

“Some trivial indication of city life”: Joyce’s Urban Poetics in *Stephen Hero*

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Abstract: From 1904 to 1907 James Joyce wrote *Stephen Hero*, an unfinished autobiographical fictional narrative that, although incomplete, stands as a relevant work for anyone interested in Joyce’s literature. Its remarkable features go from Stephen candid dialogues with his parents to the celebrated theory of the epiphany. Nonetheless, there is one particular element of paramount importance not only to the narrative itself but also for all of Joyce’s future fictional work: the city. It is precisely while walking through the city of Dublin that Joyce’s alter ego, Stephen Daedalus, gets in contact with and resignifies ‘some trivial indication of city life’, portals to the epiphanies that would ultimately qualify him as a true artist. By resignifying the Dublin of his youth Joyce narrates the processes through which both the novelist himself and his alter-ego were also resignified into artists. The city of Dublin thus becomes essential to Joyce’s literature, for it grows from an unpleasant place into the ultimate locus for both intellectual investigation and self-investigation. The omnipresence of Dublin in all of Joyce’s fictional works reinforces such assumption.

Keywords: James Joyce; *Stephen Hero*; City

Richard Ellmann, James Joyce’s most renowned biographer, claims that Joyce believed in “exile as the artistic condition” (54). Such form of exile does not necessarily refer only to Joyce’s removal from his homeland but also to his alienation from its population – in Joyce’s own words, “the most belated race in Europe” (Joyce, “The Day of the Rabblement” 50) –, from its religion and moral values, from traditional art, from his family, from patriotism, from nationalism, from British imperialism, and even from history itself. That is, from the “pack of enmities” (Joyce, “A Portrait of the Artist” 212) he believed to be against him. According to Joyce, being an artist presupposes isolation: “the artist, though he may employ the crowd, is very careful to isolate himself” (50). In *Stephen Hero* there’s a *locus* that substantiates such form of isolation: the city; more precisely, the walking through the city, a procedure that may be related to what French philosopher Michel de Certeau calls “walking exile” (107).

Writing about this concept of Certeau’s, New Zealander literary critic Simon During argues that, as one wanders through a city, “The walker individuates and makes ambiguous the ‘legible’ order given to cities by planners” (qtd. in Certeau 151). By doing so, the walker resignifies the very city. In Certeau’s own words: “one can measure the importance of these signifying practices [...] as practices that invent spaces” (107). As one

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(re-)signifies the city, as one (re-)invents the city, he/she ultimately (re-)signifies and (re-)invents him or herself. As American sociologist Robert Park points out, “the city is the world which man created [...]. Thus, indirectly, [...] in making the city man has remade himself” (qtd. in Harvey 83).

Nonetheless, in many instances, as British geographer David Harvey argues, “the city makes us under urban circumstances that are not of our own choosing” (88). In fact, still according to Harvey, with the advent and global proliferation of industrial cities, we have been “remade several times over without knowing, why, how, or wherefore” (84). The young Joyce may be understood as someone who found himself in a city, Dublin, “under urban circumstances” that were not of his own choosing.



Detail of John Henry Foley's O'Connell Monument in O'Connell Street, Dublin. Photo by the Author.

Joyce, in the Dublin of his youth, saw himself as an outcast aspiring artist imprisoned in a paralyzed city dominated by and subservient to both the British and the Roman-Catholic Empires. Moreover, Joyce saw Dublin as the materialization of the “hemiplegia of the will” (qtd. in Ellmann 132) that disturbed him to the point of wishing to go further than his “walking exile” and actually leaving his homeland for good – a resolution that Joyce would irrevocably make as soon as 1904, when he was only 22 years old, and that would prove crucial to his maturing as an artist.

It is in the very same year of 1904 that Joyce starts writing his first fictional autobiographical long narrative, *Stephen Hero*. What is currently known as *Stephen Hero* is, in reality, the remains of the autobiographical novel Joyce set himself out to write in 1904. Although the surviving text is coherent and presents considerable unity, it is incomplete. As Brazilian translator José Roberto O'Shea points out, the original manuscript consisted

of about a thousand pages. Two-thirds of these were lost and the remaining 383 pages form the basis of what we now know as *Stephen Hero* (8). Hans Walter Gabler on his turn argues that, according to Joyce's plans, *Stephen Hero* should have sixty-three chapters (xvii). However, the surviving manuscript is divided into only twelve numbered chapters: from XV – whose beginning is lost – to XXVI – whose ending is lost; in addition, there is another non-numbered sequence of pages normally located after the twenty-sixth chapter. It is also relevant to mention that the narrative encompasses both the period of time Joyce/Stephen was in college and the process through which Stephen progressively understands himself to be an artist. Nonetheless, one of the most important features of *Stephen Hero* is its protagonist's – Stephen Daedalus – relation with the city.

There are, for instance, many passages of the narrative related to the constant walks Stephen goes for in the city. Right at the beginning of *Stephen Hero* we read that "Every evening after tea Stephen left his house and set out for the city, Maurice at his side" (36) – Maurice being a fictionalized version of Joyce's younger brother, Stanislaus. While in the city, the two brothers would walk and discuss philosophical matters. A bit further in the narrative the following is said about Stephen: "He would leave his house every morning at the usual hour and come into the city on the tram" (37), where "He often walked thus for seven or eight hours at a stretch" (37); "Stephen wandered about morning, noon and night" (151).

The further the narrative progresses, the greater is the amount of time Stephen spends wandering through the city. These walks also become increasingly lonely and seem to illustrate a search for what American Joycean scholar James Fairhall calls a "realm of freedom" (34). That is, as he walks through the city, Stephen is not at home, not at college, not at church; as he walks through the city, Stephen manages to find a way to isolate himself from everything that oppresses him. Therefore, it is in fact possible to think of the city as a locus that could and would provide him with this "realm of freedom". But what would Stephen do while walking?

When Stephen was walking alongside his brother Maurice, they would beguile "the long journey with philosophic discourse" (36). When, in the morning, he went out by himself, Stephen "as often as not would decide to follow some trivial indication of city life instead of entering the oppressive life of the College" (37). These morning walks were considerably different from their evening counterparts: "His morning walks were critical, his evening walks imaginative and whatever had seemed plausible in the evening was always rigorously examined in the light of day" (69).

It is also relevant to point out that what attracts Stephen's attention during his walks are banalities, "some trivial indication of city life" (37), not running into acquaintances and socializing with them, as the following passage illustrates: "Any acquaintances that were encountered during these walks were never allowed to intrude on the young man's meditations by commonplace conversation" (70).

In addition, in some specific passages we get to know how Stephen's relation with his "realm of freedom" really takes place: "The damp Dublin winter seemed to harmonise with his inward sense of unreadiness" (37); "Dublin would lay a sudden hand upon his shoulder, and the chill of the summons would strike to his heart" (38). In other words, not only does Stephen harmonize with the city but he also anthropomorphizes it, he humanizes it. The city touches him, it calls him.

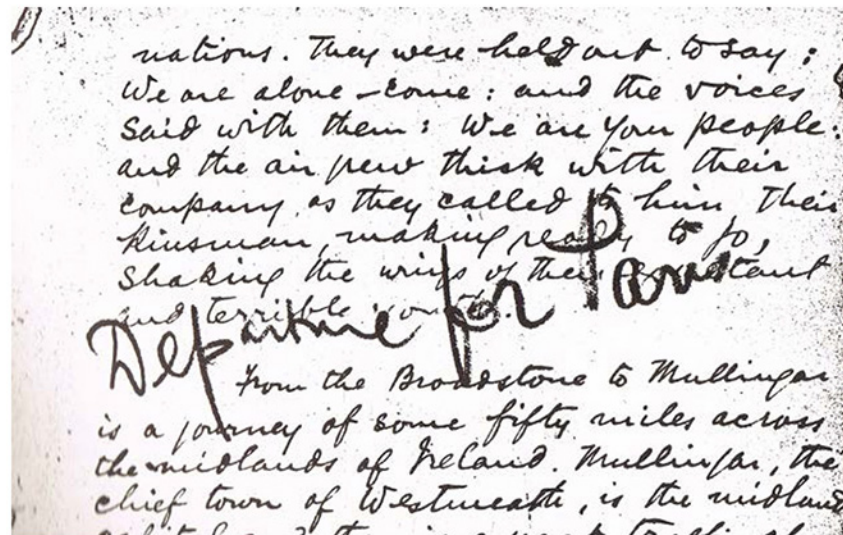
Stephen/Joyce found his own way to incorporate the isolation that he believed vital for the artist into his daily life: be it because he really felt increasingly isolated from most of those around him, be it because he found his wanderings could actually make him get physically and momentarily away from his 'pack of enmities'. Paradoxical as it may seem, it is the space of the city he supposedly hated so much that provides the isolation he needed.

The city is also made into a locus for and of Stephen's critical and creative thinking: in the mornings, 'critical' walks; at night, 'imaginative' ones. It was by walking through the city that Stephen created and developed critical thinking about his own artistic creations. These dynamics are closely related to the development of the concept of epiphany disclosed in the narrative.

It is when he passes by a couple having a conversation that Stephen firstly thinks about writing down his epiphanies. More importantly, Stephen overhears the couple's conversation when he "was passing through Eccles' St [...] with all these thoughts dancing the dance of unrest in his brain" (Joyce, *Stephen Hero* 210-211). That is, it is precisely during one of his walks that Stephen witnesses "some trivial indication of city life" – the couple's conversation – that caused "an impression keen enough to afflict his sensitiveness very severely" (Joyce, *Stephen Hero* 211). It was by entering in the "realm of freedom" of the city that Stephen got in contact with what he would later call epiphany. It should not come as a surprise that all his explanations about his particular concept of epiphany are put forth during one of his walks through Dublin.

From Stephen's perspective, Dublin is the ultimate representation of everything that is dreadful about Ireland. Exactly because of that and in order to try and find some beauty in it, as well as some sort of positive logics within the reality he found himself in Stephen develops a theory of what he calls epiphany. As Umberto Eco puts it, Stephen managed to

discover “reality and, at the same time, a way of defining reality through discourse” (344). Still according to Eco, in *Stephen Hero* the epiphany is “used only to sustain a romantic idea of the poetic word as revelation and the poet as the only one who can give a reason to things, a meaning to life, a form to experience, a finality to the world” (344).



Manuscript page of *Stephen Hero* (in Gabler Text Genetics)

Through his notion of epiphany Stephen manages to develop an individual and harmless way to deal with reality, one that does not obey religion, morals, family, patriotism, British imperialism, or traditional art. It is exclusively his and he believes it to be free. And the city plays an extremely important role in it.

In order to illustrate his theory, in a certain passage of the narrative, Stephen takes the clock of the Ballast Office as an example as he walks with one of his friends, Cranly, through the center of Dublin. Stephen catches sight of the clock by chance and uses it to illustrate his theory. In fact, the exposure of his theory only takes place because Stephen and Cranly are walking through Dublin. The narrative portrays the beginning of the explanation on the following manner: “He told Cranly that the clock of the Ballast Office was capable of an epiphany” (Joyce, *Stephen Hero* 211). That is, it is “some trivial indication” of Dublin city life that triggers Stephen’s explanation. More than that, both Stephen and Cranly are actually walking through the city. Joyce makes sure that the readers are aware of this.

It is within the city that Stephen walks and at the same time gets inside his “realm of freedom”, away from his “pack of enmities”. It is while walking through the city that Stephen gets in contact with some random “trivial indication” that “afflicts his sensitiveness very severely”. It is while walking through the city that Stephen develops,

explains, and illustrates his most important aesthetic theory. It is while walking through the city that Stephen becomes an artist.

Stephen's/Joyce's resignification of the city changes Dublin from a place where he lived under disagreeable urban circumstances to an endless source of "trivial indications of city life", something essential and of immense importance to Joyce's work as a whole. By resignifying the Dublin of his youth, Joyce, through Stephen, manages to resignify himself as an artist. The importance and quasi-omnipresence of Dublin throughout Joyce's works only reinforces such assumption.

It is exactly because he experienced life in a city so affected by both British and catholic rules, such as Dublin was, that Joyce felt the need to resignify his own relationship with the city. In his "walking exile", Joyce tried to break free from these rules, as well as from the consequences he believed they have brought about not only to Dublin but to Ireland. Let us not forget the importance Charles Stewart Parnell had in Joyce's personal and artistic development. Joyce also encouraged the Irish to "criticise in the manner of free people, as a free race" (Joyce, "Drama and Life" 25). As English literary critic Andrew Gibson points out, all of Joyce's works "repeatedly turn out to be about Ireland, its history and prospects, its politics and culture, its relation to the Church and the colonial power and, perhaps above all, the place of art in the Ireland Joyce knew" (42).

Thus, it is possible to look at Joyce's "walking exile" as an instance of resistance. It is of great relevance that Joyce's "poetics of walking exile" is intrinsically related to the urban experience, for the city is thus portrayed not only as a place where rules such as the British and/or catholic thrive but it may also be understood as a locus where resistance and resignification bloom. If, as Park would put it, "in making the city man has remade himself" (qtd. in Harvey 83), it seems that Joyce's work stands as an excellent instance of the imbrications between resignifying the city and resignifying oneself. *Stephen Hero* lies at the very heart of this endless commodious vicus of resignification.

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