

***The Symbolic Meaning of the Sea in Joyce's  
A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man***

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**Abstract**

Sea water, throughout the ages, exerts a profound influence on English literature in general and the novel in particular being a fertile source wherefrom novelists can borrow images and symbols. Such is the case, water imagery and its derivative, be it what it may be, are exploited by James Joyce as a means whereby he combines the modernist focus on the city with a universal perspective including the sea making out of the sea a meditative gate for the realization of the world. This paper explores the centrality of the sea water, whatever their symbolic value may be, to Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. The sea, throughout of the novel, ties some bi-movements as death-life, constraint-freedom, finite-infinite circles.

## المعنى الرمزي للبحر في رواية جويس "صورة الفنان شابا"

المدرس

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### الخلاصة

أثرت مياه البحر، عبر مختلف الأزمان، تأثيراً عميقاً على الأدب الإنجليزي عامةً، وعلى الرواية بصورة خاصة، وذلك لأنها منهل ثرٍ يمكن للروائيين من خلاله إستعارة الصور والرموز. وبناءً على ذلك، إستغل جيمس جويس صورة المياه وما يتبعها وسيلة يمكنه من خلالها ربط التركيز المعاصر على المدينة بالمشهد الكوني الضمني للبحر، جاعلاً من هذا بوابةً تأملية لفهم العالم. وتكشف هذه الدراسة عن مركزية البحر أو المياه، أيّاً كانت قيمتها الرمزية، بالنسبة إلى رواية جويس "صورة الفنان في شبابه"، فالبحر من خلال الرواية يربط بعض الحركات الثنائية الدائرية كالحياة والموت، الحرية والعبودية، والنهائي واللانهائي.

## 1) Introduction

'God,' he said quietly. 'Isn't the sea what Algy calls it: a great sweet mother? The songgreen sea. The scrotumtightening sea. *Epi oinopa ponta*. Ah, Dedalus, the Greeks. I must teach you. You must read them in the original. Thalatta! Thalatta! She is our great sweet mother. Come and look.'

James Joyce, *Ulysses* (1986: 361)

In this quotation, as Mulligan looks out on Dublin Bay, he recollects many others who have remembered a shout heard on a mountain in Eastern Turkey two thousand four hundred years ago: 'Thalatta! Thalatta!', translated as 'The Sea! The Sea!' This shout is first uttered by an army of Greek soldiers who had been stranded in Mesopotamia, a thousand miles from home, and had marched through the formidable tribes and across the snowy mountains and plains of Kurdistan and Armenia until they came at last to a mountain named Mount Theches. It is on that mountain that they first caught sight of the Black Sea- a scene described in *Anabasis* by one of the participants, the Athenian historian and philosopher Xenophon (Xenophon, 2008: 135).

The praising of water, no doubt, is a common thing in literature, be it ancient or modern. Thousand years ago, the very first line of Pindar's first Olympian ode reads, "Best of all things is water," and the pre-Socratic philosopher Thales maintained that "all things were but water in different forms" (Rood, 2004: 11). English Literature has for centuries courted the rain. Written in the medieval period, Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, the first great epic of English daily life, starts out with the sweet showers of April which bathe the dry land. This first shower is a sensual one, piercing the earth, finding its way into every bodily "veyne" of plants and people alike. For Edmund Spenser, too, launching *The Faerie Queene* from a standing start as Una and the Redcrosse Knight go gently pricking on the plain, rain is the beginning of his narrative poem. Weather breaks into the stillness: "The day with clouds was sudden overcast, and angry Jove a hideous storm of rain did pour" (Paine, 2013: 379).

Jonathan Swift published "A Description of a City Shower" in the *Tatler* in the wet October of 1710. It is just what it says- a description of a London shower, with all the daily detail that implies. But Swift moves out from little cameos of ordinary rained-on human life (as "brisk Susan whips her linen from the rope") to the great impersonal flood. The rain comes down on the whole city, dissolving polite boundaries, washing one thing into the next. In one great surge the natural and manmade run into each other: rain and effluent, dust and offal. The filth of all London converges in an almighty torrent as rain comes down and the rivers rise up (Damrosch, 2014: 46).

Crusoe on his island in Daniel Defoe's novel *Robinson Crusoe*, published in 1719 is similarly attentive to the problem of keeping out the rain. Rapidly training himself in that most primal and sophisticated of arts-the art of building shelters- Crusoe constructs first a double-layered tent and then, in time, a "fortification" as stout and impermeable as he can make it. He engineers a drainage system to let any excess water out. The island weather, more extreme than in England, threatens to wash away the solid objects that are his touchstones: clay pots, a table, his handmade gardening tools. When Crusoe leaves the island he takes three things with him as souvenirs. One is the parrot; the other two are his hat and umbrella. These portable shelters are Crusoe's emblems, for they are the signs combined in his struggle against water, the very source of life, and here, so ironically, a destructive force that brings death (Logan, 2014: 662).

Closely connected with rain is the way the Victorians perceive the sea.

Such a "watery plain" functions as a separator, an isolator that brings about the eternal note of sadness in. It, in other words, encourages the human contemplation. Such a meaning of the sea, nevertheless, seems to shift with the beginning of the modern era. Alfred Tennyson condensed into his early poems the vaporous air of his native Lincolnshire. Water and poetry merge as liquid sound in "The Dying Swan"; the landscape of mosses, weeds, "willow branches hoar and dank", is "flooded over with eddying song" (Tennyson: 2004, 45). The Lady of Shalott sees in her mirror the dazzling sun that shines from an unclouded sky as Lancelot appears, but

the weather breaks with of the spell and the cracking of the mirror. Going out into the world, she goes into a storm: "The broad stream in his banks complaining/ Heavily the low sky raining" (Ibid: 85). The sun had been enchanted weather, held in the looking glass. The summer day ends with the Lady freezing in her boat on a rising river, under low clouds, in the rain. Drop by drop the water falls in Charles Dickens's *Bleak House* (1852). The heavy drops fall," drip drip, drip, upon the broad flagged pavement" (Dickens, 2003: 8), when we first meet Lady Dedlock, looking out blankly over a leaden landscape. "The waters are out in Lincolnshire" (Dickens, 2003:16), and it rains for the first eleven chapters before pausing and raining again. The animals in barns and stables watch the rain and dream of sunshine. Drops fall, monotonously, with the rhythm of footsteps on the haunted terrace, on and on, "drip, drip, drip, by day and night" (Ibid: 9).

The sea's meanings in English literary culture acquire new connotations in the early modern period as geographic experience and knowledge increased. Some recent developments in maritime studies, sometimes called a 'new thalassology' (from the Greek thalassos, the sea) distinguish these trends from now-traditional New Historicist and Atlantic studies, and suggest how these methods can contribute to 'blue cultural studies' (Carlson, 1991: 12). Water, if not the best of all things, is, next to air, the most necessary to person kind.

The struggle between terrestrial order and marine chaos has been a recurring trope in the West; early modern writers drew on a series of ancient Near Eastern myths in which gods of the earth created dry land by defeating gods of the sea. Oceanic freedom functioned in the early modern period as a compelling cultural fantasy, in which the ceaseless change and instability of the sea countered human existence on land (Corbain, 1995: 208).

This conception of the sea would remain influential long after the Renaissance. Hegel's *Philosophy of History* (1837) treated the sea in exactly these terms, as 'the idea of the indefinite, the unlimited, and the infinite ... the sea invites man to conquest, and to piratical plunder, but also to honest

gain and to commerce' (Connery, 2001: 182). This sense of the ocean's challenge to landed order has ancient roots. Plato in the *Laws* celebrates the location of a new city eleven miles inland:

Had the city been on the sea ... no human power could have preserved you from corruption. Even the distance of eleven miles is hardly enough. For the sea, although an agreeable, is a dangerous companion, and a highway of strange morals and manners as well as of commerce (Plato, 2005: 4).

It is a commonplace the sea has exercised a profound influence on English literature, not as an object evoking description and emotion but also as a source of imagery and symbol. Columbus's voyage was made in 1492; and five years later Vasco da Gama sailed to discover the sea-route to India and John Cabot left Bristol to explore the north-west (Carlson, 1991: 6). It is first in Shakespeare that a fuller consciousness of the deeper poetical significance and possibilities of the sea is found that the sea appearing not merely as an object to be described and capable of arousing this or that feeling but more explicitly as a symbol and a source of imagery to interpret deeper experience (MacGregor, 2013: 73). This arises from Shakespeare's profounder insight into nature in general, but it is clear that the modern literature of the sea course has its roots in an identification of maritime literature with the Romantic movement. This may well be traced to the publication of W.H. Auden's *The Enchafed Flood, or The Romantic Iconography of the Sea*. This work, which began as a series of three lectures at the University of Virginia in 1950, is an "attempt to understand the nature of Romanticism through an examination of its treatment of a single theme, the sea." (Auden, 1987: 3).

Auden begins by identifying the two environments that God distinguished for mankind, the dry land and the sea. This duality is not peculiar to the Romantic tradition, and Auden traces it to Genesis and finds it in a number of other contexts, but it is a literary conceit which does not accurately reflect the scope of people's activities on the sea. Auden

juxtaposes what he perceives as the reluctant sailor of the classical and subsequent traditions with

The distinctive new notes of the Romantic attitude... 1) To leave the land and the city is the desire of everyman of sensibility and honor. 2) The sea is the real situation and the voyage is the true condition of man... The sea is where the decisive events, the moments of eternal choice, of temptation, fall, and redemption occur. The shore life is always trivial (Auden, 1987: 14).

Modernism is usually seen as the most urban of artistic movements in English Literature. T.S. Eliot spent hours sitting in a blustery shelter looking out over the yellowed winter sea. His sense of desolation went into the poem he was writing and which would become 'The Fire Sermon' section of *The Waste Land*. His location mattered, and he acknowledged it explicitly: "On Margate Sands,/ I can connect/ Nothing with nothing" (Menand, 2007: 13). No modernist writer, with the possible exceptions of Joseph Conrad and James Joyce, was deeply inspired by the sea or spent so much of his or her imaginative life beside or beneath its figurative depths, and in the work of no other author from the modernist epoch is the sea invested with such rich symbolic value as it is in Virginia Woolf's oeuvre, from parts of *Jacob's Room* (1922) to the whole of *To the Lighthouse* (1927). She evokes the sea more frequently and profoundly as an emblem of the silenced and marginalized position of women (Ibid: 110).

## **2) The Sea in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man***

Of all the great writers in the English language of the modern age, James Joyce could be said to have wonderfully combined the Modernist focus on the city with a universal perspective that fully includes other natural elements, among which water and the sea play a major part. The sea and its related features from climate to temperament and civilization imply the fundamental role of water itself as a primary symbol and motif in Joyce's work, in *A Portrait* and *Ulysses* in particular.

Joyce spent a life time close to water, and most of it in cities bisected by rivers: Dublin, by the Liffey; Rome, by the Tiber; Paris, by the Seine;

Zurich, by the Limmat; and Trieste, washed by the Adriatic. Be that as it may, once when he was asked if he had any plans for further writing, now that *Finnegans Wake* (1939) was finally achieved, he replied that he wanted to write a short book about the sea (Potts, 1979: 202). *Finnegans Wake* itself ends with Anna Liffey losing her individuality as her waters and her words are diffused into the sea. The centrality of the sea in Joyce's life and work suggests that it may be interesting to attempt a comparison between different versions of the idea of a threshold of sea or water. On the first page of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916), baby Stephen is wetting his bed, and from this infantile beginning the great image proceeds, becoming the sea at last. By the end of the fourth chapter, the marine imagery in particular becomes potentially rich with fertile and reviving connotations in relation to a retrieved sense of connectedness, if not of oneness, with the earth and land. Sea-water figures metonymically for passage, change, transition in the *Portrait*:

His soul had arisen from the grave of boyhood, spurning her graveclothes. Yes! Yes! Yes! He would create proudly out of the freedom and power of his soul, as the great artificer whose name he bore, a living, new and soaring and beautiful, impalpable, imperishable (Joyce, 1991: 184)\*

A close examination of the novel seems to show that there are two principal connections in which the sea symbolically appears as a sign of freedom and eternity. It appears as a symbol of freedom in two senses and at two levels, which are ultimately connected. It is shown as a symbol of movement in the narrower, material sense, "The phrase and the day and the scene harmonized in a chord. Words" (p. 180); and of spiritual freedom in a wider sense, "Now, at the name of the fabulous artificer, he seemed to hear the noise of dim waves and to see a winged form flying above the waves and slowly climbing the air" (p. 183). The *Portrait* displays an impressive array of watery and marine imagery which reveals a transition from a conventional use to a powerful, almost imagistic one. It is a common view that "in the first half of *A Portrait* water is commonly disagreeable, agreeable in the second" (Tindall, 1970: 89).

However, chapter three of the *Portrait* is entirely dry, and Stephen's

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- All quotations of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* are from the Penguin edition 1991. Henceforth, page reference bracketed in the text.

He had tried to build a breakwater of order and elegance against the sordid tide of life without him and dam up ... the powerful recurrence of the tides within him .... The water had flowed over his barriers: their tides began once more to jostle fiercely above crumbled mole (p. 98).

vision of Hell is of a field of dry weeds, though in his concluding visions of thesea, he is never in it, but on or over it. He knows that Icarus died by drowning and for him water the source of life, means destruction and ironically, of death:

In one of his spasms of piety, "[Stephen] seemed to feel a flood slowly advancing towards his naked feet and to be waiting for the first faint timid noiseless wavelet to touch his fevered skin" (p. 153). The waves that talk among themselves in young Stephen's dreamy imagination, as he snoozes in the Clongowes infirmary, might seem to speak of hope, but they herald the death of Parnell. It is Stephen's soul that is "dewy wet," and it is bathed in waves of light (p. 218). At the end of the *Portrait*, Stephen is no trained diver. "I go to encounter for the millionth time the reality of experience" (p. 276). He is both an Icarus asking for support and an Icarus asking that Daedalus stand in his place that the son will become like the father and survive to create his own labyrinth.

What is ultimately being defended is no mere freedom of movement but that eternal spirit of the chainless mind of which Stephen sang. As such, the sea symbolizes spiritual freedom in this wider sense:

All through his boyhood he had mused upon that which he had so often thought to be his destiny and when the moment had come for him to obey the call he had turned aside, obeying a wayward instinct. Now time lay between: the oils of ordination would never anoint his body. He had refused. Why? (p. 180)

Illustration of this use could, of course, be multiplied. Water serves to link the novel's books and is essentially ambivalent. This quality of ambivalence is also decisive to the enormous semantic resonance of the sea motif. The first chapters are punctuated by frequent references to the movement and the force of water and currents in relation to the protagonist's emotions and feelings, through words such as "waves", "tide", "flowing", "flowed", "breakwater", "outlet", "stream" and so on. Metaphors abound, together with similes, linked to the ideas of sin, error, failure and strength in the perspective of the artist's quest for perfection: "From without as from within the water had flowed over his barriers: their tides began once more to jostle fiercely above the crumbled mole" (p. 92).

The feeling of apparent boundlessness is derived not from experience of any given wide ocean plain, but from the consciousness that all the seas are one sea, all-embracing and thus limitless in a wider sense. The dynamic character of the sea with its movement and power is also operative. The water surface reflects the suffocating reality of clerical Ireland Stephen is trying to flee, it provides neither shelter nor a way of escape, its function is not that of a nearby elsewhere where he can ideally turn to in his reverie. It foreshadows the epiphanic potential of the watery and marine setting in the following climactic scene at Dollymount beach, on the "day of dappled seaborne clouds" (Cohen, 2010: 13).

The symbolic use of the sea and its great waters takes us from the immanent world to the transcendent. The sea in its seeming boundlessness, inscrutability and infinite power occurs in many passages in the *Portrait* as a symbol of the really Infinite and Eternal (Bradshaw, 2011: 108). Where Eternity is imaged by the sea, it appears either as a confronting or encompassing man, yet not in any explicitly directional relation to him; or as standing in a definite relation to man as his origin or as his destination, or as both. In the hell-fore sermon Stephen is prompted to imagine eternity in terms of uncountable "particles of sand" and "drops of waters of the mighty ocean". After overcoming "the flood of temptation" of religious vocation, "Pride after satisfaction" uplifts "him like long slow waves" (Bradshaw, 2011: 108). Rising and falling are still evocative of waves and

tides, implying a larger animistic sense of life. Stagnation is apparently slowly giving way to throbbing life. Stephen loves "the rhythmic rise and fall of words better than their association of legend and colour" (Ibid: 154).

Just as Stephen standing on the sea shore and watching the tired little ripples breaking at his feet wonders at the hopelessness and powerlessness of their vain efforts, so in life in a wider sense the human being is sometimes overcome by the apparent hopelessness and futility of the efforts that he sees making and breaking around him. Yet in both cases something is forgotten; on the shore we forget that 'far back' is coming in, flooding creek and inlet, and gradually giving the little ripples more and more of its own power:

He turned landward and ran towards the shore and running up the sloping beach, reckless of the sharp shingle, found a sandy nook amid a ring of tufted sandknolls and lay down there that the peace and silence of the evening might still the riot of his blood ... and the earth beneath him, the earth that had borne him, had taken him to her breast (p. 157-58).

The finite existence and effort, however little this is realized, are sustained by the constantly incoming tide of eternity that comes from unknown and inaccessible solitudes and brings a rushing power to the soul. A merging between water and earth, between sea and land concludes the movement as "the tide was flowing in fast with a low whisper of her waves, islanding a few last figures in distant pools" (p. 158).

The directional element in the relation between finite and infinite finds clearer expression in the following passage where the emphasis is on eternity thought of as that which the finite has its source and origin and from which it proceeds:

A glow of desire kindled again his soul and fired and fulfilled all his body. Conscious of his desire she was waking from odorous sleep ... enfolded him like a shining cloud, enfolded him like water with a liquid life; and like a cloud of vapor or like waters circumfluent in space the liquid letters of speech, symbols of the element of mystery, flowed forth over his brain" (p. 202).

Here the immortal sea is or represents primarily an eternal sphere from which all being comes. Once Stephen has envisaged his call and destiny, a reconciliation with the earth and the land which can shelter him again has been reached through the medium of the sea, on the luminal space of the shore. The sandy nook where Stephen finds shelter recalls the recurrent image of the womb that occurs in the fifth chapter, in relation to his visionary experience of desire "O! In the virgin womb of the imagination the word was made flesh" (p. 236).

Stephen's name is Dedalus, and his soaring ambitions are those of an intellectual Icarus, who met his death by drowning in the sea. The sea-water is dispersed and multiplied, enfolding and pervasive. Together with the vision of birds, in the guise of birdlike and wavelike words, it is once more, as in the case of transfigured girl on the beach, charged with sensuous and erotic overtones and explicitly evokes sexual desire through an illusion to the "soft liquid joy like the noise of many waters flowed over his memory" (p. 206). Stephen's fondness for water and the sea, so recurrently evident in the *Portrait*, is flair for its mutability and its nature, comprehensive of the principle of life itself, beginning and end. He is fascinated by the flowing coexistence of life and death in water and the sea (Free, 2012: 42).

Stephen's cunning, vaunted at the end of the *Portrait*, remains sterile since his intellectual framing of reality and his highly speculative mind which is at odds with his context of provenance, are not those of a true Homeric hero, curious, bold and eager to move on. Here we have two links, the first connects water as a natural element to language; it is metaphorised by "the liquid letters of speech, symbols of the element of mystery" (p. 202) which flows over Stephen's brain. The second is the nexus between Ireland as a feminine island and its "masculine" sea (Potts, 2010: 46).

### **3) Conclusion**

To sum up, for something to come to be used as a symbol, a relationship towards it deeper than that involved in a mere sense experience and description is necessary. So being, from its beginning to its end, a transition in the *Portrait* can be traced from an essentially insidious connotation of the

sea as a symbol of historical entrapment to a universal, and natural conception of the sea as the originating principle of life. To describe something experienced, even to react emotionally towards it, is not yet to have taken it up into *'out'* thought with such insight and intimacy that it can come to serve creatively as an outward and visible sign of greater and deeper realities. What is merely described or experienced at the levels of sense and emotion remains still object, something detached, perhaps alien and even hostile. Through centuries, the sea entered fully into English literature as a symbol and an imagery, as a means whereby the profoundest ideas and feelings may find imaginative expression. Human life is the life of the human spirit, and eternity is its origin, its home and destiny that is engulfed in the sea.

All this water could be just adventitious; but we have testimonies from life about Joyce's views concerning water and watery cities. Paul Leon tells us that "Joyce's feeling for all bodies of water amounted almost to nostalgia, and he was drawn to the seashore by an irresistible attraction" (Potts, 1979: 289).

Such is the case; water and the sea dominate the whole horoscope of Joyce's imagination, appearing here and there in his work as emblems of the circularity of the human life. Dichotomies of death/life, finite/infinite, eternal/mortal are really the repetitive cycles the human history and civilization have as mirrored here through the sea imagery.

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