (*OCPW* 28), grants “limitless scope” to the artist.

In 1911/12 Joyce met with Lesnes' aesthetics, which approached realism from the point of view of idealism, claiming that "all the artists worth of that name have always been able to ally the ideal and the real"¹³. The moderns have lost the balance between idealism and realism, which was perfect during the Middle Ages, as chapter XIII of the book – significantly called "Réalisme et Idéalisme au Moyen-Age" – elucidates. In that epoch, an intense attention to visible reality avoided that the artist fell into abstraction, while the presence of an ideal element prevented the artist from falling into "naturalism"¹⁴, into "observation without thought"¹⁵.

In the development of European art, Lesnes traces a degenerative curve, whose lowest point is the realism favored by the romantic movement and by French Naturalism. The same decaying movement is suggested in Joyce's lecture on Defoe, which ends with a distinction between Defoe's equilibrated realism and the "modern realism" expressed by the "French nation". Like Lesnes, who sees in the romantic and Naturalist movements an inverted passion for ugliness and corruption, "une passion pour les bancroches, les cul-de-jatte, les borgnes"¹⁶, Joyce emphasizes the distance between Defoe and the "fervour of corruption" of the French writers. He sees "anger" and "indignation" in the work of modern realism, a spirit of revolt that betrays, he writes, its "spiritual origins" (*OCPW* 173). Lesnes defines ugliness as the opposition to beauty which was born "from the revolt of the most beautiful angel of the heavenly court"¹⁷. Joyce's allusion is understood in the light of this interpretation of ugliness as a willful, enraged degradation of beauty, which is equally absent from Defoe's and from Joyce's realism.

Equally degrading, according to Lesnes, is the widespread sensationalism which dominates the arts since the Renaissance. Medieval realism did not describe the visible world in order to please or shock the senses, but made use of the senses to capture the intellect. After the Renaissance, a superficial art saw the light, which "comes from the senses and addresses nothing but the senses"¹⁸. Romantic and naturalist ugliness "makes us eager for strong and brutal sensations"¹⁹. The Renaissance, as depicted by Lesnes, marks the beginning of that degradation of realism which culminates in French Naturalism. Both movements share the axiom that "beauty results from sensation"²⁰, be it of a pleasing or of an unpleasant kind.

For the same reasons, Lesnes ranks idealism as expressed by the "romantic school" with a degraded sensualist art, which is merely satisfied with the reproduction of outward form and for which plastic beauty is all, its ideal being Greek art²¹. Thus interpreted, idealism is not in relation with truth, but with sensual satisfaction. In this way, Lesnes frees

the field from idealism as a set of forbidding norms, the form which Plato and Plotin had imposed by “proscribing from art every trait that does not offer the model of achieved perfection”, particularly ugliness²². Idealism should not refuse ugliness, inasmuch as it is in relation “avec le vrai”: with truth²³. The art of the Middle Ages could descend to an extreme realism from an idealist starting point, from a will to give concrete form to concepts; medieval realism is not degrading: it is symbolic, in that it uses the material forms to create contemplative symbols which address the intellect and express the invisible²⁴.

Like Lesnes’s medieval artist, who bends the strength of the senses to his intellectual vision, William Blake could “engrave the image of [his visions] in a hammered verse or in a copper plate” (*OCPW* 175), in the perfect harmony of his “sensual philosophy” (*OCPW* 181), of a state of mind in which the sensory power of the flesh meets the sharpness of the intellectual vision. Likewise, Daniel Defoe’s representation of Mrs Christian Davies as “crippled, scrofulous and suffering from dropsy” is not the same thing as “the solemnization of obscenity” that inspires the French Naturalists; for Joyce, it expresses one incarnation of “the eternal feminine” (*OCPW* 172-173), i. e. of an idea. Moreover, in *Duncan Campbell*, Defoe listens to “the presence of the unknown” and of “the dream” (*OCPW* 171) with the same documentary attitude that prompts him to record the days of the plague, so that his realism does not do violence to man’s place in nature as the intermediate realm traversed by spiritual and animal impulses.

With the human world as an ontological middle reign is connected Joyce’s view of the Renaissance before 1912. Echoing Walter Pater²⁵, he represents the Renaissance as a positive moment in the development of European culture, which introduced an “ardent sympathy with nature as it is” (*OCPW* 93). In Lesnes’s treaty, instead, the Renaissance marks the origin of the naturalistic tendency in European art, the moment when “art is almost totally reduced to plastic fidelity...and worships form and the senses”²⁶. He judges such a purely hedonistic taste to be immoral on an aesthetic ground, since it degrades art to “a menial task, like cooking”²⁷.

In *L’Influenza Letterarua Universale del Rinascimento*, in which bookish influences may have been stronger due to the academic circumstances of its composition – Joyce’s examination process of 1912 – Joyce, following Lesnes, suddenly presents the Renaissance as the moment when the negative materialistic tendencies of art first emerged in European culture, remarking that “present-day materialism descends in a direct line from the Renaissance” (*OCPW* 187); that hedonistic inspiration has degenerated into a “frenetic sensationalism” in the contemporary age, transforming the artwork into something to be

consumed and from which a sensualist, non-intellectual pleasure is to be drawn²⁸. Joyce abruptly declares that he wants to “oppose . . . with all [his] might” the conclusion that the Renaissance marks the mature stage of European culture and is superior to the “temporis acti”, i.e. to the Middle-Ages (*OCPW* 187); and he suddenly declares that “we lack moral sense and perhaps also strength of imagination” (*OCPW* 189). He has not become a moralist: echoing his source, he acknowledges the loss of a metaphysical frame in which art would find its place as a means of revelation, not of consumption.

Similarly, Joyce states that the Renaissance “deposed a . . . formal mind”, in favor of a “restless . . . and amorphous” (*OCPW* 188) mentality, which is responsible for the crave for sensations. As an example, he contrasts Wagner and Dante, remarking that *L’Inferno* was composed “in the wake of an idea” (*OCPW* 189). According to Lesnes, “le Moyen-âge est l’époque par excellence de l’idéalisme”. For Joyce, Dante’s art is “ideational” (*OCPW* 189); here, he employs “idealism” in a new sense, independently of the “romantic school”: not to define a series of proscriptive norms, but the intellectual inspiration of the artwork. Dantes’ realism, his “truce . . . arte” (*OCPW* 287), becomes even stronger with the intensification of his “idea”, of his metaphysical perception of evil.

Although impromptu and written under pressure, *The Universal Literary Influence of the Renaissance* is to be seen in a strong connection with Joyce’s lectures on Blake and Defoe, marking an important stage in Joyce’s meditation on the categories of realism and idealism; according to Lesnes they are reconciled in proper art, where a realist technique may fuse with a dominant, non-sensualist intellectual orientation; that Joyce elaborated on this kind of symbolic realism is evident from the rewriting of the *Portrait*, where the moral teratology of Stephen’s vision is increased, and gives life to a series of symbolic bird-like beings, fusing with Jacob Boehme’s mystical conception of birds. Moreover, in “Lotus-Eaters”, whose first stages of composition date back to 1912, both reading and writing – in the form of Bloom and Martha’s letters – are reduced to a consumerist exchange of sensations, echoing what Joyce wrote in his Padua composition; Bloom carries “the newspaper . . . under his armpit”²⁹: the objective correlative of the modern post-Renaissance sensationalist world, which has “placed the journalist in the monk’s chair” (*OCPW* 188). In *Exiles*, too, the sensualist Robert Hand is a journalist.

However, while Joyce appreciates Dante’s ideational art, he does not share his “unfortunate prejudices” (*OCPW* 73). In what sense can his realism recover an ideal inspiration in a post-metaphysical frame? “Proteus” shows that Joyce considerably widened his reflection on realism and idealism to their strong philosophical sense, as the allusions to

Aristotle and Berkeley, Kant or to the “idealist” Lessing and Blake, frame the problem of the aesthetic image. The perception of the ideal side of reality is made to rest on Aristotle’s claim that form is absolutely immanent. The world, although furnished with an ideal aspect which the intellect apprehends, is no mere mental representation, but is “there all the time” without us³⁰. This reflection connects “Proteus” not only with Joyce’s Italian essays, but also with the *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Joyce disambiguates *claritas* by finally discarding “idealism” in its platonic declination – as “the idea of which the matter is but the shadow” (*PAAYM* 230) – and by identifying *claritas* with the Scholastic, therefore Aristotelian “whatness”. In this way, he reconciles his epiphanic project to a realist conception of being in its strongest philosophical sense.

Stephen’s aesthetic discussion originates from the ambiguity of the term “visa” in Aquinas’ theory. He says that the esthetic apprehension occurs “through sight or hearing or through any other avenue of apprehension” (*PAAYM* 225). Precisely, the lectures on Defoe and Blake are based on a different declination of the artistic “vision”. Blake, the idealist, sees with the internal senses, with the “mind’s eye” and with “the ear of his soul”; he then proceeds to transfer into matter his internal visions. Defoe’s starting-point is sensorial exactitude: he describes, reports, enumerates, measures. In the end, however, the result is the same: “la burrasca... *si vede*” (*OCPW* 274, my emphasis), he produces an intellectual vision of “the whatness” of the thing, be it the tempest or the plague. Likewise, Joyce contrasts the idealist and the realist ways of seeing, when he writes that “Saint John the Evangelist *saw*... the apocalyptic collapse of the universe [while] Crusoe *saw* but one marvel in all the fertile creation...a naked footprint in the virgin sand” (*OCPW* 279, my emphasis). By 1912, idealism and realism are no longer two incompatible tendencies, like they were in *Drama and Life*: they have become a matter of *regard*. They have become a matter of vision.

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- 1 Georg Lucacks, *Studies in European Realism*, New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1964, p. 8.
- 2 Extract from Arthur Power, "Conversation with Joyce", in *James Joyce: The Critical Heritage*, ed. by Robert H. Deming, Vol. 1, London and New York: Routledge, 2002, p. 182. Cf. also: "In Ulysses I have seen life clearly, I think, and as a whole [...] Romantic evasion is contrary to modern life. Behind romanticism can only be romanticism: but behind realism can lie the key to the world", Arthur Power, "Conversations with Joyce", quoted in Barbara Laman, *James Joyce and German Theory: The Romantic School and All That*, Madison: Teaneck Farleigh Dickinson University Press, 2004, p. 78.
- 3 *Selected Letters*, edited by Richard Ellmann, London: Faber & Faber, 1975, p. 90.
- 4 Frank Budgen, *James Joyce and the Making of Ulysses and Other Writings*, Oxford University Press, 1972, p. 62.
- 5 Luca Crispi, "A Commentary on James Joyce's National Library of Ireland "Early commonplace Book": 1903-1912 (MS 36, 639/02/A)", in *Genetic Joyce Studies*, (Issue 9 – Spring 2009).
http://www.geneticjoycestudies.org/GJS9/GJS9_LCrispi.htm
- 6 See Erik Schneider, "Towards Ulysses: Some Unpublished Documents from Trieste", *Journal of Modern Literature*, vol. 27, No. 4 (Summer, 2004), pp. 1-16, p. 10.
- 7 Louis Berrone, "Two James Joyce Essays Unveiled: "The Centenary of Charles Dickens" and "L'Influenza letteraria universale del rinascimento"", *Journal of Modern Literature*, 5:1 (1976: Feb.) pp. 3-18, p. 7.
- 8 Luca Crispi, cit.
- 9 E. Lesnes, *De la Laideur dans l'Art*, Bruxelles: Société Belge de Librairie, 1911. If not otherwise stated, all translation will be mine.
- 10 "Royal Hibernian Academy 'Ecce Homo'", in *Occasional, Critical and Political Writings*, ed. by Kevin Barry, London: Penguin, 2000, p. 17. Henceforth *OCPW*.
- 11 See Franca Ruggieri, *Maschere dell'Artista: il Giovane Joyce*, Roma: Bulzoni, 1986, p. 91.
- 12 See E. Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003, p. 151.
- 13 E. Lesnes, *De la Laideur Dans l'Art*, cit., pp. 9-10.
- 14 *Ibid.*, cit., pp. 10-11.
- 15 *Ibid.*, p. 289.
- 16 *Ibid.*, p. 80.
- 17 *Ibid.*, p. 62. See also Umberto Eco, *On Ugliness*, London: Harvill Secker, 2007, p. 73 ff.
- 18 "vient des sens et ne s'adresse qu'aux sens", Lesnes, *De la Laideur Dans l'Art*, cit., p. 280.
- 19 *Ibid.*, p. 271.
- 20 *Ibid.*, p. 38

- 21 “ne cherche que la forme... la plastique est tout, les belles lignes n’ont rien à voir avec l’idée... son idéal de beauté c’est la statuaire grecque”, *Ibid.*, p. 171.
- 22 “Platon proscrit de l’art tout ce qui n’offre pas le modèle de la perfection accomplie... Plotin proscrit la représentation de la laideur”, *Ibid.*, cit. p. 63.
- 23 *Ibid.*, pp. 65-66.
- 24 *Ibid.*, p. 145.
- 25 “a sympathy for humanity in its uncertain condition” is the main feature of Botticelli’s art in Walter Pater’s *The Renaissance* (London: Macmillan, 1901, p. 60).
- 26 “l’art se réduit presque à la fidélité plastique... se fait idolâtre de la forme et des sens”, *De la Laideur Dans l’Art*, cit., pp. 157-158.
- 27 “une pratique servile, un métier comme la cuisine”, *Ibid.*, pp. 16-17.
- 28 Cf. “In many contemporary novels everything comes down to sensation and instinct. Sometimes it is an admixture of ardent eroticism and sentimentality” [“dans beaucoup de romans [de nos jours] tout se ramène à la sensation et à l’instinct. C’est parfois un mélange d’érotisme fougueux et de sentimentalité”], *De la Laideur Dans l’Art*, cit., p. 293.
- 29 *Ulysses*, London: Penguin, 2000, p. 107.
- 30 According to John Hyman “the English term “realism” was introduced into literary criticism by Samuel Taylor Coleridge in 1817” (in “Realism”, in *A Companion to Aesthetics*, cit. p. 495). In the *Biographia Literaria*, Coleridge presents Realism and Idealism in their philosophical sense: realism is “the fundamental presumption ... that the existence of things without us... should be received... independently of all grounds as the existence of our own being” (*Biographia Literaria*, Vol. I, Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1907, pp. 177-178), while idealism “destroy[s] the reality of all...[and] surrounds us with apparitions” (*Ibid.*, p. 179). He proposes a way to reconcile them, noticing that, if we are collectively idealists, we can be certain of a common reality that we all share.