

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Joyce's Prefiguring of "Deconstruction" Theory in "Proteus"

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ABSTRACT

This paper highlights correspondences between "Proteus" episode from James Joyce's *Ulysses* with its reliance on the figure of metamorphosis as a structuring principle and Derrida's "Deconstruction" not-yet theorized at the time. It details how Joyce pre-figures the theory itself. While Ovid's *Metamorphoses* is mentioned in "Oxen of the Sun", its configurations take place in the third episode of *Ulysses* which is devoted explicitly and implicitly to change. Everything is subject to othering and displacement: symbols, thoughts, language and of course the Homeric *Odyssey*. The metamorphosis motif is an adequate space for Joyce to resolve but also to problematize the dialects of present and past, time and space, self and other, presence and absence, signifier and signified and other Western dichotomies. Joyce alludes to the self-contradictory and destabilizing nature of things as well as the differing/deferral of meaning. While the differing and deferral of meaning is characteristic of Joyce's writings in general, "Proteus" episode by referring to the shapeshifting God, refers explicitly to the practice of transformation and othering within the sameness and thus in a way pre-theorizes "différance" and becomes some sort of metalanguage for deconstruction.

Keywords: metamorphosis, deconstruction, othering, differing, deferral.

1. Introduction:

Joyce's *Ulysses* has long been discussed in terms of its parallels with Homer's *The Odyssey*, its Shakespearean overtones, its mythical method and the wide array of styles employed. "Proteus" the third episode in *Ulysses* in particular introduces the interior monologue, a breakthrough in the texture of the novel. Richard Ellmann (2004) explains that this technique is inaugurated by Joyce in *A Portrait of the Artist*, however, "Joyce in *Ulysses* boldly eliminated the journal [used in *A Portrait*] and let thoughts hop, step, jump, and glide without the self-consciousness of a journal to account for their agitation" (p. 9). Joyce's experimentation with language has been the subject of myriad of critical works. Fritz Senn coined the word "dislocation" to describe Joyce's linguistic practices; a term that "suggests a spatial metaphor for all manner of metamorphoses, switches, transfers, displacements, but also acknowledges the overall significance of speech and writing" (Senn, 1984, p.202). The article presents these Joycean linguistic twists, substitutions, metamorphoses and transposition in "Proteus" as a promising background for a yet-to-be-implemented theory, namely the Derridean "Deconstruction".

2. Discussion and analysis:

While Ovid's *Metamorphoses* is mentioned in "Oxen of the Sun", its configurations take place in "Proteus" which is devoted extraordinarily to change. Proteus, often called The Old Man of the Sea,

is an aquatic herder of sea-calves. He is famous for his shape-shifting abilities. He is "[a]n old seafarer ... that gives/ A true solution of all secrets here, / Who deathless Proteus is, th' Egyptian peer, / Who can the deeps of all the seas exquire" (Homer, 2002, p. 81). He is, therefore, the holder of secrets, truths, prophesies, "foresight" and "foreknowledge" (Homer, 2002, p. 81) that people seek. He is, however, reluctant to reveal any of these secrets helped by his ability to "fly the fixt place of his us'd abode. / 'Tis hard for man to countermine with god" (Homer, 2002, p. 81). His daughter discloses how his prophesies can be seized from him:

In his first sleep, call up your hardest cheer,
Vigour and violence, and hold him there,
In spite of all his strivings to be gone.
He then will turn himself to every one
Of all things that in earth creep and respire,
In water swim, or shine in heavenly fire.
Yet still hold you him firm, and much the more
Press him from passing. (Homer, 2002, p. 82)

The passage alludes to the metamorphosing powers of Proteus who can turn to "all things" on earth, in the sea or in the air. Then later on, these powers are asserted in: "And then th'old forger all his forms began:/First was a lion with a mighty mane, / Then next a dragon, a pied panther then, / A vast boar next, and suddenly did strain/ All in water. Last he was a tree, Curl'd all at top, and shot up to the sky" (Homer, 2002, p. 83).

Since *Ulysses* is fashioned on *The Odyssey*, the parallels between the above-mentioned quotes on Proteus and "Proteus" episode from *Ulysses* are neither surprising nor untackled before in academia ranging from the marine milieu to the multiple metamorphoses of objects, living creatures, thoughts and language. Joyce himself affirms that in "Proteus" change is the theme. "Everything changes-sea, sky, man, animals. The words change too" (qtd.in Budgen 1960, p. 48). Even more self-assertively, the episode opens up with an observation: "Ineluctable modality of the visible" (Joyce, 2010, p.34). That water transforms from "the nearing tide" (Joyce, 2010, p.34) to "Bathing" (Joyce, 2010, p. 36) to "flood" (Joyce, 2010, p. 41), that the fox turns into "a pard, a panther" (Joyce, 2010, p. 43), that "God becomes man becomes fish becomes barnacle goose becomes featherbed mountain" (Joyce, 2010, p. 46), that "warm milk" (Joyce, 2010, p. 38) is translated in the same paragraph as "lait chaud" (Joyce, 2010, p. 38), that the English word "lap" mutates into the French word "lapin" (Joyce, 2010, p. 38) is a blatant questioning of any fixity or finality of meaning, of the Saussureian semiology that posits the signifier and the signified as bound together arbitrarily in what is called the sign.

While Saussure assures a presence of meaning, thinks of language as a system of signs that can be studied synchronically or diachronically, the metamorphoses affecting nearly everything including language make of the fixity of the signified an impossibility. Meaning relies on interpretation and Stephen engages in this task very early in the third episode of *Ulysses*: "Signatures of all things I am here to read" (Joyce, 2010, p. 34). Different languages are used, sometimes within the same sentence, revealing a deep dissatisfaction with the traditional linguistic system of representation. Senn explains:

Stephen Dedalus is fond of recondite or foreign words, in "Proteus" particularly: German (nacheinander, nebeneinander), Latin (iniuria patiens), Italian, Greek (adiaphane, euge), French

(Zut, nom de Dieu), Gipsy, cant, etc. They are plug-ins from alien, often remote, areas. In groping for the most appropriate verb, Stephen tries out a series in English, German/Yiddish, French and Italian: "She trudges, schlepps, trains, trascines her load" (U 3.392), aiming for the best effect. (Senn, 2018, p.141)

These interpretative operations and multiple attempts at seizing "the best effect" parallels the efforts to catch the ever-changing Proteus, deny all sorts of final meanings and decentralize any authority in the production of meaning which becomes always deferred. The practice is akin to "Deconstruction" a term coined by the French philosopher Jacques Derrida (1982) which depends upon the concept of *différance*:

An interval must separate the present from what it is not in order for the present to be itself, but this interval that constitutes it as present must, by the same token, divide the present in and of itself, thereby also dividing, along with the present, everything that is thought on the basis of the present, that is, in our metaphysical language, every being, and singularly substance or the subject. In constituting itself, in dividing itself dynamically, this interval is what might be called spacing, the becoming-space of time or the becoming-time of space (temporization). And it is this constitution of the present, as an "originary" and irreducibly nonsimple (and therefore, *stricto sensu* nonoriginary) synthesis of marks, or traces of retentions and protentions (to reproduce analogically and provisionally a phenomenological and transcendental language that soon will reveal itself to be inadequate), that I propose to call *archi-writing*, *archi-trace*, or *différance*. Which (is) (simultaneously) spacing (and) temporization. (p. 14)

The word "play" is also of a great importance to "Deconstruction" and Derrida often uses the word "articulation" interchangeably with "play". To be articulated is to be jointed or attached to something yet with a certain freedom of movement and so can open up the possibility of manipulation, of working with and in the world. According to Derrida, only play or articulation opens up time and space. The play of differences is omnipresent all over *Ulysses*, however, I have chosen "Proteus" in particular because the episode refers to Proteus the shapeshifting God and thus refers explicitly to the practice of transformation and othering within the sameness and thus in a way it pre-theorizes "différance" and becomes some sort of metalanguage for deconstruction.

It is my purpose, in fact, to highlight correspondences between "Proteus" episode in *Ulysses* and Derrida's theory of deconstruction not yet theorized at the time. Joyce's prefiguring of the theory is amazingly obvious. Stuart Gilbert (1955) observes that "[t]his episode ["Proteus"] contains practically no action. Nothing happens and yet in following the trail of Stephen's thoughts as he idles on the Dublin strand, we encounter a diversity of experience as exciting as any tale of adventure in 'the land of Phenomenon' (p. 119)". This observation favours the view that "Proteus" is more of a theory than a part of a story. The text of the episode discloses a direct preoccupation with language and meaning in such utterances as "See what I meant, see?" (Joyce, 2010, p. 39), "language tide" (Joyce, 2010, p. 41) and the opening paragraph ends up with a mocking of Samuel Johnson's dictionary definition: "If you can put your five fingers through it, it is a gate, if not a door" (Joyce, 2010, p. 34). The juxtaposition of the first letters of the Hebrew and Greek alphabets "Aleph, alpha" and the conclusion that the creation of language is "nought, nought, one" (Joyce, 2010, p. 35) reveals Stephen/Joyce's pondering over language as a constructed system of representation. And the "written words" are "[s]igns on a white field" (Joyce, 2010, p. 44) is reminiscent of semiology. The awareness

of the limitations afflicting visual and aural modes of perception permeates the whole episode: "I will see if I can see" (Joyce, 2010, p. 34), "Shut your eyes and see" (Joyce, 2010, p. 34), "When I put my face into it in the basin at Clongowes. Can't see" (Joyce, 2010, p. 42).

The concept of metamorphosis, thanks to its linguistic and formal richness, allows Joyce to lay the yet-to-be theory of deconstruction. Natalia R. Moehle (1987) provides a definition of the metamorphosis of mythic creatures in her book *From Myth to Philosophy*:

...in transformation (1) something a becomes b, (2) a and b have sortally different bodily shapes, and (3) a is the "same" as b in certain individuating features, i.e, those features which are peculiar to and distinguish one entity from all others. It should be noted that the point of condition (3) is to eliminate cases of the replacement of one thing by another and thus to preserve the sense of a process in which one thing is made over into something else. (p. xi)

So, just like meaning in the Derridean theory which denies the existence of a "transcendental signified... which...would place a reassuring end to the reference from sign to sign" (Derrida, 1976 p. 49), metamorphosis "eliminates cases of replacements" and ensures "a sense of process" from one thing, creature, sign to another. This means that every presence refers to an absence in it to be defined through a chain or rather a web of signifiers. For Stephen, the "midwife" brings to his mind the issue of "Creation from nothing" and "a misbirth with a trailing navelcord", then of "cords of all" made up of "flesh" jumping to "naked Eve" who "had no navel" with "Belly without blemish" moving further with his thoughts to "womb of sin" and his own creation referring to his substance "Wombed in sin darkness I was too, made not begotten" questioning whether "the divine substance wherein Father and Son are consubstantial" (Joyce, 2010, p. 35). It seems true to assert that "The cords of all link back" (Joyce, 2010, p. 35) but also forth.

The opening up of time and space in the game of differences applies also to the concept of "metamorphosis". Bakhtin (1998) explains this temporal and spatial aspect:

Metamorphosis or transformation is a mythological sheath for the idea of development_ but one that unfolds not so much in a straight line as spasmodically, a line with "knots" in it, one that therefore constitutes a distinctive type of temporal sequence. The makeup of this idea is extraordinarily complex, which is why the types of temporal sequences that develop out of it are extremely varied. (p. 113)

In "Proteus", Stephen muses over the distinction made by Schopenhauer between *nebeneinander* (besides each other) and *nacheinander* (after each other) and in his attempts of reading "signatures of all things" (Joyce, 2010, p. 34), he fuses "a very short space of time through very short times of space" (Joyce, 2010, p. 34). Stephen's thoughts are governed by the temporal aspect going back in time "to Edenville" (Joyce, 2010, p. 35) and by a peculiar apprehension and conceptualization of space: "Am I walking into eternity along Sandymount strand?" (Joyce, 2010, p. 34). In "Proteus", the motif of "metamorphosis" becomes the mechanics by which Stephen articulates his thoughts which obey the laws of differing/deferring and thus turns into a metatope of "différance". Through spacing and temporalization, "metamorphosis" just like "différance" asserts that "the signified concept is never present in and of itself, in a sufficient presence that would refer only to itself. Essentially and lawfully, every concept is inscribed in a chain or in a system within which it refers to the other, to other concepts, by means of the systematic play of differences (Derrida, 1982, p. 12)." The dog Stephen watches on

the beach with his owners, for example, metamorphoses from a dog yelping into a bear fawning, into a wolf panting then into a calf galloping and finally a panther "vulturing the dead" (Joyce, 2010, p. 43). The dog's morphing into a panther recalls Haines's dream about a panther which leads Stephen's thoughts to trying to remember what he himself had been dreaming about when Haines's moaning woke him. These metamorphoses taking place in the mind of Stephen from one sign to another reveal that if a word means, it means by differing and what it differs from becomes an inevitable, though absent, part of its presence.

This matches the concept of the "trace" in the Derridean philosophy. Derrida writes that: "It is because of *différance* that the movement of signification is possible only if each so-called present element, each element appearing on the scene of presence is related to something other than itself, thereby keeping within itself the mark of the past element and already letting itself be vitiated by the mark of its relation to the future element" (Derrida, 1982, p. 14). For example, the two sentences: "Of Ireland, the Dalcassians, of hopes, conspiracies, of Arthur Griffith now. To yoke me as his yokefellow, our crimes our common cause" (Joyce, 2010, p. 39-40) introduce the theme of the Irish self-rule in a way that points to the past Gaelic tribe in Munster (Dalcassians) which inevitably links to the present ardent nationalist Arthur Griffith (the time presented in the novel) yoking them to future hopes. The restless move from one sign to another attests that the so-called present is never identical with itself and allows the play of differences to contribute to the construction of meaning; only to differ/defer further the meaning via intertextuality (recalling here a coinage from Shakespeare's *Henry V*); a widely spread practice in *Ulysses*. The text in "Proteus" in particular as well as throughout the whole novel is an exteriorization, a conscious representation of what is unconsciously participant in what is called presence.

Intertextuality, among other things, enables Joyce to theorize for "the dynamic conception of the "literary word" as an intersection of textual surfaces rather than a point (a fixed meaning), as a dialogue among several writings" (Allen, 2000, p. 38). Quoting Hamlet when on the beach: "nipping and eager airs" or Yeats's title of a poem "Who Goes with Fergus?" in the midst of his narration decenters all textual authority and hence any reassurance that the text is sufficient by itself to produce meaning is soon undermined. Intertextuality or what Kristeva (1984) calls transposition "plays an essential role here inasmuch as it implies the abandonment of a former sign system, the passage to a second via an instinctual intermediary common to the two systems, and the articulation of the new system with its new representability" (p. 60). Intertextuality complicates the issue of representation and meaning questioning the fullness of presence.

"God becomes man becomes fish becomes barnacle goose becomes featherbed mountain" (Joyce, 2010, p. 46) echoes Ovidian metamorphoses, but asserts once again the impossibility of "the transcendental signified" (Derrida, 1976, p. 49) and deconstructs the metaphysics of presence that is according to Derrida (1976) is "the exigent, powerful, systematic, and irrepressible desire for such a signified" (p. 49). The smooth transition, the absence of punctuation and the repetition of the verb "becomes" reveals an identity in the process of becoming, always already on the move shattering all myths of fixed, fully present identities deconstructing in the process the logocentric logic of western thought that god acts as a foundation for all thoughts, language and actions. This series of metamorphoses foreshadows Derrida's analysis (1976) of the phenomenology of Pierce:

According to the "phaneoroscopia" or "phenomenology" of Pierce, manifestation itself does not reveal a presence, it makes a sign. One may read in the *Principle of Phenomenology* that "the idea of manifestation is the idea of a sign". There is thus no phenomenality reducing the sign or the representamen so that the thing signified may be allowed to glow finally in the luminosity of its presence. The so-called "thing itself" is always already a representamen shielded from the simplicity of intuitive evidence. The representamen functions only by giving rise to an interpretant that itself becomes a sign and so on infinity. The self-identity of the signified conceals itself unceasingly and is always on the move. The property of the representamen is to be itself and another, to be produced as a structure of reference, to be separated from itself. The property of the representamen is not to be proper [propre], that is to say absolutely proximate to itself (proper, proprius). The represented is always already a representamen. (p. 49-50)

In the same fashion, the image of the drowning man transforms in Stephen's consciousness into the death of his mother, then into a contemplation of the nature of death itself. Wolfgang Iser contends that "in the twelfth chapter of *Finnegans Wake*... Joyce repeatedly changes "remember" into "remembore", suggesting that to remember is either to bore or an idea or thought that is born" (qtd. in Richard, 1999, p. 109) blurring the distinction between past and present. While the remark concerns *Finnegans Wake*, the practice itself is conducted dexterously in "Proteus": "A drowning man. His human eyes scream to me out of horror of his death. I ... with him together down... I could not save her. Waters: bitter death: lost" (Joyce, 2010, p. 42). The abrupt transition from "him" to "her", from the present drowning man to his mother's death in the past affirms the endless chain of signifiers in the process of meaning formation.

The chapter is full of instances of jumping from one topic to another, one image entails another, one thought gives way to another. Stephen on the beach endows objects, animals and people with multiple identities: the midwives become figures of reproduction, Christ turns into a mystical pondering, the dog mutates into different species, the woman he sees reminds him of a previous sexual intercourse and language as elsewhere in *Ulysses* is subject to grammatical and lexical morphing. Some critics remark that Stephen's associations are not always logic-based, it is this very logic, however, as essence, as presence that Joyce seeks to undermine. Joyce through Stephen is temporalizing space, seeking to counter oppression by changing, acting upon or "scoping" the "guaranteed space" (Boym, 2001, p.15) that is deconstructing the metaphysics of presence. Meaning is always differing and deferring which explains the non-fixity of the sign, the non-centrality of the sign, the non-holding of the centre.

The infinite chain of signs is echoed in "world without end" (Joyce, 2010, p. 34) throwing away any possibility of decidability of or finality of meaning. Stephen through the different mental metamorphoses in the episode becomes aware of his multiple identities, reflecting and pondering upon his personal past (the death of his mother), his national past (The Viking's invasion of Ireland), his relationship to Christ (made or begotten) and also his aesthetic individuality as he managed to write few lines of poetry. This multiplicity within the one and once thought unified and single identity reveals some absences in Stephen's identity or what Derrida calls "Originary lack" that permits it to be supplemented, again confirming that nothing is complete in itself and by itself.

A phrase like "shake a shake" (Joyce, 2010, p. 39) in "Proteus" has deconstructive overtones with all the surrounding metamorphoses of signs, displacement of thoughts and the uncovering of otherness at the heart of meaningfulness. Derrida (1982) later theorizes that: "It is the domination of beings that *différance* everywhere comes to solicit, in the sense that *solicitare*, in old latin means to shake as a whole, to make tremble in entirety" (p. 23). Derrida explains that:

The idea behind deconstruction is to deconstruct the workings of strong nation-states with powerful immigration policies, to deconstruct the rhetoric of nationalism, the politics of place, the metaphysics of native land and native tongue... the idea is to disarm the bombs... of identity that nation-states build to defend themselves against the stranger, against Jews and Arabs and immigrants. (qtd in. Caputo, 1997, p. 231)

Stephen in "Proteus" has the same desire and wishes to escape family and religious institutions calling them "Houses of decay" (Joyce, 2010, p. 36). He urges: "Come out of them, Stephen. Beauty is not there. Nor in the stagnant bay of Marsh's library where you read the fading prophecies of Joachim Abbas" (Joyce, 2010, p. 36). He pictures the "priests moving burly in their albs, tonsured and oiled and gelded, fat with the fat of kidneys of wheat" (Joyce, 2010, p. 37) and confirms that he "will never be a saint" (Joyce, 2010, p. 37) because of his lust for "*naked women!*" (Joyce, 2010, p. 37). Just like "Deconstruction", Joyce's project of liberation is the multiplication of thoughts, institutions, languages and possibilities that enables the individual free will, unbound by the monological western dichotomies and essentialist narratives.

Among the well-established dichotomies is life and death which is reiterated in different ways in "Proteus". Joyce juxtaposes these two concepts in "seaspawn and seawrack" (Joyce, 2010, p. 34) and in "Dead breaths I living breathe, tread dead dust, devour a ruinous offal from all dead" (Joyce, 2010, p. 46). The purposes of these links are known only to the writer but what is obvious is this blurring of distinction between two traditionally warring concepts. In her article "'Proteus" in *Ulysses* by James Joyce and Water, the Protean Element of Transformation", Cristina Cortez (2014) comments upon the employment of "seaspawn" which "represents marine life" and "seawrack" that "indicates the death of sea life" (p. 6):

Putting these opposite nouns together in this phrase makes them equal as if in a mathematical equation. The positive side "seaspawn" and the negative side "seawrack" negate each other rendering them meaningless, and this is equal to zero or nothingness, that is represented in *The Odyssey* as chaos. (p. 6)

Cortez's observation is prompted by the fact that *Ulysses* is made up after *The Odyssey* and hence she tries to emphasize reiteratively the parallels. What she describes as chaotic is actually much more the idea that oppositions participate in each other and that there exists a fundamental dependency between the thing and its opposite, each bearing the trace of the other. This analysis is propped by Joyce himself in "Proteus" who exteriorizes the trace between the thing and its opposite: "**Oomb, allwombing tomb**" (Joyce, 2010, p. 44). The dismantling of binary oppositions is at the heart of the deconstruction project that opposes the dualistic history of western thought. Derrida (1976) writes: "All dualisms, all theories of the immortality of the soul or of the spirit, as well as monisms, spiritualist or materialist, dialectical or vulgar, are the unique theme of a metaphysics whose entire history was compelled to strive toward the reduction of the trace (p. 71)".

As such, "Proteus" through the use of the trope of metamorphosis in its mythic and linguistic configurations prefigures the concept of "différance" and reveals Joyce's deconstructive convictions despite the belatedness of the theory itself. The ever differing/deferral of meaning in Joyce makes of reading Joyce an endless task of examination of "traces", "supplements", a tracking of a web of signs in a mad process of othering and uncovering of the inherent contradictions in totalized systems. After all, Derrida (1984) finds that "the utterances: I am reading Joyce", "read Joyce", "have you read Joyce?" produce an irresistible effect of naivety, irresistibly comical. What exactly do you mean by "read Joyce" "Who can pride himself on having "read" Joyce?" (p. 148)

Therefore, Joyce by rewriting *The Odyssey* and transforming it into an everyday incarnation is not destroying *The Odyssey* but he is deconstructing it. Derrida (1976) believes that "life without différance is another name for death" (p. 71). Joyce, in fact, by metamorphosing *The Odyssey* guarantees its lifelong circulation. Yet while he consciously transformed *The Odyssey*, in his differing/deferral practices, he was always already transforming some other texts. *The Odyssey* itself being a transformation of another. As Derrida (1978) concludes in *Writing and Difference*: "there is ,..., no tragedy of the book. There is only one Book, and this same book is distributed throughout all books" (p. 9). So one may wonder to what extent can the omnipresent reference to *Ulysses* as an everyday incarnation of *The Odyssey* or as a transformation of *The Odyssey* can be true or reliable? Joyce himself, in "Proteus" affirms this inevitability of otherness and non-originality of existing books proclaiming: "When one reads these strange pages of one long gone, one feels that one is at one with one who once..." (Joyce, 2010, p. 37).

3.Conclusion:

It is obvious that while the deconstruction theory has not appeared yet, Joyce was preparing the ground for Derrida to come up with his revolutionary philosophy. Derrida (1997) himself acknowledges that "Joyce is a great landmark in the history of deconstruction" (p. 26). Andrew J. Mitchell and Sam Slate (2013) in their introduction to *Derrida and Joyce: Texts and Contexts* point to the role of Joyce in the making of the theory: "Derrida does not comment upon Joyce... but thinks with him, through him, and allows Joyce a shaping hand in his own set of philosophical concerns" (p. 1). Derrida also indulges in a series of writings about Joyce chief among them the essays: "Two Words for Joyce" and "Ulysses Gramophone: Hear Say Yes in Joyce". Is it possible that through Proteus the god of prophesies Joyce was able to prophesize deconstruction?

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