



Deconstructing consent: education, ideology and conflict in Jacob's Room and Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man

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► To cite this version:

Olivier Hercend. Deconstructing consent: education, ideology and conflict in Jacob's Room and Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man. Arts of War and Peace, 2023. hal-04362827

HAL Id: hal-04362827

<https://hal.parisnanterre.fr/hal-04362827>

Submitted on 27 Mar 2024

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Deconstructing consent : education, ideology and conflict in *Jacob's Room* and *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*.

The First World war was a turning point in modernist thought. While many authors were already concerned with the violence that lurked in the heart of modern societies before 1914, this violence seemed confined to the dark recesses of what remained on the whole a “civilised” world. Yet the barbarity of battles and the monstrous, inhuman workings of the war machine revealed something far more central and systemic. The honest, the educated and the god-fearing men raised by European societies could under orders lose any semblance of conscience and accept to kill or to die indiscriminately. Their blind obedience to commands, however ill-advised, and their more general acceptance of the necessity of conflict came as a shock to many observers. In *Jacob's Room*, Virginia Woolf condenses this impression through the description of an absurd naval exercise:

“a dozen young men in the prime of life descend with composed faces into the depths of the sea; and there impassively (though with perfect mastery of machinery) suffocate uncomplainingly together.” (p.216).

The ironical mention of a useless “mastery of machinery”, which seems to go hand in hand with the loss of any sense of self-preservation, emphasises the absolute negation of the human element. But what is perhaps most unsettling in this uncanny scene is the passivity of these “young men”, “impassively” and “uncomplainingly” dying together. The negative prefixes imply another scenario, an expectation of protest or resistance of some kind. But the “machinery” works without a hitch.

The issue of conflict and blind obedience was by no means a new one, and the surge of violence came as much less of a surprise to those who lived on the margins of the self-styled “civilisation”. While this article will not venture to disentangle the threads of their complex origin, Joyce's novels, starting with *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, were completed in continental Europe during and after the Great War, and it is undeniable that the violence of the conflict gave the tensions described within the novels a broader resonance. In *My Brother's Keeper*, Stanislaus Joyce does, as a matter of fact, refer his brother's non-partisan and grim view of his home-country to his more general “horror of violence” (p.261). What could be seen as the remnants of old grudges in a

backwater corner of the great European civilisation became, partly through Joyce's own artistic legacy, the symbol of a deeper and more general culture of violence, which as it appeared in all its indomitable horror, made it in turn much harder to imagine a peaceful solution to the Irish conflict. Furthermore, as Lyndall Gordon points out dealing with Woolf's novels, the impossibility of accounting for the barbarity of the war through the lens of official history brought to the fore new, more cultural and psychological explanations, which represented a "critique of what history and newspapers accustom us to define as memorable." [Gordon, 1984, p.161]. The same can of course be said of Joyce's own artistic method, dealing with social issues through their translation into personal experiences.

Therefore, as the war unfolded, as it became clear that the ills of Europe had a deeper cause than a mere political crisis gone too far, and as the prospect of a consensual resolution of the "Irish question" became increasingly ephemeral, an interrogation imposed itself: how could further violence be averted? This question, of course, could only be answered by focusing first on the roots of such shockingly prevalent violence. Reconstruction, for Europe as an idea and as a "world to be lived in"¹, required a form of introspection. The social and political machines which had trundled so unfailingly towards a mass-scale war needed to be opened, their cogs examined and their underlying mechanisms brought to light. As Benoît Tadié puts it, repairing to the old notion of Victorian "innocence" in the face of disaster was not an option: the ideology on which pre-war society functioned had to be questioned [Tadié, 1999, 159].

In this light, studying *Jacob's Room* and *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* side by side brings out a common thread. These novels, written in the wake of the war, both feature the trajectories of young men in the pre-war period, leading to a final disappearance, whether it be through "silence, exile and cunning" (p.208) in the face of an unbearable deadlock, or more directly due to Jacob's death of the battlefield. In both cases, the tropes of the *bildungsroman* are subverted to denounce a certain type of society – not altogether an uncommon move, with such illustrious precedents as the death of Werther or Julien Sorel, as well as more topical examples like Ernest Pontifex's stay in jail in Samuel Butler's *The Way of All Flesh*, which both authors cited as a source of inspiration. This generic leaning highlights the question of education, the seminal institution *par excellence*, inculcating values and social conducts which are used to explain the protagonist's behaviour in later years. And as a matter of fact, I will argue that Woolf's and Joyce's depiction of the education system reveals the structural violence of this institution, and hints at its links with conflict – the stories ending either in the protagonist's rejection of the society he lives in, or in his violent death.

1 Cf "The Mark on the Wall", *The Mark on the Wall and Other Short Fiction*, p.6

That is what I mean by the word “deconstruction”, which I will use here in the very strict sense of: breaking down the institutional machine from the inside in order to see how its parts function together². For behind the veil of disinterested knowledge which they don, Joyce and Woolf shed light on schools' and universities' relation to power and their reliance on physical and symbolic aggression. Instead of bringing up young people capable of critical thinking, they reproduce a patriarchal, bigoted and disciplinary social order that *structurally* fosters violence.

The institution of education

It is of course not unheard of for a novel to focus on other aspects of a character's education than their purely intellectual accomplishments, which might not have the kind of narrative and dramatic interest that encounters and social ties have. However, both in *Jacob's Room* and in *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, the content of the protagonists' education is explicitly downplayed, more often than not for comical effects. For instance, Stephen, in his youthful ardour, instrumentalises the books that he reads, with no regard for their broader content: “retaining nothing of all he read save that which seemed to him an echo or a prophecy of his own state” (p.131). This of course highlights the question of the actual destination of the knowledge acquired through education. Jacob, who is learning Greek at Cambridge, uses his status to identify as an inspired intellectual. In front of his friends, he bravely asserts: “Probably [...] we are the only people in the world who know what the Greeks meant” (p.102). But in the very same page, the narrative voice contradicts this lofty statement, remarking that “Jacob knew no more Greek than what served him to stumble through a play” (*ibid.*). The irony of the passage echoes Woolf's reflections in her essay “On not Knowing Greek”, which starts with the idea that even English scholars would, in ancient Greece, “be at the bottom of any class of schoolboys, since we do not know how the words sounded” [Woolf, 1984, p.23]. The actual knowledge that classical studies bestow is in the end very restricted. It only holds value among the people who have learned it in the same way – the Greeks themselves would not recognise their mother tongue, spoken with an English accent. This is what I mean by the notion of “institutional” knowledge.

Indeed, by questioning the absolute value of knowledge, referring it back to how their budding protagonists make use of it, the two novels reveal the social forces at work in the education

2 The term “deconstruction” is of course borrowed from the Derridean vocabulary. Although its use here is effectively restricted to that of a historicisation and breaking down of a system's pretension towards self-sufficiency, I do not believe that this simplification betrays the original meaning of the process (see for instance the “deconstruction” of science to reveal the political, economic, scientific and religious “adventure” that constitutes phonocentrism, in *De la grammatologie* [Derrida, 1967, p.141]).

system. This change of focus is in itself an attack on the Victorian vision of knowledge and scholarly research, on the idea that it should be “disinterested” and guided by the sole voice of reason. As Christopher Butler argues in *Early Modernism, Literature, Music and Painting in Europe, 1900-1916*, the idea that “the arguments of reason (and of authority) are inherently likely to camouflage disreputable motives” was a fundamental aspect of modernist attacks on the economy of knowledge in their societies [Butler, 1994, p.91]. In the case of Stephen Dedalus, the tensions that underlie the problem of knowledge are dramatised, and uncover the “disreputable motive” of his teachers: his intellectual desire clashes with the power relations which his school imposes. In Chapter 2, after his return to school in Belvedere college, he is accused of having “heresy in his essay” (p.66), publicly shamed and implicitly threatened (as he is only in the school because of the Jesuits' benevolence towards his family) and eventually forced to correct his statement in front of the class. However, the exact motive of the rebuke, the idea expressed, is reduced to a cryptic half-sentence “*without a possibility of ever approaching nearer*”. It may be argued that the context is not so hard to reconstruct for a contemporary or anyone versed in ecclesiastical matters – the question is that of the relation between the soul and the Creator, and whether not being able to reach Him is the same as never being able to approach the divine, the latter being of course constitutive of Stephen's own experience of religion rather than the Jesuit's doxa, and preparing his final decision to abandon priesthood as a career. Nevertheless, by leaving aside the content of Stephen's essay, the text highlights the “submission” that the young boy is forced to accept, in order to “appease” his teacher (*ibid.*). What he learns is not so much to reflect on religion but to bow to a certain ritual, correcting himself under the instructions of the teacher and “knowing” what he can and cannot say – the teacher's first suggestion being that “Perhaps [he] didn't know” about his heresy (*ibid.*). From that perspective, such reflections as that of Hugh Kenner, who asserts that objectivity in Joyce is dependent upon “rituals of language” [Kenner, 1978, p.14] are to be taken very concretely: Belvedere college dictates both what is true and how truth is acquired, the rituals by which it is asserted.

Hence, what appears once the question of knowledge is sidelined are the multiple, complex and ubiquitous rituals of education, and their links with other institutions. In that respect, it is very interesting to see that both Woolf and Joyce emphasise the close contact between educational institutions and the Church. The relation is explicit in *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, since Stephen is sent to religious schools and set to become a priest; but even in *Jacob's Room*, the very close ties between education and religion are striking. Cambridge is introduced through a Chapel service. And just like in Belvedere college, the question of pure faith is immaterial: what is described is the ceremonial and the order which this service imposes. In the two paragraphs in which the scene is described, the word “orderly” recurs three times – “In what orderly procession

they advance”, “inside the Chapel all was orderly”, “all very orderly” (pp.38 & 39) ³. Once again, the concrete and material structure of the social ritual overshadows its symbolic meaning. As a matter of fact, the Church itself is only marginally associated with a doctrine: rather, it represents a particularly obvious form of social and cultural machinery, with its impact on places, on language and on people. This primacy of form over content is closely linked with power relations, as Paul B. Armstrong highlights: “The politics of modernism is determined not exclusively [...] by the themes [explored] but rather by the way in which problems of power and authority are staged for the recipient” [Armstrong, 2005, p.172]. The dons at Cambridge, whatever it is they teach, can be considered “priestly” if their touted search for knowledge leads them to patronise their students, and ask that their ideas be accepted on pure faith. Woolf points out the paradox of their underlying and well-hidden “disreputable motives”: “men would respect still. A woman, divining the priest, would, involuntarily, despise.” (p.52) ⁴. There are however two sides to this story: on the don's end, of course, is self-deception; but no less on the side of the “men” who “respect” it. Like the soldiers, unquestioning and impassible, some force is at work to make them accept the submission that is asked of them and the vertical relation of power which their teacher entertains with them. It is this force which I will argue is at stake in Joyce's and Woolf's criticism of the education system.

The education system as an Ideological State Apparatus

However necessary, the attacks that both authors level at the education system, bringing to light its hypocrisy and underhanded manipulation of students, are not an end in and of themselves. Crucially, it does not explain why such hypocrisy went unnoticed, why the dons or Jesuits were obeyed. To come back to the metaphor with which I introduced the problem, schools and universities are only cogs in a wider machinery, which informs them and in turn rests on their support. As Pamela Caughie puts it in *Virginia Woolf and Postmodernism, Literature in Quest & Question of Itself*, behind individual attacks on rules or ideas, Woolf's primary objective is to be understood as “layers of discourse” [Caughie, 1991, p.98], transcending punctual instances to form a system which involves places, bodies and utterances alike. Likewise, in her analysis of culture

3 Incidentally, the word “orderly” is a very charged one in Woolf's vocabulary. Taking up a passage from *The Waves*, Jessica Berman shows how it partakes of a certain masculine ethics directly linked with war. As Bernard puts it: “it is a mistake, this extreme precision, this orderly and military progress; a convenience, a lie” [in Berman, 2001, p.154]. The orderly way of thinking which he has learned is in itself a construct, with “military” ramifications.

4 The critique of teaching as a form of preaching was in fact a deep and far-reaching topic in Woolf's political thinking throughout her life. Ten years after *Jacob's Room*, in a letter to Ethel Smyth, written on May 18, 1931, her opinion is stated with just as much virulence: “What I can't abide is the man who wishes to convert other men's minds; that tampering with belief seems to me impertinent, insolent, corrupt beyond measure” [in Berman, 2001, p.114]

within Joyce's works, Cheryl Herr affirms the need to forget the transcendent purposes of the Church and the arts in order to think in terms of “institutions”, vying for power in a very concrete cultural space [Herr, 1986, p.222]. As it is not a meagre task to examine these workings both in their unity and diversity, comparing two parallel but by no means identical cases, I will proceed using the notion of Ideological State Apparatus, as developed by Althusser in “Idéologies et Appareils Idéologiques d'Etat” [Althusser, 1976, p.81]. I think this notion, whatever its intellectual limitations⁵, does justice to Joyce's and Woolf's reflection on three critical points. Firstly, it acknowledges the agency of material structures and spaces, which play an important role in both novels. Secondly, through the concept of “interpellation”, it provides a concrete and cogent representation of the way in which institutions impose roles on individuals. And finally, it negates the question of intention, of a sort of conscious plot to make men wage war, and focuses on the autonomy of the ideological apparatus, with its aim of reproducing the power structure, and making all individuals, both the teacher and the student, partake in it.

The education system, then, makes its influence felt on spaces, defining, limiting and separating – once again to the detriment of the avowed goal of letting knowledge transcend all barriers. The college rooms, dormitories, corridors and courtyards of the different establishments, from Conglowes to Cambridge, play a very important part in Jacob and Stephen's upbringing. They divide the world between those who can or cannot afford to go to school – a purgatory where Stephen finds himself at the start of Chapter 2 in *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* – the strong and the weak students – Stephen finding himself thrown off the sports field into an adjacent ditch at Conglowes (p.11) – and of course between men and women. These differences are part of its rituals, becoming a sort of second nature that instils an impression of innate hierarchy. During the Chapel service, as his eyes wander, Jacob notices a number of women in the chapel – wives and family of Faculty members – and compares their presence to that of dogs: “No one would think of bringing a dog into church.” (p.40). The shocking nature of the comparison stresses how embedded the “order” of the “orderly” service is in the young man's mind: the divisions which it creates between the initiates and the profanes (etymologically: those who aren't supposed to enter the temple) is so strong that they might as well be of different species.

5 One of the main shortcomings of the Althusserian vision of power, at least in his first period, is its implication of a static and monolithic ideological system, justly analysed by Foucault in *Histoire de la sexualité, I La volonté de savoir*. Imagining an almighty power on the one side and the possibility of a unitary resistance on the other is glossing over the primarily local aspect of power-relations, and the local, individual “foci of resistance” which they necessarily give birth to [Foucault, 1976, p.123-128]. This essential connection between power and resistance was phrased in explicitly Althusserian terms by Jean-Jacques Lecercle, who uses the notion of “counter-interpellation” to situate the instance of resistance directly in the exchange which interpellation creates [Lecercle, 1999, pp.108-111]. However, both in *Jacob's Room* and *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, I think one can argue that the institutions are depicted in a very adversarial way, focusing on their monolithic aspect, so that the broad strokes of Althusser's theory are sufficient, if not perhaps more loyal to the authors' perspective than finer analyses.

Indeed, these spaces do not only passively stand as barriers between social spaces: as Woolf well knows, every Oxbridge lawn has its beadle, an instance actively putting people in their place. It can of course be a human judge, like the teacher calling Stephen “heretic”, but those epiphenomena are merely the liminal guardians of institutions which function on their own. In chapter 3 of *Jacob's Room*, young Jacob looks out of the window of his accommodation and “[feels] himself the inheritor” (p.57) of the college's history. The mere view outside the window fashions him as a member of his college. And as he walks in the corridors, his footsteps on the floor are described as announcing him “with magisterial authority”: “the young man” (p.59). This parallel between the material sound of his steps, which situate him in space, and their symbolic “announcement”, which defines his social status as a “young man”, illustrates the essential link between the material and the social in Woolf's description. There is something inherently sensual and physical about belonging to a college, and something inherently symbolic and identity-defining about the specific way in which an undergraduate paces about the corridors of his college. But accepting the view from one's room and taking up that particular gait, submitting to that form of institutional interpellation, also carries obligations. Not only are there spaces where the undergraduate belongs, there are also spaces where he *should* be. In a very Althusserian fashion, this submission translates into answering to one's name. When Jacob is late for Mr Plumer's Sunday luncheon at the start of chapter 3, his name precedes him; the don asks: “does anybody know Mr Flanders?” (p.40). Roll calls and name-lists do not simply mean that a student has to study and write essays. The whole machinery invokes the individual and demands his presence, in a system where every cog has its function, as the dash in Mr Plumer's reflection “if no don ever gave a luncheon party –” (p.41) ominously implies. Neither he nor his students are particularly happy to have lunch together, but the social rituals must be renewed and the order reproduced for the new undergraduates as it was for their elders, regardless of individual preferences.

This idea of impersonal forces stemming directly from places and interpellating the individual at a specific place with specific demands is even more explicitly referred to in *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. No subtle instances like that of the footsteps in the corridor at Belvedere: voices rise directly from institutions and “urge” Stephen in different directions:

“When the gymnasium had been opened he had heard [a] voice urging him to be strong and manly and healthy and when the movement towards national revival had begun to be felt in the college yet another voice had bidden him be true to his country [...] In the profane world, as he foresaw, a worldly voice would bid him raise up his father's fallen state by his labours” (p.70)

The voice of the gymnasium, unlike the previously mentioned voices of his father and teachers, is

not the attribute of a character but of an institution. These voices dictate a behaviour through a form of identification: as a man, he should be “manly”, as an Irishman, “true to *his* country” – the possessive here directly links the demands made upon him to an identity. And of course, these different influences coalesce in his identification with his father's name, his social status and the social, personal and possibly financial debt that this name carries with it ⁶.

Finally, these forces concur to reproduce the power structure, using both social incentives and threats to beckon individuals into partaking in the social system. In Stephen's case, once again, Belvedere school makes no secret of the social power which it can bestow to those who submit to its doctrines. The bright young man is coaxed towards the career which the Jesuits want for him through very direct mentions of the influence which he will be able to wield. As the director of the school explicitly states: “No king or emperor on this earth has the power of the priest of God.[...] What an awful power, Stephen!” (p.133). The repetition of the word “power” – which the traditional comparison with that of kings defines as spiritual power as opposed to material power – and the very ambivalent adjective “awful”, implying a form of warning but also, etymologically, of reverence, reveal the underlying motivations of the pedagogue. Furthermore, the link between power and interpellation is explicitly stated: the change of situation would translate into a change of name, which appears in Stephen's mind after the meeting: “The Reverend Stephen Dedalus, S.J.” (p.136). The suffix to his name becomes the symbol of the shackles – golden and “awful” as they may be – that young Stephen comes to fear. And, if we are to complete the cycle, his fear materialises when he walks past the Jesuit house and wonders “which window would be his” (*ibid.*) if he were to join them. The paragraph ends with his decision to prefer “wandering” to the monastic cell: places, social functions and names form a whole, wielding power within the Irish social structure, and it is this web, this system, which he chooses to escape.

The effect is understandably more diffuse in *Jacob's Room*, as Jacob himself does not escape the system. Nevertheless, small side-scenes abound in the novel, often bringing into focus the margins of the world in which he belongs. In Cambridge, a number of passages focus on the parties thrown by dons in their rooms. Among them is a crucial, if as always very lightly sketched, moment. Among the alumni that Pr. Sopwith has invited, one of them is “the unsuccessful provincial” (we can already note the definite article, attributing a pre-existing social paradigm to the character) which the don calls using his old university nickname: “Chucky”. And the narrative voice remarks that, although not his real name, it “brought back [...] everything, everything, 'all I could never be” (p.51), adding that the man would “save every penny to send his son” to Cambridge (p.52). Here again, the institutional power of Cambridge translates into a name, which itself belongs

⁶ On Stephen's relation to debt, and his constant oscillation between acknowledgement and evasion of his and his father's name, cf Rabaté, 1984, esp. pp.110-114 and pp.133-140.

to a place – it has no value outside the walls of the college – and which is linked with a promise of social status. The irony being of course that the promise is illusory, that Cambridge only comes to represent what this provincial, middle-class man “could never be”, since he is bound to the position of “unsuccessful provincial” – the very name “Chucky” has a condescending ring to it. But whatever his actual place within the system, the man is ready to reproduce it, saving to send his son, probably back to the same subaltern position, but at all costs partaking in the prestigious system. Incidentally, this suspicion on Woolf's part *vis à vis* the social ramifications of the education system may account for her personal unwillingness to accept the honours which were sometimes proposed to her. Lyndall Gordon explains this refusal saying that: “She would not allow herself to be used as an exception” [Gordon, 1984, p.258]. The “exception”, just like the “unsuccessful provincial”, is one of the archetypes of university life, and by accepting this position, Woolf understood that she would be contributing to the very system she criticised.

A society founded on violence

Now that we have understood the ways in which Woolf and Joyce enact a relatively coherent and thorough critique of the education system in their societies, what remains to be seen is the link between these attacks and the Great War. One very simple aspect of this relation is the fact that the conflict served to popularise new ideas, giving open-minded thinkers new perspectives on pre-existing social facts. For instance, in *Reading 1922: A Return to the scene of the modern*, Michael North reminds us that the treatment of “shell-shock” victims became the centre of an acute psychological debate, along the lines traced by the Freudian school of psychoanalysis, on the relation between reason and behaviour [North, 1999, p.69]. As its influence waned in the domain of psychology, the dominance of conscious reason in the field of knowledge was necessarily shaken. However, as I have asserted at the start of this paper, the war was not simply a pretext. On the contrary, its gruesome consequences both gave modernist writers a sense of urgency, of a question that must be asked, and brought to light the structural violence of the world they lived in. The education system beckons young men into accepting a predetermined place in society, but it also accustoms them, from an early age, to symbolic and physical violence, and prepares them to obey and submit in times of war. In both novels, any sign of resistance to the master or the unwritten laws of the class leads to a flare of aggression; and these short outbursts come with an equally brutal insight of the darker facet of the social order – the core of brutality on which the institutions of civilisation are erected.

Coming back to chapter 2 of *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, where Stephen was accused of “heresy” by his teacher, we can see the indirect but essential link between symbolic acts of violence and actual physical aggression. The teacher's remark is a prime instance of symbolic violence in speech, as theorised by Pierre Bourdieu [Bourdieu, 1982, p.79]. He makes Stephen submit to his viewpoint through a combination of humiliation in front of his peers, cultural imposition – interpreting his failure, as a form of ignorance, before he has a chance to speak out for himself – and implicit material threats. It may also be argued that he underhandedly refers Stephen back to earlier memories of school-life, where violence is a lot more concrete. The parallel between this scene and the one in Congloues where he is called a “schemer” and promised a whipping is uncomfortably established at the back of the reader's mind. However, there is no need to go so far to find actual violence: in the very next paragraph, as Stephen is debating the worth of different writers with his friends, one of them recalls the teacher's words and uses them to beat him into submission. The form that this interrogation takes is shocking, not only because of its violence, but also because of how that violence is embedded within the same structure of indoctrination that the school itself uses. As he is kicked and caned with a stick, Stephen is told to abandon his belief three times:

“-Admit that Byron was no good.

-No.

-Admit.

-No.

-Admit.

-No. No.”

The religious and profane intertext of this scene of confrontation is of course extremely pregnant, pitting Stephen as either a Christian martyr or a modern Don Giovanni in front of the statue of the commander, refusing to repent three times. But the contrast between the actual situation and its allegorical value is by no means an artistic ornament: it reveals that even schoolboys, although they don't master the subtle tactics of persuasion that their Jesuit masters use on them, are perfectly aware of how things work in their school. The truth in matters of the mind is to be imposed by violence. Education is a matter of forcing children to submit to higher authorities. This is where the social machinery behind the education system reaches its limit: in forcefully reproducing the social structure, in meeting any factor of heterogeneity with violence, it impedes any kind of dialogue other than these brutal extortions of confessions. In Ireland, it supports the endless cycle of violence that plagues the country, and undermines any political solution to its ills. But it is the same problem in the whole of Europe, where the same system leads to the same results.

Woolf depicts the mechanisms of violence in a very similar way in *Jacob's Room*, but she is more explicit in giving them a wider symbolic meaning. After the very uncomfortable scene at Mr Plumer's, where he is made to feel the tightness of the social structure around him, Jacob suddenly has a vision of "the world of the elderly":

"sure enough the cities which the elderly of the race have built upon the skyline showed like brick suburbs, barracks, and places of discipline" (p.44)

Not dwelling on the fact that, once again, the social world appears as a set of places defining people's identities – a soldier in a barrack, a prisoner perhaps, or at the time maybe a pauper, in a "place of discipline" – what is incredibly striking is the absolute continuity that this vision creates between the university and the institutions where one either partakes in or submits to state violence, what Althusser calls the Repressive State Apparatus [Althusser, 1976, p.81]. As Woolf stated in her earlier short story "The Mark on the Wall" – incidentally a wartime story –, the Sunday luncheon in Victorian society, with its artificiality and constrained rituals, was a symbol of the entire social structure, the very basis of the "real", and the standard for all the other social ceremonies, including "leading articles, cabinet ministers" (p.6) and all of the political powers that led Britain to war. Moreover, what *Jacob's Room* adds to very broad conflation of events and rituals is a unifying factor: "discipline". Just like in *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, a purely cultural opposition, against Mr Plumer's "six-penny weeklies" (p.43), becomes symbolic of a wider issue. What Jacob actually finds shocking is not Mr Plumer himself but "the world of the elderly – thrown up in such black outline upon what we are" (p.44). Jacob does not only see these barracks and "places of discipline"; he is outlined by them, his identity caught within the lines that they trace. He will accept them and accept the place they assign to him until the end, the day the barracks makes a soldier of him and sends him to his death.

Finally, the link between Cambridge as an institution and the war constitutes a possible key of interpretation for a more poetic passage within *Jacob's Room*, illustrating the abstract yet overwhelming influence of the social order. As the "orderly" procession walks across the Chapel, an enigmatic image intrudes, featuring a different yet strangely similar crowd:

"... If you stand a lantern under a tree every insect in the forest creeps up to it – a curious assembly, since though they scramble and swing and knock their heads against the glass, they seem to have no purpose – something senseless inspires them. [...] [T]hey amble round the lantern and blindly tap as if for admittance, one large toad being the most besotted of any and shouldering his way through the rest. Ah, but what's that? A terrifying volley of pistol-shots rings out [...] a tree has fallen, a sort of death in the forest." (p.39)

The absence of any connection between the two paragraphs, emphasised by the suspension points, and the paratactic description of unrelated events, leave the text open to different kinds of reading. Nevertheless, the parallel is easily drawn between this lantern and the “brightness” that the top of King's College Chapel is said to cast over its surroundings (p.38). Thus, like the insects, young men scramble towards the light, “inspired” by a power known only to them, and which makes no sense to the exterior observer. They blindly fight to be admitted closer and closer to the ambiguously desirable light of the lantern – which can of course kill them. And then, just as senselessly, pistol-shots ring out and death occurs in the forest. The haunting, intrusive ghost of meaningless death pervades the “assembly”. Without reason, but led by an internal regulatory principle of violence and competition, these creatures edge their way towards their demise. This superimposed vision, obtained through the inherently modernist technique of “montage”, as studied by David Trotter in *Cinema and Modernism* [Trotter, 2007, p.140], creates a direct, emotionally charged equation between the absurd violence of nature and the social rituals of “civilised” life. That is the answer which *Jacob's Room* gives to the question of the “meaning” – or lack thereof – of the Great War, and the reason why the novel can be read as a radical denunciation of its society in the light of that conflict.

Ideology and “positions”

The question of modernism in its relation to politics can be rephrased in the light of the present analysis. Although these texts are not “political”, in the sense in which Woolf's and Joyce's contemporaries understood the term – and let us remember Jacob's hatred of the “beastly” Wells and Shaw (p.43) as well as Stephen's distrust towards Irish politics – it is necessary to think of both *Jacob's Room* and *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* as novels written during a time when violence flared, and what had perhaps seemed like small, localised spaces of brutality within a civilised world suddenly revealed their deep links with the entire social system. For both authors, shedding light on these links was an artistic endeavour, requiring a new take on narrative, poetic and stylistic strategies. As Jean-Michel Rabaté puts it, Joyce was starting an insurrection “within language” [Rabaté, 1984, p.126]. But, however abstract this translation into the field of language and arts may seem, an insurrection within language is still a form of insurrection. Here again, the vocabulary of Althusser comes in handy. It enables us to transcend the binary opposition between the political statement and the notion of a “disinterested” form of art, through the concept of

“positioning” or “prise de position”⁷. Neither novel may be directly about the Great War, but its occurrence as an event presented all contemporaries with a choice, before which there was no neutral ground. And rather than uphold the values and social forces which they suspected had led to the conflict, both authors chose to analyse these forces, deconstruct the workings of such institutions, and denounce their pernicious effects. One may argue that they did not fight head on, letting readers draw conclusions from the individual stories of their protagonists; but there can be no doubt that these stories beg the question of how to confront the essential violence of European societies, both at the individual and the collective level.

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⁷ Although the notion of “position” in Althusser is of course already present in his texts written in the 1960's, I think the later definitions of the term, especially the one given in “Être marxiste en philosophie” [Althusser, 2015, pp.260-261] are more directly pertinent to my point here, especially since they stress the topical and “practical” nature of positions, their direct link with a specific and concrete situation.

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