



Barthes' Irreversible Codes: An Intertextual Reading of James Joyce's "Araby"

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Abstract

Roland Barthes believes that semiology is the study of how language embodies the world. Semiotic codes, the paths of this embodiment, accordingly arouse his attention. Barthes in a structural analysis of Balzac's "Sarrasine" in *S/Z* expounds five types and functions of these codes: proairetic (basic narrative actions); hermeneutic (narrative turning points); cultural (prior social knowledge); semic (medium-related codes) and symbolic (themes). This research in a parallel manner explicates that "Araby," one of the most widely read of James Joyce's short stories, is abounded with two of these irreversible codes (proairetic and hermeneutic). The present study furthermore tries to show how with resort to a series of signs and the idea of intertextuality a literary text can provide probable answers for some ambiguous and questionable lexias that comprise the story's hermeneutic code. It demonstrates that not only can the text of "Araby" be encoded by the same criteria Barthes encoded "Sarrasine" but also Joyce himself presents particular names for these codes.

Keywords: semiology, hermeneutic code, proairetic code, intertextuality, gnomon, simony, Araby, Dubliners

1. Introduction

Semiology, one of the most fruitful concepts derived from structuralism, becomes for Roland Barthes a perspective that questions other established disciplines. Barthes in *S/Z* demonstrates that "the world we perceive is one not of "facts," but rather of "signs about facts," which we encode and decode ceaselessly from signifying systems to signifying system" (Waugh, 2006, p. 271). He develops his semiological method of reading the sign systems of culture after the work of Roman Jakobson, a Russian linguist who believes that creation and explication of texts depends on codes. Semiology, generally defined as the science of signs, in fact becomes the study of codes, the systems into which the signs are organized.

In *S/Z* Barthes as a structuralist and due to the "principle of parsimony" (Chandler, 2007, P. 149) enumerates five codes employed in literary texts. One of these codes is proairetic code. This code is derived from the concept of proairetic:

The ability rationally to determine the result of an action, we shall name this code of actions and behaviour proairetic (in narrative, however, the discourse, rather than the characters, determines the action). This code of actions will be abbreviated ACT; furthermore, since these actions produce effects, each effect will have a generic name giving a kind of title to the sequence, and we shall number each of the terms which constitute it, as they appear. (Barthes, 1970/1990, P. 18)

According to Barthes all the events of a text are "codable," which means capable of being encoded and named. Robert Scholes (1982) respectively states that "We recognize actions because we are able to name them" (p. 99). In practice, Barthes applies some principles of selectivity and claims that "the proairetic sequence is never more than the result of an artifice of reading" (1970/1990, p. 19): that is to say they are recorded during the process of reading; therefore, their only definitive characteristic is the name they are given. Additionally, Proairetic code is irreversible: it governs the reader's construction of the plot, and it is mostly defined by its relationship to other same items appearing earlier or later in the text.

The other irreversible code that Barthes deals with it is hermeneutic code. This code consists of

all the units whose function it is to articulate in various ways a question, its response, and the variety of chance events which can either formulate the question or delay its answer; or even, constitute an enigma and lead to its solution. (1970/1990, p. 17)

In Culler's (1975) words, "The hermeneutic code involves the logic of question and answer, enigma and solution, suspense and peripeteia" (p. 203). This code is also the most pervasive code that can be found in detective and open-ended fictions, the fictions whose central elements are suspense and ambiguity. Intertextuality can sometimes be an applicable key to these locks.

The concept of intertextuality that the literary terms of allusion, quotation, and adaptation are conceived as its subcategories was in the first place introduced by Julia Kristeva (1986). It means that each text exists in relation to others. In fact, texts are more indebted to other texts than to their own creators. Since for structuralists language pre-exists individualism, intertextuality represents broader influences than the influences of writers on each other. In other words, it counterpoises the singularity, uniqueness, or originality of the texts and authors. In this respect Barthes (1977) refers to the writer of a text as an orchestrator of "already written" one rather than as its originator. In his point of view

A text is . . . a multidimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations . . . The writer can only imitate a gesture that is always anterior, never original. His only power is to mix writings, to counter the ones with the others, in such a way as never to rest on any one of them. (p. 146)

According to Barthes in order to reveal the codes of a text the best way is dismantling the text into lexias or textual signifiers of changing length that have a specific effect or function different from that of neighbouring stretches of text. Then, these textual signifiers should be scrutinized with minute detail. Therefore, this research according to the applied methodology in *S/Z* initially divides the text of "Araby" into several lexias in order to elucidate the structural components that carry a nonverbal message. With having recourse to the first lines of *Dubliners* this study meanwhile shows that Joyce allocates particular names to these codes.

2. Discussion

"Araby," the last story of childhood trilogy of *Dubliners*, recapitulates the moral paralysis which Joyce feels to suffocate the spirit of Dublin. It thematically seems to contain archetypal patterns of "The sisters" (a quest for the father surrogate), and "An Encounter" (the heroic archetype of quest). "Araby" furthermore is an initiation story in which the unnamed juvenile and innocent boy unknowingly sets off his journey for the station of knowledge and spiritual adulthood. Accompanying the little boy along the story and with the help of the signs which have not seemed to be conveyable to him yet, the idea that the people of this world are forlorn and their souls are incarcerated is disclosed. With having recourse to "a central apple tree" (*Dubliners* 23) in the garden behind the house which draws an analogy between the yard and the Garden of Eden, "Araby" can also be an allegory of man's fall. Likewise, "Araby"

appears in Book 4 of *Paradise Lost* and is associated with the Garden of Eden; Milton compares the sensual impact upon Satan of the newly created paradise on earth with the effect upon sailors of the scented breezes from the "spicie shoar/Of Arabie." Joyce's story similarly suggests a link between Araby and Eden. (Doloff, 1995, p. 113)

From the beginning, the little boy tries to set free himself from the different bondages of society: "I had hardly any patience with the serious work of life" (*Dubliners* 26). This emancipation struggle-epitomized as a voyage toward East through most stories of *Dubliners*-is analogous to that of Stephan Dedalus in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* but in a nascent chapter of life. Seemingly, like the former (as Stephan Dedalus is followed through *Ulysses*) "Araby" as a portrait of the artist in juvenescence ends in an uncertainty and frustration.

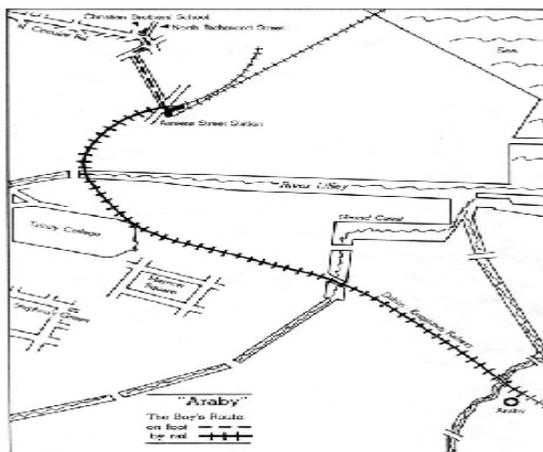
From the first act of the story when the Christian Brothers School literally emancipates the boys, the concept of thralldom versus freedom divulges. This concept becomes more conspicuous in the actions and expressions of the boy: he walks up to Mangan's steps "resignedly"; "Every morning" he in a prone posture (signifies his acquiescence) in the front parlour watches her door; he incessantly conjures up her brown image; her name is "like a summons" to him (*Dubliners* 24); in his prayers he unconsciously eulogizes her as deity; it is nebulous for him that why he sometimes dissolves into tears, and his body is "like a harp and her words and gestures were like fingers running upon the wires" (*Dubliners* 25). As it is observed through lexias, the boy is enslaved and obsessed with the Mangan's sister thought, and his actions signify the inferred thralldom and represent the proairetic code of captivity.

Mangan's sister, the other main character of the story, is the *raison d'être* of the boy's infatuation. When she holds one of the spikes, the little boy feels she is that exorcizing force standing above him like Jesus. Just like Dante's love for Beatrice in *The Divine Comedy*, through the boy's eyes she is a kind of heavenly love which purifies itself from the carnal to the sublime, "a love able to transcend the mundane, manifest itself in the abstracts, and finally resolve itself in the fervent religious intensity necessary for union with God" (Collins, 1968, p. 96). But the depiction of Mangan's sister and unfeigned nature of her actions which the little boy fails to behold besmirches her sanctity. The descriptions of her actions including tossing "the soft rope of her hair," peering "up and down the street," holding "one of the spikes" and "turning a bracelet round and round her wrist" (*Dubliners* pp. 24-25), and illustration of her posture ranging from "The light from the lamp opposite our door caught the white curve of her neck" to "the white border of a petticoat, just visible as she stood at ease" (*Dubliners* 25) to her brown raiment (Beatrice's was white) signify those of Mary Magdalene, a prostitute whom Jesus casts out seven devils from her soul. About Mary Magdalene Haskins (1995) writes "That the woman wears her hair loose is another sign of her fallen status, as only prostitutes wore their hair thus in public" (p. 16). Moreover, with resort to Matthew 27:3 (New Testament of the King James Bible): "Then Judas, which had betrayed him, when he saw that he was condemned, repented himself, and brought again the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and elder," Mangan's sister's silver bracelet becomes a sign in the story that represents the Judas' silver. The

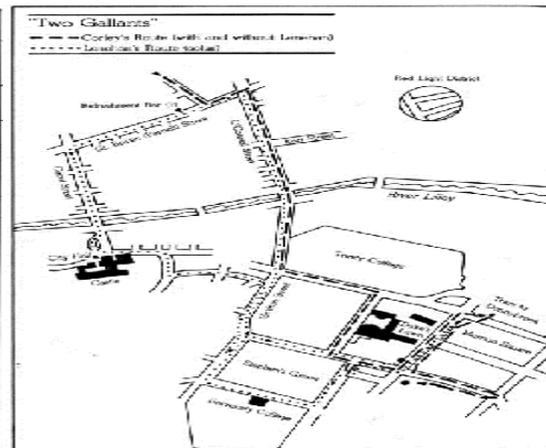
application of the word “rope” for her hairs instead of lock also signifies crucifixion, the death of an illusion. Since “Araby” connotatively deals with illusion and reality, Mangan’s sister “can be compared to and contrasted with Stephen Dedalus’ “vision” in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* which gave to him a “profane” joy and led him from religion to art” (Collins, 1968, p. 97). These signs in addition to unveiling Mangan’s sister’s worldly features and invalidating her divine aspects evince the theme of betrayal-crucifixion. Through her it is possible to sum up signs which authenticate and lead to the proairetic code of “simony.” The word “simony,” that to accompaniment of “gnomon” and “paralysis” (*Dubliners* 3) appears in the first lines of *Dubliners*, in Catholicism stands for the act of buying or selling ecclesiastical services, but it also connotes the dehumanizing or debasement of love, religion, and the intellect. Similar to code of paralysis this code is dominant in the stories. The “simony” or moral paralysis of Dublin is first seen from the child’s limited, naïve point of view to which it appears (in the figures of paralyzed priest of “The Sisters” and the pervert of “An Encounter”) as something mysterious because not yet experienced or understood and is finally penetrated at the end of “Araby” as mere shabby vanity, where the boy is confused about lust and love. Phillip F. Herring (1987) says that “‘Araby’ teaches a lesson: not that lovers are fools, or that romantic feeling is only for experienced lovers, but that love is both spiritual and carnal” (p. 33). This confusion continues up to “The Boarding House” where Mrs. Mooney makes use of the word “business” (*Dubliners* 59) instead of marriage, a “mercenary search for an advantageous sum” (Boysen, 2008, p. 163).

As it is demonstrated in the pictures below, “Araby” is the debut of a geographical precision that continues in other stories such as “Two Gallants” and comes to a climax in *Ulysses* (1922). The boy’s downward journey from his uncle’s house toward bazaar which simultaneously accompanies and signifies his fall from innocence represents the proairetic code of fall. This code becomes stronger in “Two Gallants” and reaches to its pinnacle in “The Boarding House” when Bob Doran without hope and in a paralytic manner descends the stairs to acquiesce in Mrs. Mooney’s plan and reparation: “He longed to ascend through the roof and fly away to another country where he would never hear again of his trouble, and yet a force pushed him downstairs step by step” (*Dubliners* 63). These signs in different stories help corroborate codes, and like some detective stories help render some recondite ambiguities answerable, or provide plausible clues for filling the missing parts of story.

1. Picture of boy’s route to Araby



2. Picture of Lenehan and Corley's routes



Although unlike a detective fiction it seems that there is no query in the beginning of “Araby,” by resistance against the definite conclusion, it invites the readers to a challenge for filling the gap. Likewise, all the stories of *Dubliners* as part of modern fiction contain some kind of absence, enigma, ambiguity and indeterminacy. The nature of this lack of clarity in an expression or in a situation is much analogous to the rhetorical figure of aporia: the stalemate that resides at the core of any text. As Marian Eide (2004) states “aporia that is Beckett’s mark of uncertainty, invalidation, and even hopelessness” for Joyce betokens “the undermining of determinate meaning, the path that gives way, all of these are intellectual opportunities for creativity, for path breaking, for the entertaining of possibility from within the impossible” (P. 30). However, sometimes there is a probable answer for the elliptical conundrums and ambiguities in the stories, and it allocates to itself the particular name and code of epiphany. Joyce occasionally sheds light on some ambiguities in his novels too, but sometimes there are no clarifications since Joyce does not feel a need to complete them. In the opinion of Herring (1987) when the discourse normally does not decipher these states of aesthetic suspension, “readers are invited to fill the gap by speculating about what is missing, such as what happened in an important scene omitted from a plot sequence” (p. xii). This omission forces the reader to the recursive process of rereading this and other stories of *Dubliners* in order “to find solutions that will never have the assurance of discursive truth” (Scholes, 1982, p. 102). With resort to the first lines of *Dubliners* the situations, conversations, and omissions of the plot that cannot easily be understood can be ingredient of a “gnomon” code. As mentioned in *Book II of Elements*, Euclid’s mathematical and geometric treatise,

A gnomon is the part of a parallelogram which remains after a similar parallelogram has been taken away from one of its corners. The smaller parallelogram is considered to be the absently present form and its relation to the bigger-but-incomplete one endorses a symbolic, rather micro-macrocosmic, absence/presence pattern which has served Joyce to build a notional/functional foundation in his fiction. (Ghareman, 2013, p. 159)

Similarly, there are physical objects in “Araby” that denote a gnomonic sketch. For example,

The layout of the street, so carefully described, consists of a row of houses on either side, forming a rectangle, so that the vacant house at the end, “detached from its neighbours in a square ground,” serves as the removed portion of a gnomonic parallelogram whose flawed remainder will be the setting of the story. (Robinson, 1987, p. 388)

Therefore, the code of “gnomon” is a hermeneutic code that refers to significant absences of *Dubliners*. According to the obscure situation and strange behaviour of Father Flynn this code first of all appears in “The Sisters.” From “The Sisters” onward, gnomon codes dominate most stories of *Dubliners* and other works of Joyce as well (For instance, in *Exiles* the nebulous liaison of Bertha with Robert Hand in a love triangle from which Bertha’s husband Richard Rowan is omitted for the most part).

The first gnomonic part of the childhood trilogy is about the name of characters and narrative point of view. The stories like Edgar Allen Poe’s “The Raven,” one of the most mysterious narratives, have the anonymous first person narrators that make it difficult to comprehend what relationship the narrator has with the other characters. In “Araby” moreover to the boy, Mangan’s sister is premeditatedly unnamed. That the girl has no other name than Mangan, causes curiosity and impels more dwelling upon that name. James Clarence Mangan (1803-49) was a jingoist Irish poet who dedicated his famous poem “The Dark Rosaleen” to Ireland. Though allegedly a love poem, it is an allegorical poem in which a hero comes to save Ireland from the English. Also, the men of God in the poem aid to remove Ireland from backwardness and inferiority. The protagonist of “Araby” also in a knightly manner and as a courtly lover carries his patriotic “chalice” of love among the most unromantic places and through the most unsentimental foes. Since the first application of “chalice” is in “The Sisters,” it is a sign that portends like Father Flynn the protagonist will despondently at the end drop his chalice, the small globules of hope, love, and patriotism that he can no longer hold in Dublin. Later in the story his straightforward uncle relates the poem of “The Arab’s Farewell to His Steed” which its connotation put emphasis on his dejected outcome. This background, an implied metaphor about the name of Mangan and the protagonist’s chivalric manner signify that Mangan’s sister represents Ireland herself. Because the only light of the story is associated with her, she can also be a kind of deity (though formerly in this study she represents the betrayer Judas and Mary Magdalene before purgation).

The other gnomonic part is related to the protagonist’s not remembering the purpose of his journey to bazaar. For a precise answer to this gnomon it is mandatory to have a brief look at Dante’s *The Divine Comedy*. Like Chaucer who with having recourse to *The Divine Comedy* relates his *House of Fame*, Joyce’s most likely utilization of this intertextual matter casts light on “Araby.” In the first line of *Dubliners* the sentence “There was no hope for him this time” (p. 3) shows that Joyce deliberately applies a literary allusion to Dante’s Inferno: “Abandon every hope, you who enter” (Dante, 1555/1996, p. 55). Like Dante, the protagonist of *The Divine Comedy*, the protagonist of “Araby” idealized a Beatrice and then strays (Dante approached Beatrice from the romantic and courtly aspect of love to a divine personification of her, but the little boy first moves toward Mangan’s sister as divine and then takes cognizance of the fact that his interest is thoroughly romantic). When he arrives at Araby, his shilling is taken by a worn out doorman who is seemingly a kind of Charon. In Greek mythology, Charon is the ferryman of Hades who carries souls of the newly deceased from the world of the living to the world of the dead. For his work he must be paid with a coin. After entering Araby, like Dante in Inferno who knows the past and future but not the present, the protagonist cannot recall the grounds of being there. And like Dante’s soul his soul is condemned to hell since the story ends on disconsolate signs in darkness: “Gazing up into the darkness I saw myself as a creature driven and derided by vanity; and my eyes burned with anguish and anger” (*Dubliners* 29). The connotation of darkness in this indelible spell of mind reminds one of a salient idea in Sophocles’ tragedy *Oedipus the King*: the idea of love’s being blind, and when the reality reveals, the blindness of an illusion leads to a view of darkness. Furthermore, the “big hall” (*Dubliners* 28) of Araby accompanying darkness connotes

the spacious Hall” of Satan’s council (1.762) in the “darkness” (2.377) where Belial and the others convene.

The darkness in the last sentence in which the boy “sees” himself so painfully may also recall the “darkness visible” of Milton’s Hell, which “[s]erv’d only to discover sights of woe” (1.63-64). (Doloff, 1995, p. 114)

In aspect of story-telling structure the story has a gnomonic plot too: it has a beginning and middle, but it seems to have no end. According to Aristotle, the plot of a story must follow an ordered sequence: “The order of a unified plot, Aristotle pointed out, is a continuous sequence of beginning, middle, and end . . . we feel satisfied that the plot is complete” (Abrams, 1990, p. 226). The completeness of a work brings pleasure for the readers; consequently, the feeling of relief and tranquility revolves around them. When the reader solves the suspense of the story, he achieves the pleasures of reading, but “Araby” hangs its readers in the air and the result is losing the satisfaction. Like the boy, reader is left in the dark and incapable of finding out what the protagonist’s “anguish and anger” is about. Is it that he misses his plan of buying something special for Mangan’s sister? Or does he recognize in watching the adults’ flirting that his chivalric dreams and love for her are actually lust? The possibility of a yes or no answer to each of these questions is “precisely what lends these stories their enduring power. Joyce does not give us easy answers. Instead, he challenges us to search for them ourselves” (Bulson, 2006, p. 38). This ellipsis can also be a gnomon of perspective. Because Joyce revelations appear objectively not subjectively, they obey such an aesthetic distance.

An intertextual reference to *Paradise lost* provides a probable answer to this gnomonic epiphany. This gnomonic term is also used by Belial, the fallen angel in *paradise lost* who has accepted his defeat diplomatically. Joyce’s choice of words “a creature driven and derided by vanity” (*Dubliners* 29) reverberates the status of the fallen angels, signify that

of the boy and amazingly revitalize the proairetic code fall in the last line of story. Moreover, declaring the rolls that other characters plays in the creation of the boy's anguish and anger and his fallen position is of a great importance. His uncle, who is intoxicated even at the sacred nights, talks to him bluntly and by reciting "The Arab's Farewell to His Steed" foreshadows the end and postpones his visit to Araby; his aunt who at the end of story takes the boy part does not seem very supportive or compassionate; Mrs. Mercer, a pawnbroker widow like the two men who counts money on a salver evokes mammonism and materiality, and the young saleswoman at the bazaar while wrangling with young gentlemen proclaims "O, I never said such a thing! . . . O, there is a . . . fib!" (*Dubliners* 28). This gnomic dialogue, especially utilization of the word "fib" that is charged with significance, replaces the little boy's fantasies of love in terms of chivalric romance with the trivial actuality of ordinary flirtation. There is a quite similar elliptic dialogue in the passage of *Stephen Hero* (1944) that epitomizes the code of simony: Stephen beholds a couple standing before "those brown brick houses" and eavesdrops on their conversation:

The Young Lady (drawing discreetly) . . . O, yes . . . I was . . . at . . . the . . . cha . . . pel . . . The Young Gentleman (inaudibly) . . . I . . . (again inaudibly) . . . I . . . The Young Lady-(softly) . . . but you're . . . ve . . . ry . . . wick . . . ed (p. 118)

In aspect of feminine character "Araby" is also much identical to the final section of Homer's Book III of *The Odyssey* where Telemachus, Odysseus' son, descry the palace of Menelaus and Helen. In quest of a father the boy of "Araby" and Telemachus are homogeneous and the four women in "Araby" (the boy's aunt to a lesser extent) coalesce to delineate Helen, the destroyer of men. Stunningly enough, here Telemachus story without satisfying him ends despondently too.

3. Conclusion

Joyce, the lord of words and disguise, created an enigmatic texture for the readers to interpret. The readers' plight when encounter with gnomic structures resuscitate the experiences of the characters that themselves are entangled with interpretive questions in the story. Although an interpretation, no matter how conclusive and practically dependable, remains always a generation disparate from that to which it is addressed, it helps to have a better understanding and outlook of the text. Intertextuality as an interpretive and semiotic appliance verifies that each text exist in relation to others. Furthermore, it states that texts provide contexts and codes within which other texts may be created and interpreted. Here the intertextual study of "Araby" demonstrates that it reflects many voices, not just that of Joyce: it has a multidimensional space in which a variety of none original writings blends. On that account, Joyce in his polyphonic and all-encompassing "Araby" amalgamates writings and counters them with each other, but his power implicitly lies in the fact that he does not rest on any one of them.

Each story of *Dubliners* contains some kind of ambiguity, absence and enigma that make them mysterious for readers and instigate their sense of curiosity. With a resort to the first lines of *Dubliners* it can be inferred that Joyce allocated to these enigmas the name of gnomon. In fact, Joyce instead of utilizing the word of hermeneutic inserted the word "gnomon" in the text as a sign that can be associated and followed by the subsequent signs in later stories. The code of gnomon is actually that of hermeneutic Barthes applied in *S/Z*, the code that refers to missing information of a story. Furthermore, the major Proairetic code of the story that this study authenticates is the code of simony. Simony that denotatively means the selling of material goods for spiritual benefit, through the course of signs connotes the vulgarization, debasement and denigration of religion, romance, and the intellect. Therefore, gnomon and simony can be considered as great irreversible codes (the type of codes that Barthes specified in *S/Z*) around which the whole sign system of the text turns. They also have strong affinities with the other distinguished codes of "Araby" such as paralysis, captivity or fall.

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