Quest Journals
Journal of Research in Humanities and Social Science
Volume 11 ~ Issue 7 (2023) pp: 66-69
ISSN(Online):2321-9467
www.questjournals.org

Research Paper

Words as Luxury: Stephen's Economy of Extravagance

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ABSTRACT: *Utilizing Mark Osteen's essay, The Treasure-House of Language: Managing Symbolic Economies in Joyce's Portrait, as a jumping-off point, this essay analyzes main character Stephen Dedalus in James Joyce's A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man. Specifically, this essay illuminates how Stephen views words as luxurious items in his self-established "linguistic economy," and how the novel tracks the young man's evolving perceptions of these supposed treasures belonging solely to himself.*
KEYWORDS: *Luxury, Linguistic Economy, Metaphor, Exchange*

R*eceived 01 July, 2023;* ***R****evised 08 July, 2023;* ***A****ccepted 11 July, 2023 © The author(s) 2023.*
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I. INTRODUCTION

In James Joyce's Portrait, Stephen Dedalus experiences the repercussions of his family's painful loss of wealth. By fixating on words as a coping mechanism for such a change in monetary status, he creates a "linguistic economy"—a symbolic system coined by author Mark Osteen—that functions analogously to its financial counterpart (Osteen 154). Yet Stephen's opinions toward the verbal money within his economy become flawed: in the role of an "linguistic banker," Stephen exhibits "linguistic fetishism," or the desire to stop words circulating from the "marketplace" (the daily life) by depositing them into a permanent "verbal countinghouse" (Osteen 160). Osteen points out that such an unwillingness to embrace the "exchange-value" of words peculiarly contradicts Stephen's former notion of the importance of metaphors (the deriving of "illumination" from "lamp"), a literary device with the connotation of exchanging an imagery for an idea (Osteen 160). However, his voluntary exile marks the start of a self-correcting journey to engage in linguistic trade. Looking back at his teenage years, Stephen first expresses his dissatisfaction towards the "false smiles" of those giving him "compliments and encouraging words" (Joyce 82). Then, he feels repulsed by certain words' "colors" because he draws "less pleasure from them" (Joyce 146). Finally, he analyzes Cranly's usage of the phrase "lap of luxury" as a "technical expression" delivered "without conviction" (Joyce 213). At first glance, Stephen appears to correct his perception of words upon realizing the importance of exchanging verbal money as a way to proliferate their value. In reality, Stephen has already recognized the impossibility of sole, linguistic ownership: his more significant change occurs as he relinquishes the belief that the words currently in his possession are luxurious items, materialistically superior than those around him. In understanding the nature of the artist's reconciliation with the building blocks of his artistry, Stephen's written portrait becomes a primary document of his journey towards accepting rather than escaping poverty through false extravagance.

II. ANALYSIS

In his attempt to quell the embarrassing actions of his father, Stephen cringes at the cheapness of the words coming out of the friend group's mouths while desperately trying to prove his possession of luxurious words. At Newcombe's coffeehouse, Stephen recounts,

> One humiliation had succeeded another—the false smiles of the market sellers, the curvetings and oglings of the barmaids with whom his father flirted, the compliments and encouraging words of his father's friends. They had told him that he had a great look of his grandfather and Mr. Dedalus had agreed that he was an ugly likeness. They had unearthed traces of a Cork accent in his speech and made him admit that the Lee was a much finer river than the Liffey. One of them, in order to put his Latin

> to the proof, had made him translate short passages from Dilectus and asked him whether it was correct to say: *Tempora mutantur nos et mutamur in illis* or *Tempora mutantur et nos mutamur in illis.* Another, a brisk old man, whom Mr Dedalus called Johnny Cashman, had covered him with confusion by asking him to say which were prettier, the Dublin girls or the Cork girls. (Joyce 82)

At the outset, Stephen transforms into a scrupulous buyer—a persona unseen in Osteen's portrayal of the author as a constant provider of monetary resources—dissatisfied with the "false smiles" of "market sellers." The redundancy in Stephen's description (for "sellers" naturally implies "market") places himself undoubtedly in the marketplace, revealing an openness toward exchange. Yet his indignation towards feigned characteristics surfaces again, when the men at Stephen's table give him "compliments"—the root of "complimentary," or free—because, viewing words as a commodity in the market, selling costless products contradicts the purpose of trade. The vendors he criticizes to be fake in attitude now prove to be even worse: to hold false knowledge of how to effectively perform their job. Additionally, Stephen seems to take more offense with the "compliments" and glosses over the "encouraging words;" while the latter aims to simply stimulate (a movement akin to exchange, which he accepts) an increase in self-confidence, the former becomes the source of his shame. As he is complimented to possess the "great look of his grandfather," Simon worsens this painful reception of gratuitous words by accusing Stephen of being an "ugly likeness," essentially debasing him to a poorly-made duplicate, or fake, of the "greatness" which constitutes his grandfather. Now metaphorically an inferior version of a luxurious item (for something "great" stands out in value), Stephen seeks to defend his worth by utilizing his luxury words, as revealed by the friends' reaction to his "speech." Yet Stephen's plan seems to backfire as he interestingly becomes an object under examination, and "traces" of his hometown, "Cork," accent is "unearthed" in a process akin to testing the authenticity of luxury. His "proof" thus lies again in his ability to use language to distinguish whether "*nos et*" or "*et nos*" is the correct Latin arrangement for the test phrase. Without explicitly recounting the results of this authentication, Stephen implies that his valuable words have passed evaluation, for "Cashman" poses him a question of a non-scrutinizing nature, symbolizing the approval of literal printed money, or "cash," towards the genuineness of Stephen's luxury. As conversations return to "girls," Stephen becomes certified in his possession of a luxurious linguistic bank and distances himself through "confusion" from all other inferior forms of pleasure, like uncivilized ("ogling") flirtation and discussions on "which were prettier."

Yet after authentication, Stephen's superiority complex falters upon learning about the "far richer tribute of devotion" his peers pay in priesthood (Joyce 145). While Osteen notes that this event motivates Stephen "to mediate...exchanges" (which he already does), the artist, in reality, begins to doubt the legitimacy of his possession of words as a luxury (Osteen 159). He debates,

> Words. Was it their colours? He allowed them to glow and fade, hue after hue: sunrise gold, the russet and green of apple orchards, azure of waves, the greyfringed fleece of clouds. No, it was not their colours... Did he then love the rhythmic rise and fall of words better than their associations of legend and colour? Or was it that, being as weak of sight as he was shy of mind, he drew less pleasure from the reflection of the glowing sensible world through the prism of a language manycoloured and richly storied than from the contemplation of an inner world of individual emotions mirrored perfectly in a lucid supple periodic prose? (Joyce 146)

Here, Stephen confronts the peculiar pull that "words" have on him, first assessing whether the explanation lies in their "colors." Describing their "glow and fade, hue after hue," Stephen endows words with a rhythmic shine, for they give out a bright "glow" that fades away, one cycle "after" the other. The pulsating illumination of these words tempt the beholder like a luxurious item, momentarily revealing aspects of desire, beckoning the tempted to succumb to their allure. It is important to note that Stephen measures his "love" for words by the amount of "pleasure" he draws from their qualities, a feeling only previously exhibited by the adults towards the pretty girls. Without needing to prove the worth of his words, Stephen thus makes room to finally *feel* such hypothetical patterns: starting from "gold," a precious metal used by Osteen to represent a fixed quantity, or the "gold standard," the color of words decrease in vigor to a muddy "russet," but returns to a relatively brighter "azure." However, the colors, not adhering to established patterns, then seem to fade permanently, as the "greyfringed fleece" (with the metaphor "fleece," used to describe "clouds," informally connoting financial trickery) taints Stephen's perception of these words and evokes his previous hatred towards falsification within the marketplace. In effect, he snaps out of his episodic daydream ("No, it was not their colors"), for even though he accepts the kinetic "rise and fall" of words, he rejects their "association of legend." Just as a "legendary" story can never be verified to be true, luxurious words, whose colors could metaphorically,

or by "association," become "fleece," can never undergo authentication. He thus fears that one day his luxury, in evoking temptation, will be exchanged for "fleece," while he, characteristically "weak in sight," remains unable to spot a fake. In effect, he derives "less pleasure" from the idea of a "glowing sensible world," wherein a permanent "glow"—unlike luxury's intermittent shine—pervades every object. He rejects a "language manycolored and richly storied" because the excessive "stories" might deviate from "truth" the same way that the chaotic, "manycolored" blend might result in another "grayfringed fleece." Furthermore, because various colors of light bend differently depending on their speed when they "reflect" through a "prism," Stephen hangs onto his "inner world," where feelings of pleasure are "mirrored perfectly," with every mirror image proving to be the exact, authentic copy of the original. In a way, Stephen builds his own process of authentication—through reflection—to assure himself of true luxury possession, and continues trying to verify his luxurious ownership by recreating the pulsating illumination through the "lucid" (bright) and "periodic prose" within him. Even so, the described "supple[ness]," or flexibility, of said prose leaves his luxuries prone to manipulation and counterfeiting.

As Stephen ruminates on his uncertain possession of luxury, his final conversation with Cranly solidifies his decision to let go of his desire to prove ownership:

> But was your father what is called well-to-do? I mean when you were growing up?
> —Yes, Stephen said.
> —What was he? Cranly said after a pause.
> Stephen began to enumerate glibly his father's attributes.
> —A medical student, an oarsman, a tenor, an amateur actor, a shouting politician, a small landlord, a small investor, a drinker, a good fellow, a storyteller, somebody's secretary, something in a distillery, a taxgatherer, a bankrupt and at present a praiser of his own past...
> —Are you in good circumstances at present?
> —Do I look it? Stephen asked bluntly.
> —So then, Cranly went on musingly, you were born in the lap of luxury.
> He used the phrase broadly and loudly as he often used technical expressions as if he wished his hearer to understand that they were used by him without conviction.
> —Your mother must have gone through a good deal of suffering, he said then. Would you not try to save her from suffering more even if... or would you?
> —If I could, Stephen said, that would cost me very little.
> —Then do so, Cranly said. Do as she wishes you to do. What is it for you? You disbelieve in it. It is a form: nothing else. (Joyce 213)

Cranly labels Stephen's inherited wealth as "well-to-do," which literally denotes being rich enough to "do" what one desires. Emphasizing the motion of "doing" rather than "buying," Cranly deviates from the materialistic side of wealth under which Stephen's luxuries fall. Upon a laconic "yes," Cranly "pause[s]," evidently in thought, before asking "What was he?" rather than "Who was he?," hoping to receive more words from Stephen, as the friend knows how the artist will only use his luxurious word in response to something equally worthy, which in this case becomes the "what-ness" of his father's former affluence. This strategy is deemed effective: Stephen "enumerates" his father's titles in a "glib" manner, exhibiting a blatant insincerity antithetical to his previously righteous and anti-counterfeit self. Interestingly, among the diverse roles of his father exists the "storyteller," which not only evokes the memory of the "moocow" tale that begins Stephen's portrait, but is also reminiscent of the richly "storied" language with unchecked authenticity (Joyce 5). At this crucial turning point, Stephen alludes to the possibility of his worst nightmare—his patrimony of *fake* luxurious words—and thereby acts on his disdain by finishing his list with "somebody's secretary" and "something in a distillery," unspecific identities akin to unbranded, non-luxurious products. This reading explains Stephen's "glib" words, for he begins to hint at his possession of falsehood through his no longer refined or authentic speech. Consequently, Stephen loses his superiority complex as an imposter and redirects the question back to Cranly ("Do I look it?) in response to questions about his financial situation. Surprisingly, Cranly confronts for the first time the notion of extravagance by describing Stephen's birth "in the lap of luxury." Yet Cranly's analysis is viewed as a "technical expression," not adopting the exchange-value of the phrase, as Osteen would state. In other words, without trying to be metaphorical, Cranly is simply insinuating that Stephen was born into a good financial situation rather than hypothetically *inheriting* words as a luxury product *through* the "lap" of his father. However, Stephen's need to clarify Cranly's use of the phrase goes to show his sensitivity to the word "luxury," almost refusing to believe that Cranly has uncovered his former obsession with words as luxurious goods—perhaps his clarification becomes the last of his dignity. In the end, Stephen refers back to his annoyance at the free "compliments" by revealing the true, minute value of his words: if he could "save her [his

mother] from suffering," he says, "that would cost me very little." In truth, the "cost" is even less than "little;" without luxurious words, Stephen can only make his mother suffer less by "do[ing]," while his worthless words reduce his pacification into a "form," a general and unexceptional arrangement of language—"nothing else."

III. CONCLUSION

While Stephen's most significant shift in perspective appears to be his recognition of the importance of letting words increase in value as they circulate in a linguistic economy, the more meaningful development lies in his discovery that the words currently in his possession are not characterized by luxury, nor the worthier alternative to others in circulation. From feeling enraged by being described as an "ugly likeness," Stephen experiences a moment of doubt from the possible "grayfringed fleece" color of words, eventually giving in to his patrimony of being a "storyteller," or a feigned possessor of luxury. This distinct relationship of Stephen with the words in his writing enables his portrait to become a raw documentation of his gradual acceptance of poverty, without relying on the extreme, extravagant words as escape.

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