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JOYCE, WITTGENSTEIN, AND THE PROBLEM OF REPRESENTATION; OR WHY JOYCE WROTE *FINNEGANS WAKE*

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"Signatures of all things," says Stephen Dedalus in the opening lines of the Proteus section of *Ulysses*, "I am here to read . . . coloured signs. Limits of the diaphane . . . in bodies."[1] As Stephen walks along Sandymount strand, having begun his exile from Mulligan's tower, he contemplates the central problem for himself as an artist: the relationship between things and signs, between worldly objects and their signatures in language. How, Stephen asks, can things mean? The world, despite its protean appearance, must have a static reality behind it. Just as colored signs ("snotgreen, bluesilver, rust") are the surface qualities of real bodies (presumably sea, sky, and the beach on which Stephen walks), so must artistic expression be the signature for a universal reality. One of the central concerns in Joyce's work is the shaping of things, as empirical objects, into the signatures of artistic expression through language, how one can represent the other.

As a parallel way of approaching this theoretical question in Joyce's work, I also intend to examine Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*.[2] I wish to suggest that Wittgenstein and Joyce explore the same theoretical issues concerning language and the possibility of representation. The *Tractatus* "is not concerned with the meaning of individual signs *per se*, but rather with how relationships are stated to hold between objects in the empirical world through the use of signs."[3] The problem facing Wittgenstein and Joyce—that of representation—is precisely the same. I am not suggesting that Wittgenstein and Joyce are part of any one-to-one relationship of cause-and-effect influence (despite the fact that the *Tractatus* and *Ulysses* were both published in 1921), but rather that an analysis of the *Tractatus* can help historicize the theoretical strategies in Joyce's work.

Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* is broken into seven sections, each composed of a series of carefully constructed axioms which build one upon another. Often the assertions of one section alter or reinterpret those which came before them (Wittgenstein himself compared the process to a series of ladders which are to be thrown away once one has climbed them). The *Tractatus* begins with the assertion that "The world is everything that is the case" (1.0), and that it divides into "facts" which are non-linguistic. Wittgenstein then turns to the "pictures we

make for ourselves" of the facts—propositions or sentences—and explores the semantic relationship between facts and propositions. Wittgenstein holds that meaning is possible only if the proposition is a picture of the facts—a literal model. (This was suggested to him, so the story goes, by dolls and toy cars used to reconstruct an automobile accident in a courtroom.) The elements of a proposition, then, have the same logical form as do facts: the logical form of representation. Just as toy cars and dolls represent the situation of an accident, to understand the logical form of a proposition is to understand the logical form of the world: "there must be something identical in a picture and what it depicts, to enable one to be a picture of the other at all" (2.161). In order to verify propositions, then, one must look to the world (rather than, say, a dictionary) because propositions, if true, are pictures of the facts of the world.

Once Wittgenstein demonstrates the representational relationship between propositions and facts, he raises the ante and begins to seriously question whether language can transmit such inquiries. Even though language can represent the world, it cannot make sense of the world, for "a picture cannot, however, depict its representational form: it displays it" (2.172). In other words, the relationship between language and the world cannot be put into words, just as the relationship between an artist and his painting is not directly displayed in the painting itself. Values ad ethics, therefore, cannot be expressed, for "in it [the world] no value exists—and if it did exist, it would have no value" (6.41). To make sense of the world one would have to climb outside the world, which for Wittgenstein is illogical and therefore impossible. He adds that "Here it can be seen that solipsism, when its implications are followed out strictly, coincides with pure realism," and philosophical investigations, because they try to be ethical and outside the world, are senseless. Wittgenstein then concludes the *Tractatus* by applying this dictum to his won work: "What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence" (7.0). Wittgenstein thereafter abandoned philosophical investigations completely for nine years, and published but one essay until his death thirty years later.

So to return to Joyce, the problems facing Stephen Dedalus in the opening of *Ulysses* are the same problems facing Wittgenstein in the opening arguments of the *Tractatus*: the relationship between language and the world. The young Dedalus in *Portrait* struggles through a series of crises which involve his own private, artistic relationship between himself as artist and his world: first his family, then his church, and finally his country and the question of Irish nationalism. These three spheres revolve around young Dedalus in a series of hierarchical circles of language, for it is language and its power to represent things through signs that continually obsess Stephen and attract him to the rhetoric of

the pulpit and the political platform. Even as a grammar school student at Clongowes, Stephen tries to articulate the relationship to his world through language as he writes in the flyleaf of his geography book:

<div align="center">

Stephen Dedalus
Class of Elements
Clongowes Wood College
Sallins
County Kildare
Ireland
Europe
The World
The Universe (*Portrait*, p. 14)

</div>

Beyond the universe is God, whose relationship to the young schoolboy is also linguistic:

> God was God's name just as his name was Stephen. *Dieu* was the French for God and that was God's name too; and when anyone prayed to God and said *Dieu* then God knew at once that it was a French person praying. But though there were different names for God in all the different languages in the world and God understood what all the people who prayed said in the different languages still God remained always the same and God's real name was God. (*Portrait*, p. 16)

Now aside from the humorous naiveté of Stephen's schoolboy logic, the essence of is question contains a key Joycean idea: the power of words o name and make distinctions. In order to understand his world, to place values on it, Stephen must posit a God outside his world to give the hierarchy meaning. Words can represent logically and truthfully the world because language and reality share the same form: God knows his names among the languages and words are his form. Stephen in a sense doesn't struggle with God—he struggles with signs, names, the instruments of God if you like. But despite the struggle, notice that Stephen never questions the relationship between signs and things, only the relationship between signs themselves. The representational quality of language is still possible; words can still make sense of the world.

Furthermore, as Stephen matures and faces the oratory of the clergy in Book III of *Portrait*, it is again the representational power of language which haunts him. Feeling the pull of the sermons, the shame of his sins and his need for confession, Stephen again confronts the nature of signs and their relationship to things. Stephen's struggle

with the church is a struggle against rhetorical manipulation and the power of language, for the point of the chapter is not so much that Stephen "sins," but rather it focuses on the power of the church in making Stephen submissive to its orthodoxy, an orthodoxy of words. Returning from the chapel after a sermon on Hell, for example, Stephen cries:

> Every word for him! It was true, God was almighty. God would call him now . . . He had died . . . —Hell! Hell! Hell! Hell! Hell! (*Portrait*, p. 125)

It is the cadence of the words that terrifies; Stephen's torment lies in signs, not things.

Stephen's predicament is similar to a series of propositions from Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*:

> Objects make up the substance of the world, That is why they cannot be composite (2.021).
> If the world had no substance, then whether a proposition had sense would depend upon whether another proposition was true (2.0211).
> In that case we could not sketch out any picture of the world (true or false) (2.0211).
> It is obvious that an imagined world, however different it may be from the real one, must have *something*—a form— in common with it (2.022).
> What a picture, of whatever form, must have in common with reality, in order to depict it—correctly or incorrectly—in any way at all, is logical form, i.e. the form of reality (2.18).

Wittgenstein at this point in the *Tractatus* shares the same views as young Dedalus: pictures of the world (in Stephen's case God and Hell) share the same logical form as the world itself. Stephen's torment lies in his choice of pictures which represent the world, with signs not things. And strongly implied in Stephen's awareness of his sin is the *a priori* notion that words can logically and truthfully represent the world.

Conversely, if words can imprison Stephen through their representation of the world, they can also set him free: confess and say it with words. Confession is his release:

> Blinded by his tears and by the light of God's mercifulness he bent his head and heard the grave words of absolution spoken and saw the priest's hand raised above him in forgiveness . . .

> He had confessed and God had pardoned him. His soul
> was made fair and holy once more, holy and happy
> (*Portrait*, p. 143).

So in Book V of *Portrait*, when Stephen spells out his aesthetic theory, it comes as no surprise that the artist, "like the God of creation, remains within or behind or beyond or above his handiwork, indifferent, paring his fingernails" (*Portrait*, p. 215). Like the God on the flyleaf of his geography book, Stephen's artist steps outside the world to make sense of it; and like the concentric circles on that same flyleaf, Stephen constructs a hierarchy of meaning which moves from objects to the stasis of essential beauty. Beauty, Stephen tells Lynch, is an aesthetic universal, independent of specific objects:

> Though the same object may not seem beautiful to all
> people, all people who admire beautiful objects find in
> them certain relations which satisfy and coincide with the
> stages themselves of aesthetic apprehension (*Portrait*,
> p. 209).

So Stephen's aesthetics depend upon the representational quality of language—objects, after all, have to depict beautiful forms before he can extract their essence—and also upon the ability of language to construct hierarchies, to make distinctions and value judgments between signs and propositions (drama is the highest form of art, and so on). And the omniscient position of the writer is a God's-eye-view of creation. To make judgments about propositions and their relationship to things, in Wittgenstein's view, is an impossibility because such statements are outside the world, extra-logical, and therefore senseless. Hierarchies are not possible because:

> All propositions are of equal value (6.4).
> The sense of the world must lie outside the world (6.41).
> And so it is impossible for there to be propositions of
> ethics. Propositions can express nothing that is higher
> (6.42).
> It is clear that ethics cannot be put into words.
> Ethics is transcendental.
> (Ethics and aesthetics are one and the same) (6.421).

Stephen's art is therefore bound to fail because he is asking language to do things of which it is not capable.

Another thing Stephen fails to understand (especially in the Proteus section, quoted above) is that language is not a mere transparent series of labels which represent the world. What language and propositions

have in common is their logical form, according to Wittgenstein, but language is no sheer "diaphane" of the world as Stephen says in Proteus. It is more complex than that:

> Language disguises thought. So much so, that from the outward form of the clothing it is impossible to infer the form of the thought beneath it, because the outward form of the clothing is not designed to reveal the form of the body, but for entirely different purposes (4.002).
>
> At first sight a proposition—one set on the printed page, for example—does not seem to be a picture of the reality with which it is concerned. But no more does musical notation at first sight seem to be a picture of music, nor our phonetic notation (the alphabet) to be a picture of our speech.
>
> And yet these sign-languages prove to be pictures, even in the ordinary sense, of what they represent (4.011).

So as *Ulysses* opens we find Stephen in the same aesthetic quagmire as in *Portrait*: he cannot reconcile the things of his culture to his art, and he fails to recognize that hierarchies of meaning are arbitrary and senseless constructions of artificial order.

In broad terms, the artistic aesthetic which Joyce assigns to Stephen is the artistic aesthetic of the traditional novel, for the traditional novel depends upon the construct of the authorial voice, the voyeuristic persona outside the fictional worlds, making distinctions, placing values upon things and viewpoints, judging his characters. For what is a plot, after all, other than a series of "author-ized" value judgments concerning the significance of fictional events? A narrative line reflects the choices made by e the author, the distinctions and value judgments placed upon things from outside the world of the book. For to posit a particular "point of view," or to develop a defined "character" through the subtle use of carefully chosen detail, is to create a false objectivity, an illusion of truth, an example of Wittgenstein's senselessness.

Hugh Kenner, in his book *Joyce's Voices*, reads *Ulysses* as a conflict between two narrative voices which correspond to the Homeric voices of muse and poet, one inner and one outer:

> These two narrators command different vocabularies and proceed according to different cannons. At the outset their command is evenly matched, and the first three Bloom episodes, culminating in "Hades," exhibit an economical weaving of inner and outer, the brisk notation of Bloom's

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> thought and the wonderfully compact narration glinting one
> against the other.[4]

But after "Hades," Kenner says, something happens. These two
voices—the voice of lyrical subjectivity and the voice of neutral
objectivity—begin to conflict, each prone to its own excesses. The
objective, outer voice which was responsible for the headlines of
"Aeolus" also controls "Sirens," and the subjective, inner voice shows
its excessive stylistic power in "Oxen of the Sun," giving birth to
disembodied speech. These two voices are the catechistic questioner and
answerer in "Ithaca," and "Penelope" illustrates the triumph of the
lyrical, subjective voice—objectivity, the explicator's fiction, is dead.
       Kenner's reading of *Ulysses* is very close to what Wittgenstein
means when he says that:

> The limits of my language mean the limits of my world
> (5.6).
> We cannot thing what we cannot think; so what we
> cannot think we cannot *say* either (5.61).
> This remark provide the key to the problem, how much
> truth there is in solipsism (5.62).

We have already seen that to go beyond the limits of the world is to
attempt the objectivity of God's eye, and this is as impossible for
Stephen as it is for Wittgenstein. But not for Joyce.
       It is with the "objective" style of the "Ithaca" section of *Ulysses*
that Joyce explodes the notion of representation. The long encyclopedic
catalogues of detail which puzzle so many readers show us that
Stephen's aesthetics mean nothing. The protean quality fo the visible
reveals nothing behind it, just as lists of objects reveal nothing about
what they are lists of. Frank Budgen writes that "Ithaca" is "the coldest
episode in an unemotional book. Everything is conveyed in the same
tone and tempo as if of equal importance. It is for the reader to assign
human values."[5] But this is not possible even for Budgen. The only
way he can interpret "Ithaca" is to fall back on the Homeric parallels
and compare Bloom to the heroic Odysseus disposing of his suitors:
"Bloom's victory in "Ithaca" is to all appearances complete" (Budgen,
p. 262). Victory? Hero? Budgen, like so many other critics of Joyce,
cannot resist the temptation to offer interpretations where there are
none.
       The point of "Ithaca" is that Budgen's "human values," like
Stephen's aesthetics, are senseless. Consider, for example, one of the
catalogues in "Ithaca," the contents of Bloom's secret, locked drawer:

> What did the first drawer unlocked contain?
> A Vere Foster's handwriting copybook, property of
> Milly (Millicent) Bloom, certain pages of which bore
> diagram drawings marked *Palpi*, which showed a large
> globular head with five hairs erect, 2 eyes in profile, the
> trunk in full front wit 3 large buttons, 1 triangular foot: 2
> fading photographs of Queen Alexandra of England and of
> Maude Branscombe, actress and professional beauty: a
> Yuletide card, bearing on it a pictorial representation of a
> parasitic plant, the legend *Mizpah*, the date Xmas 1892,
> the names of the senders, from Mr and Mrs M. Comerford,
> the versicle: *May this Yuletide bring to the, Joy and peace
> and welcome glee*: a butt of red partly liquified sealing
> wax, obtained from the stores department of Messrs Hely's
> Ltd., 89, 90, and 91 Dame Street: a box containing the
> remainder of a gross of gilt 'J' pennibs, obtained from the
> same firm; an old sandglass which rolled containing sand
> which rolled . . . (*Ulysses*, pp. 720-721).

Here is the trivia and clutter of Bloom's life, and they add nothing to our understanding of Bloom. Who are the Comerfords? In his *Notes for Joyce*, Don Gifford identifies "Mr. and Mrs. M. Comerford—lived at Neptune View, 11 Leslie Avenue, Dalkey," according to *Thom's Dublin Post Office Directory, 1886*.[6] Who is Maude Branscombe? Again Gifford tells us that she was "an actress with an extraordinary reputation for beauty" who sold 28,000 photographs of herself in 1885 (Gifford, p. 325). Now the careful reader also knows that Bloom, in "Nausicca," 350 pages earlier, lists Maude Branscombe in a series of Irish actresses as he masturbates wile watching Gerty MacDowell, so are we to make a connection? Does Bloom masturbate wit the photograph as well? Or did he just happen to keep one of those 28,000 photographs? Is Bloom "at it again" on the Christmas card too?

Perhaps, perhaps not. And this is precisely my point: these catalogues leave us unable to sort through the details to find the patterns of meaning, for there are none. The hierarchies of meaning are gone. Budgen is half right: everything in "Ithaca" is of equal importance, but there are no "human values" to assign them. And to be sure we don't miss the point, Joyce has Bloom give us the final nonsensical catalogue as "Ithaca" closes: "Sinbad the Sailor and Tinbad the Tailor and Jinbad the Jailer . . . " and so on to "Xinbad the Phthailer" (*Ulysses*, p. 737). The catalogues themselves degenerate, like an engine running on its last drops of gasoline, racing faster and faster until it exhausts itself, finally falling silent. The end of "Ithaca" was the last writing Joyce did before starting on the *Wake*, and in the chronology of the actual production of *Ulysses*, the book ends not with

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Molly's "yes" but rather with the big black Roc's egg at the close of "Ithaca." ("Penelope," you may remember, was finished before "Ithaca" so the book could be reviewed.)

So as a coda to my discussion I come round at last to my subtitle: why, in theoretical terms, I think Joyce wrote *Finnegans Wake*. In 1921, the year of publication of both *Ulysses* and the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein packed his bags and headed for the secluded Austrian countryside to teach fourth grade for six years, and Joyce began work on the *Wake*. The *Wake*, in short, with its babble of undifferentiated voices, is Joyce's alternative to Wittgenstein's silence. A world without distinctions in which all propositions are equal and therefore useless was unbearable for Wittgenstein; Joyce embraced it with comic celebration. Louis O. Mink, a philosopher as well as a *Wake* scholar, writes:

> Because *Finnegans Wake* is not about anything but itself, it is, I think, the most consummately nihilistic work in any literature. By "nihilism," I do not mean merely an extreme degree of skepticism, rebellion, or destructiveness, but rather the complete absence of the capacity to order the world by a scale of relative values, by *any* hierarchy of relative importance . . .
>
> In the world of *Finnegans Wake* . . . everything is of equal value with everything else.[7]

It's true. Take, for example, the "Anna Livia Plurabelle" episode from the *Wake*, which nearly everyone considers to be the most intelligible chapter, largely because Joyce himself made a recording of it. ALP, in her role as the primary female persona of the *Wake*, is, through various allusions, identified with Hero, Petrarch's Laura, Leda, Molly Bloom, all the whores in the world, "poor las animas" (her initials reversed), anima—any Ma. There is no distinction; all these roles are laid side by side, one after the other, with no historical or mythic differentiation. The pleasure of reading the *Wake*, as anyone who has tried it knows, is unraveling the puns and the allusions—but putting the individual pieces into a coherent, "author-ized" whole is impossible.

Consider the hundreds of puns on river names which run through the "Anna Livia Plurabelle" chapter. They are marvelous to spot and work out, but they add nothing "deeper" to the meaning. If you happen to know, for example, that Lough Neagh is the largest lake in the United Kingdom (which I didn't—I read it in a crib on the *Wake*), then the line "how long was he [HCE] kept under loch and neagh" (*Wake*, p. 196.20) is more fun. How long was HCE under, presumably, lock and key (for one is never sure), for his crime of voyeurism or

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exhibitionism, and how long was he under ALP, whose associations seem to be rivers? Neither reading is primary—they both coexist side by side.

Or if you happen to know that the Tombigbee is a river in Alabama (I do—I was born there. Joyce read this one in a crib on Alabama.), then among the list of presents for ALP's children the line "and a nightmarching hare for Techertim Tombigby" (*Wake*, p. 210.15) appears to make a little more sense. ALP, being associated with water, gives birth to other rivers. But I still have no idea what a rabbit walking in darkness has to be with Alabama, even though I spotted the pun.

Either way, whether you spot the puns or not, it makes no difference. The allusions and puns are self-contained, and they fit no larger scheme of reference; they exist independently from their context. In philosophical terms, Wittgenstein agrees: "There is no compulsion making one thing happen because another has happened" (6.37). Things and events can exist independently one from another without a hierarchical system of values to relate them. "Hierarchies are and must be independent of reality" (5.5561), writes Wittgenstein, and the method of *Finnegans Wake* bears this out. The *Wake* is, according to Wittgenstein's program, a book of perfect realism.

NOTES

[1] *Ulysses* (New York, 1961), p. 37. All references to Joyce's works will come from this edition, and from *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (New York, 1964), and *Finnegans Wake* (New York, 1959).

[2] *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuinness (New York, 1963). References will be to this edition and will appear in the text by proposition, rather than page, number.

[3] Cecil H. Brown, *Wittgenstein Linguistics* (The Hague, 1974), p. 15.

[4] Hugh Kenner, *Joyce's Voices* (Berkeley, 1978), p. 73.

[5] Frank Budgen, *James Joyce and the Making of* Ulysses (Bloomington, 1969), p. 257.

[6] Don Gifford, with Robert J. Seidman, *Notes for Joyce* (New York, 1974), p. 487.

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[7]Louis O. Mink, "Reading *Finnegans Wake*," *SHR*, 9 (1975), p. 11.