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THE SEMIOTICS OF “TRANSIT” IN JOYCE’S ULYSSES

An analogous combination of accumulating change and persisting habit is superbly formulated in Alfred North Whitehead’s account of process or becoming: “There is the aspect of permanence in which a given type of attainment is endlessly repeated for its own sake; and there is the aspect of transition to other things...” Alternatively formulated, to interpolate additional phrases from Whitehead, “transference” and “passage” (ergo, metempsychosis) for Stephen and Bloom concern an unfolding process, one which entails both conservation and novelty – both “inheritance of aspects from their own past” and “continuous transition” to the future. And it is such that, though, in the Joycean schema, “vital growth” is indeed continuous “from infancy through maturity to decay” (817), it nevertheless entails convulsive transitional phases (“convulsions of metamorphosis”), involving psychologically turbulent oppositions between that which was and that which is coming to be. Bloomsday – June 16, 1904 – concerns precisely such transitional phases. All is subjected to the aura of endless modification and reification, all entrapped within a world of oft haunting refrain, a universe wherein re-inscription overtakes otherness, wherein renewal subsumes defeat: whence, ultimately, Ulysses is, as a literary construct, a scrupulously coordinated writ on the ludic contortions of difference and sameness.

Like Keats’s Grecian Urn, Ulysses is a work of art that does “tease us out of thought / As doth eternity.” Indeed, the novel boldly foregrounds the “difficulties of interpretation” (790): “Let some meinherr from Almany grope his life for deephid meanings in the depth of the buckbasket” (263). At the level to be investigated in the present study, the challenge of interpretation posed or invited by Ulysses concerns not just the meaning of the text and what Richard Kain terms its “richness of reference”, but also the meaning of life or, to adopt the formulation in the “Ithaca” chapter, “the solution of difficult problems in imaginary or real life” (791). In this context, A. E. Russell’s mot in the “Scylla and Charybdis” chapter gains significance: “The supreme question

about a work of art is out of how deep a life does it spring” (236). Here art is valued in terms of its profundity – a quality construed to vary according to the depth of the life or, more precisely, of the understanding of life proper to its author. In the novel, this view is both challenged and expanded. On the one hand, life can never rival the perfection of art: “University of life. Bad art” (585). But on the other hand, “life is a great teacher” (43), whose lessons can provide the content or inspiration for great art, as in Stephen’s account of Shakespeare: “A man of genius makes no mistakes. His errors are volitional and are the portals of discovery” (243). S. L. Goldberg has commented on this idea in *Ulysses*: “The development of the soul is thus the sequence of the epiphanies it discovers.” Here instead of art for art’s sake, there is life for art’s sake. Conversely, as Stephen indicates, the art thus produced is for humanity’s sake: “the eternal affirmation of the spirit of man in literature” (777).

At bottom, considered as a mimetic project, the task of *Ulysses* is not just to represent “human life” (642, 819), or to provide “an epitome of the course of life” (546), or “to make up a miniature cameo of the world we live in” (750), but more importantly to illumine “the basis of human mentality” (817). Of course, when addressing the issue of “human mentality” in *Ulysses*, critical tradition is accustomed to draw – often with extremely illuminating results – on the theories of established psychological theoreticians, among whom the most celebrated is Freud. But our own approach will follow cues in the text itself. As the quotation containing the phrase, “the basis of human mentality” indicates, the novel posits fear as the factor underpinning human mentality: “catastrophic cataclysms which make terror the basis of human mentality” (817). Yet the “cataclysms” occasioning this terror are not uniformly external, but pertain also to the inner process of “vital growth” through which life passes in its transit from birth to death: “the fact of vital growth, through convulsions of metamorphosis from infancy through maturity to decay” (817). This conception, of course, entrains the doctrine of metempsychosis or “transmigration of souls” (77), reinterpreted in the novel to signify the sequential changes of circumstance, perspective, and condition undergone by the individual in the course of a lifetime – changes so extreme that their only adequate metaphor is the transition of the same soul from incarnation in one body to another. Many critics, however, consider Joycean metempsychosis primarily in terms of an Ovidian metamorphosis of classical figures. For example, to Suzette Henke, “Molly is the seductive Calypso and ‘Big Mamma’ to Ulysses – Bloom.” To Patrick McCarthy, the notion of metempsychosis relates “the world of *Ulysses* to ancient Greece.”

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