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James Joyce, J. M. Coetzee, and Truth in Fictional Autobiography: Generic Hybridity and the Claims of Fiction

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Jeri Johnson in the recent (2000; 2008) Oxford World Classics edition of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* reviews, among other things, some of the issues relating to Joyce's work and his own life, concluding that the novel is perhaps a "genuine forgery" of an autobiography (xxxix). Much earlier Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg asserted that *A Portrait* was "autobiographical in plot and content though not in point of view" (215). The question in James Joyce criticism, especially since Richard Ellmann's biography of 1959, has typically been one about the distance between Joyce and his presumed *alter ego* Stephen Dedalus. Ellmann suggested early on that Joyce "reconstitute[d]" his past in order to become his own creator.[1] In *Portrait* and *Ulysses*,

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[1] Well, at least in the 1982 revised edition 295, 299.

> Joyce seems to reconstitute his family relationships, to disengage himself from the contradictions of his view of himself as a child and so to exploit them, to overcome his mother's conventionality and his father's rancor, to mother and father himself, to become, by the superhuman effort of the creative process, no one but James Joyce. (299)[2]

This anticipates much critical thought about autobiography in general since Ellmann's legendary biography, as does the insight, particularly relevant in Joyce's case, that the artist's life is often itself a work of art, involving a great deal of self-fashioning: "The fact that he was turning his life to fiction at the same time that he was living it encouraged him to feel a certain detachment from what happened to him, for he knew he could reconsider and re-order it for the purposes of his book" (Ellmann 149). Clearly his writing and life were all along mutually creative and interactive.[3]

A major contribution to this debate was Wayne Booth's famous discussion of authorial distance in *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (323-336). Joyce's relationship to his young protagonist is ambiguous and "uncertain." For Booth, this was a problem for fictional construction in general at the turn of the century. "Most 'autobiographical' novelists probably encounter difficulty in trying to decide just how heroic their heroes are to be. But Joyce's explorations came just at a time when the traditional devices for control of distance were being repudiated, when doctrines of objectivity were in the air, and when people were taking seriously the idea that to evoke 'reality' was a sufficient aim in art" (330-331). And of course Joyce's efforts also came at a time when new forms of representing consciousness where developing which made this task the more complicated. Harry Levin had already noted in 1941 [1960] the trend of realistic fiction tending towards autobiography (41); Levin even claimed that the *Portrait* was "more candid" than traditional autobiographies in its "emphasis on the emotional and intellectual adventures of its protagonist" (45).

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[2] "To write [*Portrait*] Joyce plunged back into his own past, mainly to justify it, but also to expose it" (295).

[3] "The relationship between narrative and human identity, and the question of how we construct our lives and how we create ourselves in the process" (Brockmeier and Carbaugh 15) are central not only to literary studies, but to a number of disciplines concerned with various aspects of the self, identity, and subjectivity.

Dorrit Cohn has taken Booth to task for his discussion of narrational uncertainty, ascribing the confusion to Booth himself rather than Joyce. As she points out in her seminal discussion of "psycho-narration" (or "narrator's discourse about a character's consciousness" [14]), there is a "striking absence [in *Portrait*] of the more obvious signs of disparity between the narrating and the figural consciousness...[:] the narrator avoids prominent analytic or conceptual terms, as well as reportorial indirection." This leads to an intentional ambiguity and complexity: "Because of the absence of authorial rhetoric, the narrator's knowledge of Stephen's psyche seems to coincide with Stephen's self-knowledge" (31). As Cohn notes, there are examples in the novel of "stylistic contagion" where psycho-narration merges with "narrated monologue" (Cohn's term for "free indirect speech" or "indirect interior monologue"), and this leads to nuance and ambiguity—and possible confusion—but this is rather Joyce's masterful development of a technique shared with Thomas Mann, Kafka, and other Modernists than a fault.[4]

Hugh Kenner seemed a bit overly confident in claiming (in *Dublin's Joyce* of 1956), against the suspicion of Booth, that "Joyce was never the Stephen Dedalus" of *Portrait* (44). The critical consensus is rather that Joyce was indeed considerably like the Dedalus of that book, only not at the time of the writing of it in its final version (in contrast to his closer proximity to the protagonist in *Stephen Hero*); and that, as Robert Scholes wrote in 1964, "everything about Joyce is relevant in some way to our interpretation of *A Portrait*" (Anderson 469).

Whatever you may believe about Joyce's distance, or lack of distance, from the ("covert"[5]) narrator and from the protagonist of the *Portrait*, I think we can all agree that the novel is a key text not only in Joyce's oeuvre, but indeed in 20th century English-language fiction. Levin claimed that Joyce's "contribution to English prose [was] to provide a more fluid medium for refracting sensations and impressions through the author's mind—to facilitate the transition from photographic realism to esthetic impressionism" (50). Anthony Burgess later called the opening of the novel "the first big breakthrough of twentieth-century prose writing" making "prose and subject matter ... one and inseparable" (Bloom 46). As such it establishes a precedent and a measure for subsequent works of quasi-autobiographical fiction in the Anglophone tradition, particularly in the sub-genre of the *Künstlerroman*.

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[4] "By leaving the relationship between words and thoughts latent, the narrated monologue casts a peculiarly penumbral light on the figural consciousness, suspending it on the threshold of verbalization in a manner that cannot be achieved by direct quotation" (103).

[5] See Chatman 197-211.

There has been a great deal of scholarly work in the past few decades—since the early important work on Joyce in the 50s and 60s—on autobiography and the questions the genre raises about truth, fiction, and narrative. To go too much into this material would be irrelevant to Joyce's novel, which is, after all, NOT an autobiography, but some insights from this scholarly work are no doubt helpful in thinking about Joyce's inaugural, hybrid construction of a quasi-autobiographical, modernist, artistic *Bildungsroman*. For one thing, as Rousseau scholar Jean Starobinski points out, an autobiography is NOT a portrait (Olney 73) because it necessarily involves time, movement, and change: that is, narrative. Although Joyce's book is presented as a fiction, and importantly NOT in a first-person narration, Starobinski's insight applies:

> It is because the past 'I' is different from the present 'I' that the latter may really be confirmed in all his prerogatives. The narrator describes not only what happened to him at a different time in his life but above all how he became—out of what he was—what he presently is. Here the discursive character of the narrative is justified anew, not by the addressee but by the content: it becomes necessary to retrace the genesis of the present situation, the antecedents of the moment from which the present 'discourse' stems. The chain of experiences traces a path (though a sinuous one) that ends in the present state of recapitulatory knowledge. (78-9)

The other obvious restriction in applying this observation to Joyce is that his book ends at a point no longer contemporaneous with the author's present (in 1914 or even earlier towards 1904), but stops at a developmental phase from which the author (as we know from Stanislaus, from letters, etc.) and the narrator are separated by a more or less ironic distance.

According to Jerome Bruner, an autobiography typically involves "the rhetoric of self-justification" as well as narrativity, and indeed, like fiction in general, enacts a sort of "'world-making' [Goodman] in which the constructed Self and its agentive powers become, as it were, the gravitational center of the world" (Brockmeier 35). The focalization of the narration of *Portrait* through Stephen and his particular perceptive sensitivity, despite the third-person narrative distance, enforces this state of affairs as much as Stephen's role as the protagonist at the center of all of the plot developments. It is questionable how much parts 4 and 5 of *Portrait* involve self-justification rather than self-mockery, especially in light of Stephen's character and consciousness later contrasted with those of Bloom in *Ulysses*. Actually I do not think the two attitudes are mutually exclusive. Joyce clearly does not express *contempt* for Stephen, and genetic studies of the drafts and of *Stephen Hero* show if anything a progressive recusal of judgment by the narrator (and presumably the author) in the later text.[6] Certainly the parallels between Joyce and Stephen regarding specific cultural refusals, the commitment to art, and exile suggest that no matter how harshly Joyce might have judged Stephen or distorted him away from autobiographical truth, a certain self-justification or "ratification" is involved here. Barrett Mandel speaks of "two distinct aspects of autobiography": ratification of one's life and the "self-conscious pointing to its own assumptions and ... horizon of implications" (Olney 63).

In a short piece on Yeats and autobiography, David Herman helps bring this insight closer to Joyce. He first warns of an all-too-easy collapsing of autobiography and fiction whereby, in J. M. Coetzee's words, "All autobiography is storytelling, all writing is autobiography" (*DP* 391). True, perhaps, but at the risk of being merely trivially so. Herman rather suggests that we read "autobiographies

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6) See Scholes and Kain 1965.

as allegories of selves, as representations of how a self should function in a given set of circumstances" (Herman n.pag.). For Joyce, these circumstances comprised, of course, the specific turn-of-the-century "semi-colonial" Irish issues of "nation, language, [and] religion" that Stephen, like Joyce, had to negotiate and finally chose to address by "silence, exile, and cunning" (208) in the service of free, artistic self-expression. The "allegorical" nature of this (self-)representation is thus normative ("ratifying"), whatever distance Joyce might have maintained from his youthful protagonist. Herman writes, "every [autobiographical] identity emerges in the interstices of the [cultural] presuppositions it rejects. A self just is a patchwork of affirmations and negations, a set of arguments about what one would and should not be, opposed to other more or less conflicting arguments about one's identity". We can go further, with Paul Ricoeur, in connecting the self to forms of narrativity, likewise relevant to prescriptive or normative consequences. Ricoeur discusses with great nuance [in *Time and Narrative* and *Oneself as Another*] the ways in which the "narrative unity of a life" (MacIntyre) that we see in fictional and other texts provides a model for the "discordant concordance" (*OaA* 141) that characterizes identity in the dialectic of selfhood and sameness. This is not the place to go into an in-depth exploration of Ricoeur's thought, but the idea that we have a sense of ourselves through narratives we construct, at least partly on the model of literary narratives of one sort or another, and that literary texts, like the metaphors and other tropes that often occur in them which in their *prima facie* opacity can lead to discovery and transformation, have an "ontological vehemence" (*RM* 294) in our actual lives, is true for writers and artists as much as for readers. Autobiographical narrative can be truly self-creating as much as affirming, recounting, apologizing, celebrating.

Indeed the process of autobiographical writing can be *truth-creating* for the subject—or such is a possible lesson of the quasi-autobiographical writings to date of J. M. Coetzee.7) As is well known, Coetzee was for the first 20 years of his

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7) In a longer version I would want to study a major intermediary between Joyce and Coetzee in this and other respects, Samuel Beckett (see Olney and the late works). Model

fictional writing career (1974-1994) very private and unforthcoming about his personal life, beliefs, and experiences.[8] His fiction to that point[9] was certainly not in any sense autobiographical either, beyond its typical, though minimal, setting in South Africa and engagement with issues relevant to that setting. Thus his publication in 1997 of *Boyhood: Scenes from Provincial Life* (further defined "paratextually" on the cover of the original American edition as "a memoir") was something of a surprise. The book treats primarily of the boyhood of John (88) Coetzee (e.g. 87) between ages 10 and 13 with some reference to earlier periods. A companion volume called *Youth: Scenes from Provincial Life II*, published in 2002, documents, in its curious way, the continuation of this young man's life between the ages of 19 and 24. Like *A Portrait* the books are narrated in the third person—thus formally distanced from memoir and suggesting the fictionalization of autobiography, as in Joyce, or indeed a *hybrid* (cf. Head 8) of the two—but unlike *Portrait* the narration is in the present rather than past tense. Moreover, the narrator is for the most part suppressed, or at least harnessed, so that no obvious ironic distance between narrator and protagonist can be easily identified.

There are, however, telling gaps between the present tense recounted experiences of the protagonist and the narrator's tone or specific assessment of these experiences. A typical example from *Boyhood* (4): "The memory of his mother on her bicycle does not leave him. She pedals away up Poplar Avenue, escaping from him, escaping towards her own desire. He does not want her to go. He does not want her to have a desire of her own...." The bicycle scene is depicted from the perspective of a boy. Some lines of narration are clearly what is called "internal analysis" and can easily be converted into plausible first-person thoughts of the boy: "I don't want her to go." Other passages are more sophisticated

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of artist, exile...

[8] The exception to this is the 1992 collection of non-fiction writing and interviews with David Attwell, *Doubling the Point.*

[9] *Dusklands* (1974); *In the Heart of the Country* (1977); *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980); *Life & Times of Michael K* (1983); *Foe* (1987); *Age of Iron* (1990); *The Master of Petersburg* (1994).

descriptions of the same thoughts, not plausibly accessible in those terms to the boy: e.g. "escaping." But the lines about "not having a desire of her own" are clearly not those of the boy at the time in his terms or a more adult translation of them, but must come from the much more developed understanding of a retrospective narrator. Another example involves animals (sheep, 102) and reflects a well-known attitude of J. M. Coetzee that is simply not represented as being shared by the young protagonist in any of the rest of the "memoir" material and is thus external to the focalization on the boy/youth.

In fact, the gap between the narrator and the protagonist becomes even more pronounced in the second volume, *Youth*, again not so much in tone as in the underlying principle of inclusion/exclusion. A much more negative picture of the youth is presented than of the boy, leading one to suspect a somewhat merciless contempt of retrospect by Coetzee for himself as a young man. In an interview with David Attwell, Coetzee, criticizing Nabokov, states that "we can't wallow in comfortable wonderment at our past." Rather we "must look at the past with a cruel enough eye to see what it was that made that joy and innocence [of childhood or youth] possible. Forgiveness but also unflinchingness..." (*DP* 29). Coetzee seems to have been more forgiving and understanding of himself as a boy, more unflinching in his treatment of his far from joyful or innocent youth. Moreover, as Derek Attridge points out, certain facts of Coetzee's life during the period ostensibly covered in the volume are simply left out or distorted in such a way as to make the protagonist even more odious (for example, successfully finishing his MA thesis on Ford Maddox Ford or, even more importantly, getting married!—160). A falsity of fact in the service of ... what, a greater personal truth? In an interview Coetzee explains, "You tell the story of your life by selecting from a reservoir of memories, and in the process of selecting you leave things out.... To call autobiography... true as long as it does not lie invokes a fairly vacuous idea of truth" (*DP* 17). Many things of course must be left out, so there is a matter of honesty, intelligence, and economy of choice, but Coetzee also suggests here a different dimension of truth. "We should distinguish two kinds of truth, the first truth to fact, the second something beyond that...” (*DP* 17). What is this truth, particularly in autobiography, which is beyond fact?10)

Critics have focused in this respect on a critical article by Coetzee from 1985 entitled “Confession and Double Thoughts: Tolstoy, Rousseau, Dostoevsky” in which he explores the problem of “how to know the truth about the self without being self-deceived” (*DP* 252). Coetzee draws on a distinction by Francis R. Hart between confession, apology, and memoir11) whereby confession is characterized by “an underlying motive to tell an essential truth about the self” (*DP* 252). His main point is that in a secular context, confession cannot escape an infinite regress of self-awareness and self-doubt (274), so that without the structural possibility of absolution, there can be no end to confession, no certainty, and no certain truth. Now, theoretical questions of confession are not entirely relevant either to Joyce’s *Portrait* or Coetzee’s *Scenes from Provincial Life* except insofar as all autobiography has a confessional element, and yet these quasi-autobiographical fictions also seek both to convince and to achieve truth. In his chapter on these volumes by Coetzee, Derek Attridge suggests interestingly that the choice of 3rd person distanced narration combined with present continuous tense is Coetzee’s solution to the problem of confession, a way of exposing himself to the reader/public without apology, judgment, of self-reflection (152).

In other words, Coetzee seems to be deeply committed to the goal of truth (in these works as in all of his writing),12) and he is very wary of narrative mediation

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10) At one point in *Boyhood* the protagonist compares his first memory with that of his friends Greenberg and Goldstein and in a passage of apparently free indirect thought posits, “It is a magnificent first memory, trumping anything that poor Goldstein can dredge up. But is it true?” (30).

11) “Hart describes confession as ‘personal history that seeks to communicate or express the essential nature, the truth, of the self,’ apology as “personal history that seeks to demonstrate or realize the integrity of the self,’ and memoir as ‘personal history that seeks to articulate or repress the historicity of the self.’ Thus ‘confession is ontological; apology ethical; memoir historical or cultural’” (Coetzee, *DP*, 418-19, n. 2). Qtd. in Hart 227.

12) My current book project addresses the issue of fictional truth in Coetzee’s novels and

in the articulation of (fictional) truth, so he tries his best to present us himself without motives, explanation, or retrospective distance.

In *Youth* the question of truth is explicitly thematized. Early on the narrator has gotten involved with a possibly unstable older woman and has written his critical thoughts about her and their relationship in his diary, which he has failed to hide successfully from her eyes, leading to a conflict and break up. This diary, as a form of candid life-writing, raises a question of truth obviously relevant to autobiography. "The question of what should be permitted to go into his diary and what kept forever shrouded goes to the heart of all his writing" (9—certainly this seems to encompass more than the diary of 19 year old John...). Although John is incapable of explaining the complexity of the issue to Jacqueline, the narration reveals a subtlety in his understanding. "How could she believe that what she read in his diary was not the truth, the ignoble truth...but on the contrary a fiction, one of many

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seeks to relate this, but also keep it distanced from his ethical and political commitments as revealed in his non-fictional writing. The notion of *fictional truth* is complex, but is at the least based on the assumption that statements in fictional texts are non-sense, neither true nor false, when judged according to criteria of propositional truth in the real world (see e.g. Ronen 1994 and Dolezel 1998). There are certainly truths within fictional worlds, given textual details (these are the sort of "facts" poor or hasty readers can demonstrably get wrong). But the real question is the social, political, or moral truths fictional texts can stage or articulate which have relevance and resonance in the real world. Obviously much depends on how one chooses to define truth, fact, and "real world" before truth mediated through the aesthetic structuring of a fictional world can be assessed. If truth, for example, is defined as a conventional or coherent discourse or description of a world, then the possible truth of fictional texts will involve points of salience (Pavel 1986) between fictional worlds and the "real" world. Thus we recognize a text as realistic if scene details or character responses correspond to our conventionally coded (Barthes 1974) descriptive systems (Riffaterre 1990), our cultural encyclopedia (Eco 1984), or what have you, albeit in perhaps a stylized way (Barthes, Riffaterre). Fictional words, whatever their ability to change or affect the "real" world, are understood as (discursive) secondary ontologies derived from, and capable of being mapped onto, the primary ontology of (discursively mediated) lived experience. This experience is understood not to be purely private but necessarily communal and conventional to a strong degree (a private world is like a private language...).

possible fictions, true only in the sense that a work of art is true—true to itself, true to its own immanent aims—when the ignoble reading conformed so closely to her own suspicion that her companion did not love her...” (10). Here we have the positing of at least two truths—one involving historical fact, the other involving artistic immanence, but what is the relationship between these two truths in a putatively non-fictional context like autobiography?

Later in the narrative, after his awful treatment of Marianne, the young, unsophisticated friend of his visiting South African cousin Ilse, (involving “de-flowering,” his inability to help her in her bleeding, a cold parting, a lack of follow-up—in short, his “coldness, callousness, caddishness” 131), we read, “There remains the question of what to make of the episode, how to fit it in the story of his life that he tells himself” (130). This brings me back to the allegorical nature of autobiography, to its narrative and normative function: connecting and making sense of the myriad details of a life in order to provide a model from which we can learn something of value about a particular social context and the responses it gave rise to in the person of the writer. On autobiography, truth, and self-interest, Coetzee asserts in an interview that “there is no ultimate truth about oneself, there is no point in trying to reach it, what we call the truth is only a shifting self-appraisal whose function is to make one feel good, or as good as possible under the circumstances, given that the genre doesn’t allow one to create free-floating fictions...” (*DP* 392). Clearly Coetzee didn’t write *Youth*, nor Joyce *Portrait*, in order to make himself feel good, unless we mean the all-too-easy feeling of having moved beyond earlier limitations. But I think he did, by treating his former self almost *as if* a fictional character in one of his fictional worlds, learn about those circumstances, what Herman calls the “interstices of the presuppositions” that he had to contend with and had to reject in the way he did, and thereby did, in writing this narrative, discover a personal truth. As Attridge explains, for Coetzee “truth is something arrived at in the process of articulation” (145) but this articulation isn’t simply linear. It is a matter of developing a world with its immanent truth. Truth mediated by a fictional imagination which has a truth beyond fact as its primary goal: to create a world with "the aura of truth" (*Youth* 138).

There is no time for me to go into parallel details between *Portrait* and *Boyhood*/*Youth*. Rather, by way of Coetzee, I want to make a rather simple point. The lesson we seem to learn from autobiography theory is that all meaningful self-description involves narration and all narrations involve fictionality, artifice, gaps, and so forth, so all "true" stories, including those of the self, are fictions. I rather want to gesture towards quite a different conclusion. Fictions involve their own truths, and the truths of fictions and art (for those who take them seriously) can have real and meaningful significance in our lives. Joyce and Coetzee in their separate but related ways seem to realize an element of fictionality in autobiography but see this as a way of discovering and expressing even greater truths about the self than the scrupulous documentation of fact could ever achieve. In this sense, Jeri Johnson's notion of Joyce's *Portrait* involving "genuine forgery" seems quite apt: a fictionalization of identity within self-narration—that is, a forgery—can lead to truth (genuineness, authenticity) for the writer, and for the reader, despite the superificial deviation from mere fact.

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Abstract

James Joyce, J. M. Coetzee, and Truth in Fictional Autobiography: Generic Hybridity and the Claims of Fiction

Duncan McColl Chesney

Reviewing some of James Joyce's narrative strategies in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and related techniques employed by J. M. Coetzee in the two volumes of his *Scenes from Provincial Life* (*Boyhood* and *Youth*), this paper explores theoretical complexities involved in the genre of fictional autobiography. Resisting the trend to collapse autobiography and other putatively factual narrative prose genres into fiction in general, the paper presents a case, deriving from Joyce and Coetzee, for re-assessing rather the truth claims and truth functions of fictional discourse. Autobiography as a narrative form can be truth-disclosive for the writing self, as for the reading self, and it is perhaps more productive to focus not on the role of artificiality in the process but on that of truth.

■ Key words : James Joyce, J. M. Coetzee, autobiography, fictional truth

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