Shape and Satisfaction: The Figure of the Aged Penelope in Dickens and Joyce

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Abstract

This paper explores the representation of an ageing Penelope briefly in Tennyson and at length in Dickens and Joyce. In the case of Joyce's *Ulysses*, the paper specifically considers how the ageing of Molly Bloom gives rise to the threats of ended fertility and diminished sexual desire in the masculine ego. To evince these threats, the paper argues that Molly's portrayal lacks both interiority—as in attention to her visible, rather than felt, menstruation—and a willingness to pamper masculine vanity. Bloom, in turn, lacks the ability to see woman beyond the curved satisfactions of her figure and shape. Near its close, these observations lead the paper to see Joyce's early aesthetic theory as infused with the visualization of the female body and his later writing as troubled by the loss of sexual desire.

Through Arthur Power we know Joyce's claim that "the modern theme is the subterranean forces, those hidden tides which govern everything and run humanity counter to the apparent flood: those poisonous subtleties which envelop the soul, the ascending fumes of sex."¹ When Joyce wrote *Ulysses*, he could still think of sexuality as an unconscious force, a 'hidden tide.' Today, the fumes of sex, commodified and mediatized, are part of our everyday environment. Since we are no longer shocked by Joyce's emphasis on matters of the body, the time may have come to wonder what unconscious forces were at work in Joyce's obsession with writing the body. My discussion shall bring us from Tennyson's poem "Ulysses," via a 'commodius vicus' (touching on Dickens' novel *Little Dorrit*), to the figure and figurality of Joyce's Penelope, Molly Bloom. My suggestion will be that the difference in the representation of the figure of an ageing Penelope in Dickens and Joyce provides insight into the defence mechanism which underlies Joyce's celebration of the 'aged wife.'

Although the notion of the figure of Penelope as an 'aged wife' may well derive from Tennyson's famous poem "Ulysses," nothing in the text of "Penelope" nor in the notes and early drafts of the chapter suggests that Joyce kept Tennyson in mind as he wrote. To be true: Tennyson figures repeatedly in the novel. Twice he is described as "Lawn Tennyson, gentleman poet" (U 3.493, 9.648), and in "Circe" he figures as the character "Lord Tennyson: (gentleman poet in Union Jack blazer and cricket flannels, bareheaded, flowingbearded)" (U 15.4395). The connotation of the English poet seemed primarily to have been one of stereotypical English affectation. Tennyson is a type of the upwardly mobile English bard. Joyce does not seem to think of him as the author of a vision of a Ulysses suffering from acute mid-life crisis, threatened by the prospect of death, inaction, the barrenness of the crags of Ithaca, and the match to an 'aged wife.' Nevertheless, both Joyce and Tennyson were deeply interested in Homer. Tennyson's poem "The Lotos-eaters" precedes Joyce's episode which bears that name; and although Joyce's Ulysses does not betray direct influence, the idea of the ageing of the Penelope figure plays an important role in the plot and in the stream of consciousness of both the male and female protagonists. The major and significant difference is that Joyce's protagonist has found a way of coping with the threat of age and ending which drove Tennyson's Ulysses to a suicidal flight forward upon the 'moan[ing]' 'deep,' 'seek[ing] a newer world."² The question we must address, then, is 'What was Joyce's strategy of coming to terms with the painful threat to the masculine ego entailed in the visible ageing of his wife?' In order to formulate an answer, we must begin with Joyce's fleshing out of the Homeric Penelope figure. Much has been said about her, but much remains to be discovered.

Christine Froula cites the feminist artist Dorit Cypis's retort to Freud's perennial question 'What do women want?': simply "Mr Freud, we want our bodies back."³ Joyce's rendering of Molly's corporeality warrants Cypis's demand. Joyce places her on the chamberpot, and makes her exclaim "O patience above its pouring out of me like the sea' (U 18.1122-23). Molly's corporeality seems lacking in interiority. She is not rendered from the inside—especially not when we compare her experience of menstruation to the extremely intimate sensations given to Leopold Bloom on the jakes. Instead, Molly is staged in the very moment when her femaleness makes itself **visible** as the flow of menstrual blood

out of the body into the chamberpot. Molly's sex is doubly exteriorized. It is made into a flow to be seen, not a sensation to be felt. Joyce's emphasis on the visibility of Molly's menstruation seems to fit a chapter which is marked by its graphic expression of femininity in the iconic letter 'O'; Joyce's recourse to the lemniscate as a symbol to indicate <u>Das</u> <u>ewig Weibliche</u> or his notion of the eternal feminine. Those instances of iconicity are in turn reinforced by the chapter's play with the visualized inadequacy of Molly's mind—her spelling mistakes. The notorious dot (or is it square?) which ends "Ithaca" and introduces "Penelope" also marks a shift in the text to a more graphic and visual mode of inscription.

The ineluctable modality of Penelope's visibility seems significant, especially in its combination with the exaggeration of the scope of the phenomenon of her menstruation. It is 'pouring out . . . like the sea.' Elsewhere in *Ulysses* menstruation is rendered as a "female tepid effluvium" which "leaks out from" a woman's body (U 15.2116). Joyce can, literally, see menstruation differently, then; but coming from Molly it must be a force which cannot be stopped or controlled. The reader may remember Bloom's musings: "Woman. As easy stop the sea" (U 11.641). Indeed, Molly's flood, mythically profuse and 'ineluctably visible,' may tell us something about the drive and 'subterranean tides' of Joyce's own creativity.

The term which Ulysses offers for menstruation is 'roses.' The expression relates to the visibility and colour of blood, and it offers itself as a figure, a flower of rhetoric, for the idea of feminity. In "Penelope" and throughout Ulysses women are seen as flowers, often roses. Molly herself gives testimony: '[F]lowers of the mountain yes so we are flowers all a womans body yes' (U 18.1576.). Mrs Breen's eyes are seen by Bloom as "Flowers her eyes were" (U 8.910); in the ballad "My Irish Molly, O," Molly is described as the primrose of Ireland,⁴ and the name Flora, as in Flora McFlimsy, is offered as a generic Christian name for the lightweight female of the species. Here again, it does not rain but it pours. When Bloom (himself feminized by his surname and, among other things, because he suffers from monthly menstrual cramps) thinks in "Circe" of a "womancity," the stage directions describe the place thus: "Mammoth roses murmur of scarlet winegrapes. A wine of shame, lust, blood exudes, strangely murmuring" (U 15.1327-30). Menstrual blood is transmuted into wine (for the connoisseur, always with the lingering aftertaste of shame and lust), and the wine, in turn, murmurs, murmurs strangely. Visibility and gigantism link to strange murmuring: speech without words. Blood speaks, female sexuality speaks; it murmurs somewhere from between Molly's cheeks.

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In pointing to the ways in which Ulysses associates women with visual phenomena (like flow) and immanent or mute communication (murmurings), I shall speak of Joyce's "language of flowers" (U 11.298), taking up Leopold Bloom's suggestion in "Lotuseaters" that such an immanent system of communication is appropriate in connection with women. In dealing with women, words are useless (U 8.477). The language of flowers bears on the connotation of speechless visibility which I am exploring here: like women and children, the language of flowers is to be seen but not to be heard. The term is also appropriate to a Penelope: a homebody, a stay-at-home who is as rooted and territorialized as a plant. Flowers lack legs. Finally, the language of flowers is a language of affect. The flower denotes a mood, desire, or emotion. For instance, the language of flowers is an instrument of seduction, a song without words $(U \ 11.1093)$, a body language, as when Molly asks Bloom with her eyes "to ask again yes and then he asked would I ves to say ves my mountain flower" (U 18.1605-7). The language of flowers might also be understood as a cultural expression of the system of visual interaction between mother and child which precedes linguistic articulation, and which is receiving increasing scholarly attention. My suggestion, however, is that in Joyce we are not dealing with an attempt, conscious or not, to articulate the mother-child dyad as the basic framework of all human communication. The flower is always already a rose. The stress on female menstruation suggests that at issue is not the infantile dvad with Mommy, but mother's fertility and the threat of its ending. When Stephen, thinking of George Fox in "Scylla and Charybdis," imagines him in New Place (Shakespeare's residence in Stratford-on-Avon), the Penelope involved is described as "a slack dishonoured body that once was comely, once as sweet, as fresh as cinnamon, now her leaves falling, all, bare, frighted of the narrow grave. . ." (U 9.339-42). The ageing, waiting wife is seen as a rose whose leaves have fallen. The end of female fertility brings visions of death. In order to bring out the distinctiveness of Joyce's recourse to the language of flowers, I want to turn to another flower, another Penelope who has waited for the return of her beloved, named Flora Finching in Dickens' Little Dorrit. Flora's discursive profusion is remarkably similar to that of Molly:

> 'In Italy is she really?' said Flora, 'with the grapes and figs growing everywhere and lava necklaces and bracelets too that land of poetry with burning mountains picturesque beyond

belief though if the organboys come away from the neighbourhood not to be scorched nobody can wonder being so young and bringing their white mice with them most humane, and is she really in that favoured land with nothing but blue about her and dying gladiators and Belvederas though Mr. F himself did not believe for his objection when in spirits was that the images could not be true there being no medium between expensive quantities of linen badly got up and all in creases and none whatever, which certainly does not seem probable though perhaps in consequence of the extremes of rich and poor which may account for it.'

Arthur tried to edge a word in, but Flora hurried on again.

'Venice Preserved too', said she, 'I think you have been there is it well or ill preserved for people differ so and Maccaroni if they really eat it like the conjurers why not cut it shorter....⁵

Like Molly, Flora is a rambling rose. She shares Molly's peculiar punctuation, "never once com[ing] to a full stop" (92). The text remarks on her "disjointed volubility . . . running on with astonishing speed, and pointing her conversation with nothing but commas, and very few of them" (193). Also note the "inconsistent and profoundly unreasonable way in which she instantly [goes] on" (195), her orientalizing clichés, her unintentionally irreverent attitude to high culture, and a down-to-earth humor when conjuring up the image of the Italians eating 'maccaroni' (she means spaghetti) like conjurors: 'why not cut it shorter.'⁶ Dickens' creation of Flora may have inspired Joyce, but here my purpose is not to point to literary influence, but to the different ways in which these two authors handle the threat of the loss or fertility of the female other.

Arthur Clennam, after an absence of some 16 years (I think), returns home like Odysseus to find his Penelope totally changed. "Flora, always tall, had grown to be very broad too, and short of breath" (191). Flora, who had seemed the enchanting epitome of feminine perfection, stands revealed as diffuse and silly. It is important that the difference between the present Flora and "the Flora that had been" (197) is itself articulated in the language of flowers, as if it related to something unspeakable, and could only be signified concretely: "Flora, whom he had left a lily, had become a peony" (191). The pale and virginal young woman has changed into the flushed and wide open flower of middle-age. More pertinently yet, Flora's flush, added girth and shortness of breath point to menopause, the end of menstruation, the mother of all unmentionables.

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Arthur's idealized image of Flora is brusquely shattered. "Clennam's eyes no sooner fell upon the subject of his old passion than it shivered and broke to pieces" (191). The 'subject' shivers and breaks to pieces. Does Flora shiver and break to pieces? What meaning does the word 'subject' have here? How does subject relate to object here? Although the text seems ambiguous to the twenty-first century reader, it is Clennam's *imago*, based on his recollection of Flora's figure (her shape and physical appearance) which is shattered. Seeing her aged by 16 years, Clennam's idolized mental portrait shivers and breaks to pieces, as if it were a mirror which he had held up to the self. The ambiguity about the subject is pertinent, however. The subject which shivers and breaks is the image of Flora, it is true, but that image has been life-sustaining during his stay of absence abroad. Its shattering implies that Clennam's selfimage, too, is under threat. Later in the novel, after Clennam has rejected Flora, there is a direct reference to the restrictions of middle age. He wonders at Flora's persevering flirtatiousness "now, when the stage was dusty, when the scenery was faded, when the youthful actors were dead, when the orchestra was empty, when the lights were out" (197). It is never clear, however, whether Clennam realizes, let alone accepts, that that desolate situation is also of application to himself. After all, he is also middle-aged. As Dickens writes it, the text associates images of death solely with Flora, and not with Clennam.

In a patriarchal culture, the masculine ego is saved from too close a confrontation with the 'sense of an ending' by virtue of a female willingness to pamper masculine vanity. Certainly in Dickens, it is women's function to bear the symbolic weight of the grim realities that the male ego wishes to shun. Thus, Clennam's ego is saved by Flora herself :

This is Flora!

'I am sure,' giggled Flora, tossing her head with a caricature of her girlish manner, such as a mummer might have presented at her own funeral, if she had lived and died in classical antiquity, I am ashamed to see Mr Clennam, I am a mere fright, I know he'll find me fearfully changed, I am actually an old woman, it's shocking to be found out, it's really shocking!'

He assured her that she was just what he had expected and that time had not stood still with himself.

'Oh! But with a gentleman it's so different and really you look so amazingly well that you have no right to say

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anything of the kind, while, as to me, you know—oh!' cried Flora with a little scream, 'I am dreadful!' (192)

Flora, assuming the burden of dreadfulness, does what is expected of a true woman. Declaring him unchanged, she opens the way for what follows in the chapter. In choosing a younger partner, one can avoid having to look in an objective mirror. This is Clennam's strategy. The chapter, which Dickens entitled "Patriarchal," ends with the following scene: Reviewing his afternoon with (by now) 'Poor Flora,' Clennam asks himself, "What have I found !?' His door was softly opened, and these spoken words startled him, and came as if they were an answer: 'Little Dorrit'" (207). Just as Joyce in Finnegans Wake splits the female figure in an older and a younger one to deal with the problem of death and ending, Dickens splits his women to allow his protagonist rejuvenation or "repristination" (U 17.518), to take a term from "Ithaca." Flora's linguistic profusion, then, is the marker of the pathology of the continuation of flirtation after the end of youth and fertility. Flora's change in shape marks a difference not just in physical appearance, but in her function with regard to the self-constitution of the masculine subject. Menopausal females are useless for masculine ego support. In other words, masculine subjectivity seems closely intertwined with the *imago*, the mirror reflection of young femininity.

Joyce handles the threat of an ending differently in *Ulysses*. Although there, too, linguistic and menstrual profusion are closely linked, Molly's approaching middle age does not become a reason for her disavowal. Molly's avalanche of blood and words seems a protection against the idea of the threat of ending. The linguistic resemblance between the names of Molly and her daughter Milly might seem to point to a similar strategy of splitting reduplication in *Ulysses*, as in *Little Dorrit*, yet that does not seem to be so. Molly Bloom's "ardent perfumed flower life" (*E* 153) is as yet not threatened by her daughter's rivalry. On the contrary, her female shape, generally commented on, seems the support of her husband's masculine ego when finding himself precariously positioned in a homosocial group. Sitting in the carriage with fellow-mourners, Mr Dedalus bends over to greet Blazes Boylan in the street. Bloom tries to hide his embarrassment and anxiety:

Mr Bloom reviewed the nails of his left hand, then those of his right hand. The nails, yes. Is there anything more in him that they she sees? Fascination. Worst man in Dublin. That keeps him alive. They sometimes feel what a person is. Instinct. But a type like that. My nails. I am just looking at them: well pared. And after: thinking alone. Body getting a bit softy. I would notice that: from remembering. What causes that? I suppose the skin can't contract quickly enough when the flesh falls off. But the shape is there. The shape is there still. Shoulders. Hips. Plump. Night of the dance dressing. Shift stuck between the cheeks behind.

He clasped his hands between his knees and, satisfied, sent his vacant glance over their faces. (U 6.200-210)

Bloom knows that his Penelope is getting on in years, but the vital ingredient of his primarily visually oriented appreciation, the female form, Molly's shape, what we would call her figure, is undiminishedly plump. When Bloom recalls his visit to the museum with the intention of inspecting the posteriors of the Greek goddesses, this notion of 'female form' is defined as the "splendid proportions of hips, bosom" (U 16.892). Its essential features are boobs and buttocks. What makes the female form the "form endearing" (U 11.665) is the combination of symmetry and proportion. To Bloom, a woman is primarily a shape, a figure, a curve, a <u>Gestalt</u> or *imago* which functions as the stimulus or signal to trigger off instinctual patterns of response. She is: "the counterattraction in the *shape* of a female" (U 16.930-31). I emphasize the noun 'shape,' because Molly Bloom may seem a living, breathing, embodied woman. Nevertheless she is always already a shape, a figure, an image, a simulacrum, functioning in what Lacan has called the Imaginary order.⁷

It was Joyce himself who contributed the association with the graphic symbol of the lemniscate, the figure 8 lying down, for our better comprehension of "Penelope." The figure symbolizes eternity; and the composition of this episode, which is divided into two parts revolving around a turning-point, iconically enacts the shape of the lemniscate, as if it were the figure of femaleness or femininity itself. Das ewig Weibliche, which "Penelope" was meant to express, according to Joyce's letter to Frank Budgen,⁸ the flesh which is the counterpart to the masculine spirit and the spirituality of the male, is not perishable meat, or limited fertility, but is idealized as curvature and shape: Platonic form. The figure eight may be associated with the form endearing of the female breasts or the female buttocks, or to breasts and buttocks, according to the reader's preference, but at issue here is the belief that shape and form do not belong to the same ontological level as flesh. The curve of the smile of the Cheshire Cat lingers after his body is gone. Dorian Gray stays in shape while his picture grows flabby and wrinkled. Shape is an abstraction, a visual form which may live on though fertility has gone.

The current obsession with 'staying in shape' testifies to the general cultural desire to keep one's shape even after youth has gone. The refiguration of Penelope as Platonic form is a strategy which contains the threat of the end of fertility within an imaginary economy of graphic representation. Thus the rose, once traced on paper, will blow forever, and, in the words of Joyce's notes to *Exiles*: Roses gr[o]w "then a sudden scarlet note in the memory which may be a dim suggestion of the roses of the body" (*E* 169). The pen, finally, which, staining the page with red ink, traces the figure of the rose of the form endearing, blossoms into the 'Penrose.' 'Pen is Champ.' For a full discussion I refer the reader to the final chapter of "*Ulysses*": *En-Gendered Perspectives*.⁹

My paper has traced the work of the mechanisms of the primary process, displacement and condensation, in Joyce's overdetermined construction of the female body as shape and figure, although in his letter to Budgen he claims he is writing of flesh and fertilisability. Freud showed us that the logic of the dream exhibits a constant sliding of meaning. Because "Penelope" is staged in between dreaming and waking it seems appropriate to me to approach it as if it were a dream. As Laplanche and Pontalis point out: "It was also the model of the dream which caused Freud to postulate that the aim of the unconscious process was to establish a perceptual identity by the shortest available route—i.e. by means of the hallucinatory reproduction of those ideas upon which the original experience of satisfaction has conferred a special value."¹⁰ We may read Joyce's transposition of female flesh into shape and figure, then, as a desire to reproduce that which had, originally, given valuable satisfaction. Moreover, the drive to visualise the original object of satisfaction may have been the impetus behind Joyce's desire to write from a very early age. With this notion in mind, I am asking you to think of Joyce's aesthetic theory as he articulated it in Pola in 1904:

Sensible objects, however, are said conventionally to be beautiful or not . . . by reason of the nature, degree and duration of the satisfaction resulting from the apprehension of them and it is in accordance with these latter merely that the words 'beautiful' and 'ugly' are used in practical aesthetic philosophy. It remains then to be said that these words indicate only a greater or less measure of resultant satisfaction. . . . (*CW* 148)

The term 'satisfaction' occurs 5 times in this passage, which concludes a meditation on Thomas Aquinas' *Pulchra sunt quae visa placent*. What provides satisfaction answers a desire, **visual desire**. What is the desire

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behind the drive to visualize? The desire to visualize the primal object, which is the female breast, the female figure. How is that primal object to be given perceptual identity? As shape or 'curve of emotion.' That is, as an 'epiphany' (Joyce's own definition of the epiphany, four days after the death of his mother, on January 7, 1904, spoke of it as the 'curve of an emotion').¹¹ You see "that it is that thing which it is and no other thing" (*P* 213). In other words, Joyce's aesthetic theory hints at the fact that from the beginning its object was the visualization of the female body. Such a visualization constitutes the object in its ultimate overdetermined state of territorialization, of immutable presence and identity of the same. The term 'satisfaction' recurs in "Ithaca":

In what final satisfaction did these antagonistic sentiments and reflections reduced to their simplest forms, converge?

Satisfaction at the ubiquity . . . in all habitable lands . . . of adipose anterior and posterior female hemispheres, redolent of milk and honey and of excretory sanguine and seminal warmth, reminiscent of secular families of curves of amplitude . . . expressive of mute immutable mature animality. (U 17.2228-30)

The satisfaction of the visual, always already sexualized but non-genital, consists in its visual concretization of the curves of amplitude which in turn express the purely animal presence of a female body which does not lose its shape and fertility, and which does not fade away or die. Mature sexuality fuses with infantile desire to satisfy the need of the "childman weary" for presence and affirmation (U 17.2318).

Joyce criticism has long spoken of Joyce's fetishism.¹² Here I want to suggest that we may need to rethink our use of that term. Another term may be more suitable. Ernest Jones, reviewing the idea of the castration complex, introduced the term aphanisis, the fear of "the disappearance of sexual desire."¹³ This is not the fear of the possible disappearance of the male organ (and the social prestige that organ entails). It is a more fundamental fear, the fear of the evaporation of desire itself. According to Jones, as explained by Jean Laplanche, it is a fear even more gripping than the fear of 'ideas of death.' It has long been noted that in *Ulysses* there seems no shade of a castration complex. Bloom's references to the possibility of gelding, neutering, etc. would seem to suggest compassion, and even perhaps an identification with those who are subjected to the experience; but there is no repression or ridicule. Indeed, the text almost

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flirts with the idea of castration. It certainly flaunts Bloom's feminization. But such a flirtation is only possible because the text has invested in another psychosexual economy than that of castration fear and the Oedipal complex: it sacrificed the phallus in order to safeguard nongenital sexuality and desire itself. The feat was performed by means of a strategy of idealization, the elevation of shape, figure, and style to the Platonic, unwithering and unwilting form of the mountain flower, mute and immutable.

Notes

¹Arthur Power, *Conversations with James Joyce* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1974) 67.

² Poems of Tennyson (London: Oxford University Press, 1917) 165.

³Christine Froula, *Modernism's Body: Sex, Culture, and Joyce* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996) 253. I want to express my indebtedness to Froula's work. Although we always reach different conclusions, our arguments often hinge on the same quotations, examples, and ideas. In this paper I shall discuss Molly's roses and thus I retrace part of the itinerary of her text.

⁴ See Don Gifford and Robert J. Seidman, *Notes for Joyce: An Annotation of James Joyce's "Ulysses"* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1974) 245.

⁵ Charles Dickens, *Little Dorrit* (London: Dent, 1965) 509, henceforth cited parenthetically by page number.

⁶ Fred Kaplan, in "Dickens' Flora Finching and Joyce's Molly Bloom," *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* (1968: 23.3) 343-46, was the first to comment on the resemblance between Flora and Molly.

⁷ See J. Laplanche and J-B. Pontalis, *The Language of Psychoanalysis* (London: Hogarth Press, 1983) 210.

⁸ Selected Letters of James Joyce, ed. Richard Ellmann (New York: Viking Press, 1975) 285. Joyce writes : ". . . though probably more obscene than any preceding episode it seems to me to be perfectly sane full amoral fertilisable untrustworthy engaging shrewd limited prudent indifferent *Weib. Ich bin der [sic] Fleisch der stets bejaht.*" Joyce's words, echoing Goethe's *Faust*, Act I, where Mephistopheles is denoted as the "spirit that always denies," betray his perception of a woman as the 'other' to the masculine spirit. His words also testify to a Romantic and essentialist understanding of gender difference, and a repartitioning of the burden of being flesh to the female. The male is pure spirit. This means, in effect, that the woman, the female figure in the text, is the body and has the body which the masculine protagonists and their author lack.

⁹ "Ulysses": En-Gendered Perspectives: Eighteen New Essays on the Episodes, eds. Kimberly J. Devlin and Marilyn Reizbaum (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1999) 267-82.

¹⁰ Laplanche 339-40.

¹¹ A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man: Text, Criticism, and Notes, ed. Chester G. Anderson (New York: Viking Critical Library, 1976) 257-8.

¹² See Frances L. Restuccia, *Joyce and the Law of the Father* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991); Christine Froula's *Modernism's Body*; and my own *Joyce, Derrida, Lacan and the Trauma of History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

¹³ See Laplanche 40.