

“Proteus” as Truthful Expressive Object

In “Proteus,” Joyce writes of sensory experience as if it is a series of particles that strike the person, each particle an individual parcel of sensation. He makes the episode into a motion picture slowed to a frame-by-frame pace that keeps the brain from presuming a sensible continuity between images. As a result, “Proteus” occupies the curious but not uncomfortable space between the distinctly humanist belief in language for self-expression and an antihumanist objection that language is a limiting intermediary that determines, not enables, expression. Joyce’s storytelling—disjointed, discrete, lacking in traditional continuity—disrupts the arc of narrative we are so comfortable and practiced in tracing in life and fiction. To try and follow the signs within the Joycean galaxy would leave one cross-eyed, disoriented. This might suggest that Joyce adopts an antihumanist perspective to language—his fuzzy signals could be construed as proof that words obscure and constrain even as they claim to mediate and enable. Yet the galaxy of “Proteus” reflects an earnest faith in the power of truthful expression—from its raw appeals to the senses emerges a resounding faith in some expressible reality. That Joyce’s signifiers don’t seem to point to particulars is not in tension with their power to convey experience. The dissolution of the tension stems from Joyce’s very treatment of reality that expression seeks to convey; to Joyce, that truth holds an inherent (and I dare say, ineluctable) modality. It is as if to say: stop looking for a constellation—the night sky is only a random smattering of bright and discrete specks—and those specks? They take on a different arrangement each time you look.

As “Proteus” opens, Joyce crafts a careful intermingling of physical senses. Stephen instructs himself to “Shut your eyes and see” (31) and describes the moment as “A very short space of time through very short time of space” (31). In both instances we see an imaginative defiance of descriptive norms: Stephen must close his eyes to see; his physical space becomes a

measure of time and vice versa. The warping of sensory domains here gives the chapter a kind of edgeless quality—readers cannot construct the dimensions of Stephen’s world via sight, smell, touch, taste, sound, and thus must be content with the blurry reality before its contours are sharpened and made capable of being cohesively narrated. The jarring mix of inputs would certainly be more concretely understood if the conventional borders of sensation were respected, but that seems to be precisely why Joyce defies these bounds: Joyce works to prevent the reader from understanding.

By disrupting the natural process of contouring, Joyce essentially captures the very first frame of experience before a cognitive process can impute to it meaning or narrative. In doing so, Joyce aligns himself with a form of expression that simulates, as opposed to describes, experience. He challenges the idea that language is mere intermediary, a tool used to express some determined idea. Instead, he takes experience to be an oscillatory space of negotiation, wherein the mind endlessly tries to commence a negative feedback loop that will eventually resolve experience into that which can be named and redelivered. The process is akin to Roland Barthes’s description of reading: “to read is to find meanings, and to find meanings is to name them, but these named meanings are swept toward other names; names to call each other, reassemble, and their grouping calls for further naming” (Barthes 11). This is to say, Joyce mounts a protest to the “reading” of experience, this sort of post-hoc rendering, a saliva that pre-emptively digests the input only to make it more agreeable to the mind. It is this partially digested experience—containing anything resembling narrative—that has deterministic power over its reception, limiting individual expression by its attempting to capture experience in too late a stage of its existence.

At this stage, a reader is rendered incapable of writing their experience of words; the words on the page have lined up with a single static target whose meaning is similarly static—the signals point to something actual, and the receiver is meant to be prodded toward it. Joyce’s work, then, is to interrupt the drawing of lines so as to recognize experience as a negotiation and reconciliation of discrete, independent factors. In this sense, Joyce is a humanist—he has a sincere belief in a purer form of expression, and in himself as the artist who performs the quick pour of life-preserving resin over a moment so fleeting it may just as soon have struck the mind as it is distorted into something far less true to life.

This is not to say that Joyce does not narrate—“Proteus” is not entirely formless. Faint but visible is a penciled tracing of guiding narrative lines. He delicately switches from a heavy-handed expository statement to softer accounts of Stephen’s inner world. This layered approach appears almost immediately in “Proteus”: “Stephen closed his eyes to hear his boots crush cracking wrack and shells. You are walking through it howsomever. I am, a stride at a time” (31). In a three-sentence instant, Joyce flits from a thick-lined third person description placing Stephen within a physical world, to a second person address: Stephen to Stephen, to an internal echo of Stephen’s own response. With each small step into interiority, Joyce peels away a translucent layer of narrative film, exposing a clearer, more vivid picture of truth. By inclusion of visible outlines Joyce creates contrast between narration and purer expression. In a sense, this implicitly acknowledges the decisive and somewhat antihumanist power that words themselves hold, being that narrative clarity has utility as a grounding feature—something of a gestalt illusion to introduce uniformity when there is potentially or probably none. At the same time, his flickering between heavy and light narrative outlining speaks to a faith in the possibility of alternative use of language—just as it can contrive plot, it can also express unaltered experience.

It may seem paradoxical that Joyce wants to express truthful experience, when his writing seldom holds any potentially-disputable narrative—what is “true” to him, if there is not also “false”? Barthes presents a definitively antihumanist explanation: “Reading involves risks of objectivity or subjectivity (both are imaginary) only insofar as we define the text as an expressive object presented for our own expression), sublimated under a morality of truth, in one instance laxist; in the other, ascetic” (Barthes 10). A handy compromise: if we just deny the text the right to the title of expressive object, then we may neatly cut across the question of true and false. The problem is, “Proteus” rejects this compromise. Joyce seems to want his words to be an expressive object *and* to skirt the risks of objectivity and subjectivity. His bold subversion of the forced arises from a recognition of truth as inherently unstable—he maintains his morality of truth while rejecting false simply by redefining truth itself. To Joyce, truth is not just a moving target, but is itself the range of motion—it is the action of negotiation on the way to making sense of experience.

This negotiation process is modeled in “Proteus”: Stephen is the proxy through which Joyce argues that internal monologue is in fact self-dialogue. Stephen’s inner dialogue is at once instructive, probing, and questioning. It is a trail mix of sensory intake, questioning, and seemingly nonsensical phonic experimentation: “Am I walking into eternity along Sandymount Strand? Crush, crack, crick, crick. Wild sea money. Dominie Deasy kens them a’” (31). This is followed by what seems to be a discussion between two parties, one wanting Stephen to open his eyes, and the other wanting to delay the moment: “Open your eyes now. I will. One moment. Has all vanished since? If I open and am for ever in the black adiaphane. *Basta!* I will see if I can see. See now” (31). This dialogue takes place entirely between Stephen and himself. We could describe this as Stephen’s own philosophical investigation of the senses, yes, but to narrate this

sequence of events rather than simulate it would be a violent reduction of the experience.

Excluding the reader from this disorienting and indecisive sequence of thoughts deprive them of a certain truth. Joyce masterfully points out the plausible existence of an expressive object that remains undecided on what it expresses. Joycean signifiers point to something dynamic, and the dynamism is irreducible. He introduces a Heisenberg-esque uncertainty to the interpretation of experience—the more you claim to know about what the signifier objectively means, the less you can conceivably know of what is signified.

This is perhaps the source of Joyce's generosity toward his signifiers, which readily encroach on the borders of existing language in a quest to communicate. By this, I refer to Joyce's propensity to simply make up words whenever convenient. Joyce writes this tendency into Stephen's character; in the middle of a self-mocking daydream appears this peculiar string: "Fiacre and Scotus on their creepystools in heaven spilt from their pintpots, loudlatinlaughing: *Euge! Euge!*" (35). The concatenation of existing words—creepy stools, pint pots, loud latin laughing—works together with what looks to be true manufacture of onomatopoeia, *Euge!*, in order to express otherwise inexpressible sentiments. The neologism works in competing ways: it at once acknowledges a limit to expression by language through the implication that there exists something unable to be expressed within prevailing linguistic structures while simultaneously demonstrating how weak these borders really are—it asks: if such a limit can so flippantly be transgressed, does it impose any sort of meaningful constraint on expression? By creating words, Joyce makes the casual point that he can generate ever-closer approximations of truth, sounds and sensations.

It is this faith that reveals Joyce's convictions on the question of language's promise, power, and perhaps peril. He believes in a true rendering of human consciousness, and in his

own ability to use language to do so. At the same time, his project is not blind to the constraints and determinations linguistic convention holds. To superimpose a preference for the antihumanist approach to language on his work seems to discredit his evident efforts to explain a world that is in some sense *real*. “Proteus” seems to represent a loose resolution to this conflict: that Joyce cedes power to words does not necessitate a limitation on his power of expression; in fact, his recognition of the power of language necessitates a recognition that experience is a plural object—itself a motion.

Works Cited

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