"James Joyce's Method—Regarding the 'Stream of Consciousness''

From Modernism Lab Essays

by Michael Chan

James Joyce’s Method—Regarding the “Stream of Consciousness” (Jeimuzu Joisu no metōdo “ishiki no nagare” ni tsuite) is an article published in June 1930 in the journal Shi, genjitsu by the author and literary critic Itō Sei (1905-1969), who was also one of a team of three Japanese translators that prepared the first Japanese translation of Ulysses in 1931. In addition to being one of Itō’s first critical essays, this essay also has the distinction of capturing the eye of Joyce himself, who wrote to Sylvia Beach in 1931 that he was interested in having the article translated and submitted for publication in an English magazine. [1] Although this endeavor did not come to fruition, the fact that Joyce himself had paid attention to Itō’s article makes clear the importance of Itō’s work not only regarding Ulysses, but also regarding the state of Joyce reception in Japan during the 1930s.

Itō had been inspired to turn to Joyce primarily by the English scholar Doi Kōchi, whose article “Joisu no Yurishīzu” (Joyce’s Ulysses) had appeared in the journal Kaizō in 1929. Itō, inspired by this article, which praised Joyce’s new writing style and his meticulous planning, purchased a copy of the 1922 publication of Ulysses and attempted to read it. However, finding it too difficult to read, he turned to explanatory matter such as Herbert Gorman’s James Joyce, His First Forty Years before attempting to continue. [2] In 1930, Itō was commissioned by the head of the journal Shi, genjitsu, Yodono Ryūzō (who had just finished translating Proust’s Swann’s Way), along with Nagamatsu Sadamu and Tsujino Hisanori, to prepare a Japanese translation of Ulysses. Translation began in July 1930, and culminated in the publication of Ulysses in two parts: the first in 1931 and the second in 1934. Upon publication of the second volume of Ulysses, the book was banned for indecency, and allowed to be republished later provided the Molly Bloom soliloquy was excised. [3]

In “Jeimuzu Joisu no metōdo,” Itō argued that literature was running out of novel approaches to writing. He wrote in particular that authors like Flaubert, Henry James and Dostoyevsky had breached the last reaches of literature by exploring the psychological interior of characters in their writing. [4] As a result, Itō proposed a new technique that was supposed to represent the only path left for literature: the stream of consciousness. Itō argued that this technique originated in the works of Edouard Dujardin, particularly his novel Les Lauriers sont coupés. Itō’s remarks resonate with similar remarks that Joyce himself made regarding Dujardin as the origin of the stream of consciousness.

Itō praised Joyce’s use of the stream of consciousness for making “the consciousness purely
unconscious,” and allowing his expressions to “flow along the unconscious.” He was particularly concerned with the psychological ramifications of Joyce’s use of the stream of consciousness as the result of Itō’s previous exposure to Freud and psychoanalysis. Itō believed that the stream of consciousness had the ability to accurately depict both the reality of the outside world as well as the inner reality of the psychology of characters. However, it is curious that Itō overlooks consideration in this article of the planning that Joyce undertook in the preparation of *Ulysses*, even though it was specifically alluded to in Doi’s prior article, among other works that Itō would have read in preparation for this essay.

Itō reinforces his examination of Joyce by comparing him to other authors such as Virginia Woolf and Dorothy Richardson. In particular, Itō was interested in comparing the style of Joyce’s use of the stream of consciousness to Woolf’s use of the technique in her novel *Jacob’s Room*, as well as Richardson’s use of it in *Interim*. Itō’s concern here was the result of criticisms that he felt were levied at the stream of consciousness: that it was untrustworthy and would destroy the novel itself. He argued that as long as the author was faithful to his own sensations and had sufficient talent, neither issue would be a problem, and cited Woolf and Richardson as alternative examples that supported his argument. Ultimately, however, Itō felt that Joyce’s utilization of the technique was the superior one; he wrote that Woolf’s use of stream of consciousness appeared to be too planned, whereas Richardson’s use was so magnified that the story and movement of the novel itself completely disappeared.

Although Itō’s article makes interesting points regarding the stream of consciousness style and how Itō perceives that it operates on both a literary and psychoanalytical level, the larger objective of his article must be questioned. Itō focuses primarily on the stream of consciousness as a technique and how it is used in *Ulysses*, without considering the other contexts at play within the work, particularly the socio-political context. Furthermore, Itō’s concern with Joyce’s use of the stream of consciousness as a way to depict the unconscious appears to overlook the Joyce’s conscious subjectivity in the creation of *Ulysses*. Nevertheless, although Itō’s article may be flawed, it is interesting to consider how he views the stream of consciousness as the crux, not only to Joyce’s style, but to a new type of literature.

3. ↑ Ibid, p. 93.
4. ↑ Itō 1930, p. 113.
5. ↑ Ibid, p. 113.
6. ↑ Ibid, p. 113
8. ↑ This article prepared by Michael Chan.