



# Spatio Temporality and Subjectivity in James Joyce's 'Araby'

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**Abstract**— This paper looks briefly at the configuration of spatio-temporality and subjectivity in James Joyce's short story 'Araby' from the thematic perspective of courtly love and chivalric romance and through Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the chronotope and elements of Heideggerian phenomenology and Lacanian psychoanalysis.

**Keywords**— *Araby, courtly love, chivalric romance, chronotope, blindness, desire, fantasy.*

North Richmond Street is blind. Love, too, is said to be blind. Love makes one blind. It can also afford an insight (a subject's reflexive sight into himself) that appears blinding. Love can also draw as well as lift a blind between lover and beloved, but also within the ontological register of the self-divided subject itself.

James Joyce's 'Araby' is a story of blind but also luminously blinding love. It is an object lesson in the phenomenology of courtly love, that medieval paradigm of modern love such that the (imagined?) space of union is always different from and temporally deferred, even kept indefinite, from the space of the encounter.

While commenting on the chivalric romance in his essay on the chronotope<sup>1</sup> in the novel Mikhail Bakhtin says that it involves a 'testing of the identity of heroes (and things)—basically, their fidelity to love and their faithfulness to the demands of the chivalric code,' which plays an organizing role. (Bakhtin 151). James Joyce's short story 'Araby' is a chivalric romance, albeit a romance that fails in its realization. In this story, which is psychologically founded on and framed by the structure of courtly love, the unnamed hero's identity is tested. This testing takes the form of a travail through certain key conjunctures of time and place, which are psycho-socially significant.

To reduce the story to its perhaps absurd minimal kernel, an adolescent boy, unnamed in the story, promises a girl, named in the story merely as Mangan's sister, to bring her a

gift from the bazaar *Araby* if he goes there. He does go, but he is late and comes away without a gift, a victim of great anguish.

The temporality of the subject, i.e. the narrator-protagonist, in 'Araby' makes itself felt by waves of anticipation followed by a possible retrospection, poised on the knife-edge of a perceived stoppage of time when confronted with the bazaar *Araby*. I shall leave aside the question of the adolescent protagonist's story being tempered by the temporal focalization of an adult narrator. At the beginning of the story, which firmly places the narrator in his psycho-social element, time hangs heavy with death. We are told of the young narrator's expeditions in the rooms where a former tenant, a priest, had died. The season is winter. Days are short. Dusk falls early. When the protagonist and his friends met in the street 'the houses had grown sombre (Joyce, 17).' Their play included 'running the gauntlet of [...] rough tribes' 'through dark muddy lanes (Joyce, 17).' Darkness is established early in the story as a rhetorical dominant.<sup>2</sup> When Mangan's sister came to call her brother in to tea the boys watched her from the shadow. 'Her figure was defined by the light from the half-opened door.' Mangan's sister thus appears in the half-light, toward dusk. The narrator watched her door every morning, protected by a blind that was pulled down. The romance thus is framed by the play of light against dark. Each morning he followed her to school and passed her silently where their paths diverged. '[H]er name was like a summons to all my foolish

blood. Her image accompanied me even in places most hostile to romance (Joyce, 18).' The image and the name of the unnamed object of devotion have inundated the protagonist's being within the matrix of time and space. The ordinary and the miraculous are juxtaposed. Like a knight errant the hero imagines bearing his chalice through a throng of philistine foes. 'Her name sprang to my lips at moments in strange prayers and praises which I myself did not understand. [...] I thought little of the future (Joyce, 18).' The magnetic influence of the beloved mistress's name has rendered the time of the loving-knight an endless stretch of present—predicated upon the past (im?)perfect and projected into the future indefinite—wherefrom the future proper, however, is erased, or is left in abeyance. The romance-time of the eternal now also marks a stasis of everyday time; thus, a subjective disjunction is instituted in the subject consequent upon the fantasy of an end-less love without the horizon of finality.

The topic (in both senses) of *Araby* introduces this moment of finality and thus disturbs the fantasy, but this takes place, that is, is given to the protagonist's consciousness, only retroactively.

One evening the narrator goes into the back-drawing room where the priest had died. It was dark. He was thankful he could see so little. The refusal (or inability) to think about the future, always already abutting on the past, here translates into the refusal (or inability) to see. He does not know if he can ever speak to his beloved or no, or if he spoke how to speaks about his 'confused adoration (Joyce 18).' The refusal to think about the future ties in with the refusal to know, that is to think, and above all the refusal (or inability) to act. The protagonist is stuck in fantasy-time. Feeling as though to slip away from his body, he presses his palms together and trembling, murmurs 'O love, O love (Joyce, 18)!' The place of death becomes the place of love, the protagonist taking the place of the dead priest as a devout priest of love. Love, like death, appears (for it only appears) to abstract and absent itself from time. From the future. At last she speaks to him. 'She asked me was I going to *Araby* (Joyce, 18).' He forgot whether he answered yes or no. It is not *Araby*, yet, that places itself into a scheme of the near future but the overwhelming, dis-placing present of the presence of Mangan's sister. He asks her why she herself cannot go. She cannot go owing to a retreat in her convent. Thus, the time of the hero and the time of Mangan's sister intersect, and Mangan's sister seems to transfer her own fantasy onto the protagonist.<sup>3</sup> 'While she spoke she turned a silver bracelet round and round her wrist (Joyce, 18).' This action becomes the emblem of self-consuming passage of circular time, an eternal presence, in which the destinies of the lover and also perhaps of his beloved seemed to be locked at the moment. For Mangan's sister *Araby* is 'a

splendid bazaar (Joyce 18).' For the protagonist this bazaar becomes a site of fantasmatic heterotope.<sup>4</sup>

Mangan's sister appears, again, in the half-light. Her words, '[i]t's well for you (Joyce, 19),' seems to suggest that the protagonist had answered her question in the affirmative. "'If I go," I said, "I will bring you something (Joyce, 19)."' The word 'if' is operative here. No firm commitment is made. The future is qualified with a conditional. At the same time, instead of a profession of love the young hero comes up with a promise made to his mistress. It is this, that firmly inscribes the scene within the structure of courtly love. The succeeding moments are spent by the hero in breathless anticipation. He suffers from a confusion of categories: the serious business of life, which stood between him and his desire, appearing to be child's play. Just as the name of Mangan's sister had been a summons, the 'syllables of the word *Araby*, 'a metonym for Mangan's sister, call forth an Eastern enchantment. A visit to a bazaar has become a chivalric adventure. He asks permission to go to *Araby* on Saturday morning. As he leaves home in the morning, he has a misgiving. Owing to the presence of his uncle he is denied his morning glimpse of his mistress. He spends his time staring at the clock, then looking at the dark house where the girl lived, and where her image, cast by his own imagination, comes to meet him—halfway, as it were. It is nine before his uncle comes home, and his journey is delayed. His anticipation is met by a concomitant retardation of time. It is as if time is being solidified. The train he takes moves 'slowly' after 'an intolerable delay (Joyce, 20).' In the meantime, he had almost forgotten his purpose for the journey. He reaches 'the large building' with 'the magical name (Joyce, 20) when it is ten minutes to ten. When he gets there '[n]early all the stalls were closed and the greater part of the hall was in darkness (Joyce, 20).' Silence hung heavy, as in a church after service. He remembers with difficulty why he had come. A saleswoman asks him if he wanted to buy something. 'The tone of her voice was not encouraging; she seemed to have spoken to me out of a sense of duty (Joyce, 21).' This accounts for the hero's misgivings and forgetfulness regarding his purpose of visit. He had come to *Araby* out of a sense of (chivalric) duty; having come, his fantasy, face to face with itself, falls apart. Time comes out of joint. The image of the young woman talking to two young men presents a vision of femininity far different from the chiaroscuro appearances of Mangan's sister who had embodied, for him, the prototypical image of ~~Woman~~.<sup>5</sup> The hero knows his presence—his being present—has been rendered useless. A voice calls out and the light goes out. The hero, qua subject, is divided and left destitute by the (de-)realization of his desire, a desire formed and framed by the fantasmatic assumption of another's, an other's, desire.<sup>6</sup> The intersection of the times

of lover and beloved reveals itself as an intersection along a void, emptied of both everyday and adventure time,<sup>7</sup> with a destitute subject faced with a receding world. 'Gazing up into the darkness I saw myself as a creature driven and derided by vanity; and my eyes burned with anguish and anger (Joyce, 21).' The light had gone out. The world confronting the burning eyes was no longer in half-light but was dark. Blind. Time had come to a stand-still. Time had become blind.

Bakhtin makes mention of a chronotope of the road which is associated with the chronotope of the encounter (Bakhtin, 243). He points out that 'heroes of medieval romances set out on the road (Bakhtin, 244).' The chronotope of the road is governed by chance. Much of the 'action' in 'Araby' takes place on the road; or to be more precise, at the blind ends of roads, between Richmond Street and *Araby*, in such a way that space becomes fused with time and saturated with significance. The visit to *Araby* is prompted by a chance conversation and its frustrating result is precipitated by a chance delay.

Bakhtin mentions a chronotope of the threshold, which he says can be compared with the motif of encounter but whose most precise articulation is as the 'chronotope of crisis and break in life (Bakhtin, 248).' This chronotope involves '[a] moment of crisis, the decision that changes a life (or the indecisiveness that fails to change a life [...]) [...]' In this chronotope time is essentially instantaneous.' He says further, that in Dostoyevsky these moments of crisis, which in Dostoevsky are moments of decision, 'become a part of the great all-embracing chronotopes of mystery- and carnival- time (Bakhtin, 249).' Such is the case with *Araby*. *Araby* is a carnival and its attraction is precisely due to the fact that it is shrouded at least partly in mystery. *Araby* operates as a threshold in the hero's subjective trajectory. Once there, when confronted with the shopgirl, the hero decides on the spur of the moment, instantaneously, not to buy anything. It is a moment when time seems to empty itself out, and the world seems to fall away. The boy's decision, negative and (self-)negating, shades nearly but not quite into indecision.

We recall here that when the protagonist spoke to Mangan's sister about *Araby* the latter's frame too was shrouded in half-light. Thus *Araby* is associated with Mangan's sister metonymically as object of desire in the protagonist's fantasy. Similarly, North Richmond Street, the marketplace where the young adolescent knight bears his chalice and the bazaar *Araby*, essentially a market, become metonymically linked into a trajectory of blind journey affording, perhaps, an insight. The moment at which time empties itself out is also the moment at which what was placed by fantasy as somehow outside time—whose future realization was put

off, deferred—re-inscribes itself as belonging to the ordinary, non-mysterious matrix of everyday time, a time that could potentially disabuse the subject of his timeless fantasy of courtly love.

'*Araby*' is a chivalric romance. It is a failed chivalric romance. This very failure tells a truth about the genre and the phenomenon of chivalric romance itself. The romance is sustained along interior adventure-time. This time leaves a mark on the narrator's own subjectivity, including his perception of and being within time, but has no ostensible effect of the social and historical world, the world dominated by what Heidegger calls the public 'they', that he inhabits. The conclusion of this abortive adventure-time takes the form of an emptying out of time itself where the subject is faced with anxiety and with the recession of the accustomed co-ordinates of time and space, confronted with an effect of subjective destitution. The progression of the unnamed hero's adventure-time takes the form of anticipation, whose fulfilment is deferred, and its significance put on hold, until the moment of realization which makes a rent in the imaginary universe of the hero. Not only North Richmond Street—*Araby* too reveals itself to be blind, the journey from North Richmond Street to *Araby* being a blind journey from blindness to blindness. A blindness that nevertheless illuminates, if only by casting a blinding light.

#### Notes:

1. Bakhtin discusses the chronotope, a condensed circuit or telescoped trajectory of narrative space-time as a formal and thematic categorical determinant in narrative fiction. Bakhtin's definition in *The Dialogic Imagination* is 'intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships...in literature.'
2. I use 'dominant' as a conceptual category qua tropic binder in Roman Jakobson's sense. In Jakobson's own words, 'The dominant may be defined as the focusing component of a work of art.'
3. Jacques Lacan gives the following formula for fantasy which is implicated with desire:  

$$S \diamond a$$
4. Michel Foucault enumerates several classes and principles of heterotopia in 'Different Spaces' amongst which is the bazaar, carnival, or fairground.
5. I write Woman under erasure following Jacques Lacan's lesson in his Seminar XX *Encore!*
6. In Lacan's formulation desire is always desire of the Other where the preposition indexes both

subjective and objective genitive and the Other is distinct from an other.

7. Bakhtin discusses threshold, adventure and romance times over against everyday time.

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