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A Source for the "Most Profound Sentence" in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*

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This note identifies the source of what Temple, in chapter V of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, calls "[t]he most profound sentence ever written": "Reproduction is the beginning of death" (*P* 231). Although often quoted, this sentence is rarely glossed, and its biological context has almost entirely escaped notice despite the fact that Temple locates it "at the end of the zoology" and frames it by asking whether Stephen "believe[s] in the law of heredity" (*P* 231, 230). Interpretations tend instead toward the metaphysical. Suzette Henke, detecting an allusion to Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, cites the line as an illustration of "the Manichean dichotomy between flesh and spirit, body and mind,"[1] while William L. Miller equates "reproduction" with the Christian notion of "sin."[2] Less schematically, Trevor L. Williams notes that for Stephen to "reproduce" his father's role as "a servant of the present Ireland . . . would be 'the beginning of death' for the artist."[3] Stephen does indeed strive to sidestep his father's path, but his anxieties about cultural repetition are entirely fused with his fear of biological procreation.

To my knowledge, only Don Gifford and Bradley D. Clissold have looked into the biology of Temple's sentence, though neither has identified its origin.[4] Acknowledging that its "[s]pecific source is unknown," Gifford correctly notes that "the sentiment is not unusual in late nineteenth-century discussions of zoology" (272). He then quotes Richard Hertwig's definition of reproduction as "'the fundamental property of the organic world, essential in repairing losses by death'" (272).[5] It is perhaps an unfortunate choice of quotation, for it says that reproduction is the beginning of immortality. This is rather confusing because it is the opposite of what Temple says.

Joyce almost certainly found Temple's sentence in Patrick Geddes and J. Arthur Thomson's 1889 *The Evolution of Sex*.[6] Described in a contemporary review as "a systematic *resumé* of what is known on the subject of sex," this gracefully written and widely read book aimed to inform "the public" of developments in reproductive biology.[7] It also proposed what Geddes and Thomson refer to as their "unconventional thesis" that organic life conforms to the tension or "organic see-saw" between "anabolic" processes (growth and life) on one hand and "katabolic" processes (reproduction and death) on the other (234). It is in the final chapter, "at the end of the zoology," that we find the source of Temple's sentence (*P* 231). Having recapitulated their

primary argument about "the close connection between reproduction and death," Geddes and Thomson conclude "that reproduction is the beginning of death; which is not inconsistent with the apparent paradox, that local death was the beginning of reproduction" (234, 258).

For this aphorism, Geddes and Thomson credit primarily "Goette" (258), the Anglicized name of the zoologist Alexander Wilhelm von Götte (1840–1922); implicit in their phrasing, however, is also the influence of August Weismann (1834–1914), who is acknowledged, sometimes grudgingly, throughout *The Evolution of Sex* (see especially 94-95, 258-62). Götte, in his 1883 *On the Origin of Death*, modernizes the Aristotelian argument that sex literally kills organisms by sapping their vital energies.[8] Reproduction is thus, for Götte, the "exclusive explanation of natural death."[9] Geddes and Thomson describe the extreme example of a worm whose "young live at the expense of the mother, until she is reduced to a mere husk" (256), an image that may inflect Stephen's attitude toward procreation, especially as it relates to his mother and her decline after bearing "nine or ten" children (*P* 241). At first glance, Götte's theory seems to account for Temple's claim that "reproduction is the beginning of death."

Yet Temple's "law of heredity" is more nuanced and, indeed, more implicated in hereditary processes than Götte's model allows. His views and the context of his "sentence" are better served by Weismann's theory of "programmed death," whose influence is evident in Geddes and Thomson's reference to "local death [as] the beginning of reproduction" (258). Against Götte, Weismann argues in his essay on "Life and Death" that death is not necessarily caused by reproduction, though the two are correlated (107-59). The correlation is not a necessity but a historical contingency that persists because, as Weismann notes, "the duration of life beyond the reproductive period would not be to the advantage of the species" (157). If death follows from reproduction, then, it is only because reproduction makes individual longevity superfluous. This logic is consistent with Weismann's influential "law of heredity," which divides the individual into two parts: the immortal "germ-plasm," now called genes, and the mortal "soma," the rest of the body, the bulk of the organism (28). In Geddes and Thomson's paraphrase, "bodies . . . are but appendages to [an] immortal chain of sex-cells" (119). From an evolutionary perspective, the individual is thus merely, in Gillian Beer's words, "a vehicle and a dead end,"[10] individual survival serving merely as a transient vessel for the long-term, inter-generational survival of the germ-line. A profound instability emerges, then, between reproductive continuance and the integrity of the individual body: "The germ-cells no longer appear as products of the body . . .; they appear rather as something opposed to the sum-total of body-cells," according to Geddes and Thomson (95). This internal opposition explain how "local" (in effect,

somatic) death can be "the beginning of reproduction," which is itself a way to say that "reproduction is the beginning of death."

In his discussion of heredity in *A Portrait*, Clissold suggests that linking Temple's sentence to a specific genetic theory may be impossible or even undesirable. Yet if, as he argues, "the entire novel documents Stephen's struggle to understand if and how the laws of heredity affect his development" (203), then surely our understanding of his development will only benefit from knowing the precise identity of Temple's "law of heredity." If my interpretation of Geddes and Thomson's "local death" is correct, then that law is Weismann's Neo-Darwinian division between body and germ-line, suggesting that, for Stephen, individual development is, in a sense, in competition with the claims of reproduction and genealogical succession. In *Ulysses*, Stephen appears to view reproduction in exactly these terms: "The son unborn mars beauty: born, he brings pain, divides affection, increases care. He is a new male: his growth is his father's decline, his youth his father's envy, his friend his father's enemy" (*U* 9.854–57). These thoughts certainly pertain to Stephen's strained relationship with Simon Dedalus, but it is the possibility of another father-son configuration that, two lines later, gives him what might be called an existential shock: "Am I a father?" he wonders. "If I were?" (*U* 9.860). For the protagonist of a *Bildungsroman*, a son's "growth" can only herald his own "decline." No wonder Stephen responds to Temple's "profound sentence" with silence.

NOTES

[1] Suzette Henke, "Stephen Dedalus and Women: A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Misogynist," *Women in Joyce*, ed. Henke and Elaine Unkeless (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1982), p. 84.

[2] William L. Miller, "The Picture and the Letter: Male and Female Creativity in James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*" (Ph.D. diss., Australian Defence Force Academy, University of New South Wales, 1996) (accessed 2 February 2014), <http://www.finneganswake.info/WallLetter/FW4_2HCERevenant.htm>.

[3] Trevor L. Williams, *Reading Joyce Politically* (Gainesville: Univ. Press of Florida, 1997), p. 177.

[4] See Don Gifford, *Joyce Annotated: Notes for "Dubliners" and "A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*," 2nd ed. (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1982), p. 272, and Bradley D. Clissold, "Heredity and Disinheritance in Joyce's *Portrait*," *Troubled Legacies: Narrative and Inheritance*, ed. Allan Hepburn (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 2007), pp. 191–218. Albert Bermel briefly notes the zoological context but incorrectly places the sentence in "the first line of a book on biology" and credits Cranly instead of Temple—see Bermel, *Contradictory Characters: An Interpretation of the Modern Theatre* (Evanston: Northwestern Univ. Press, 1996), p. 172n. Further references to the Gifford compilation and the Clissold work will be cited parenthetically in the text.

[5] Richard Hertwig, *A Manual of Zoology*, ed. and trans. J. S. Kingsley (New

York: H. Holt, 1902), n.p.

[6] Patrick Geddes and J. Arthur Thomson, *The Evolution of Sex* (London: Scribner's Publishers, 1889). Further references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

[7] "Geddes and Thomson on the Evolution of Sex," *American Naturalist*, 24 (1890), 754.

[8] Alexander Wilhelm von Götte, *Über den Ursprung des Todes* (*On the Origin of Death*) (Hamburg: Voss, 1883).

[9] Götte is quoted here in August Weismann, *Essays upon Heredity and Kindred Biological Problems*, ed. Edward Poulton, trans. Arthur Shipley et al. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1889), p. 132. Further references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

[10] Gillian Beer, *Darwin's Plots: Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot, and Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 2nd ed. (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2000), p. 38.