

Consciousness and Society in *A Portrait of the Artist*

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6

ALTHOUGH *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* is centered exclusively in Stephen Dedalus's mind, it preserves at every moment that dialectic between individual subjectivity and social reality which enables us to identify a character. Stephen tries to isolate himself in a private world, but the novel makes us feel the pressure of a public world outside, never giving way to the wishes, fantasies, and unrealized possibilities which Georg Lukács has called "abstract potentiality."¹ Lukács, who regarded Joyce as a decadent and solipsistic writer, was surely incorrect: Joyce's protagonist lives in a world of abstractions, but the novel does not; in fact, one of Joyce's chief strengths as a writer is that he always shows us how consciousness is determined by a social existence.

From his earliest experiments with the interior monologue, Joyce was aware that the private self could not be isolated from the larger, objective world. In "The Dead," for example, as Gabriel Conroy listens to Mary Jane Morkan run through her tedious Academy piece, he allows his mind to wander. An apparently inconsequential sight—Aunt Julia's picture of the two murdered princes—sends him off into a reverie, and he finds himself ineluctably drawn to thoughts of his childhood, his mother, and his marriage. But his thinking is presented **113**

neither as a *recherche du temps perdu* nor as the sort of mystical falling away into darkness that one finds occasionally in the novels of Virginia Wolf. In Joyce's work, the inner monologue never represents a satisfactory escape from an unpleasant reality, even though his characters often try to use fancy or imagination to liberate themselves. Thus, the more Gabriel tries to drift away, the more his thoughts serve as a commentary on his present circumstances, showing how his character has been molded by his family and his social life.

It is this "social" aspect of Joyce's literary experimentation that I wish to discuss. My primary aim is to show some of the ways that Stephen Dedalus's ideas, language, and art have been affected by his economic status and his Catholic upbringing. At the same time, however, I have been aware that James Joyce was born into the same class and culture as Stephen; I therefore propose to conclude with some tentative speculations about the relationship between the innovative form of Joyce's novel and the author's own social existence. In this way we will see that Joyce's work belongs in a tradition of literary realism, but a realism of a special, modernist type which tries in subtle ways to escape what Stephen later calls the "nightmare of history."

I

Most readers of *A Portrait* are aware that Simon Dedalus's fall from prosperity coincides directly with Stephen's growing alienation from family and country, but comparatively little has been written about the subject. Perhaps one reason for our lack of attention is that the money problems of the Dedalus household are presented indirectly, from the point of view of a child who can barely understand why he is becoming poor. Then, too, as Stephen grows older he maintains a certain bohemian contempt for materialism; his very name implies saintliness, while his father is equated with Simon Magus. The implied author of the narrative remains silent, ever the aloof,

Flaubertian ironist. Nevertheless, the financial disasters of the elder Dedalus can be shown to have a crucial effect on Stephen's consciousness, just as the identical family crisis must have affected the consciousness of James Joyce.

The economic situation of the Dedalus family is clarified if we step somewhat outside the novel and consider a few simple facts about Joyce's own background. In his later life, Joyce described his father's occupation as "a bankrupt." According to Yeats, whose disdain for the Catholic middle classes is well known, John Joyce was essentially a minor canvasser for Parnell, like one of the seedy, white-collar types we meet in "Ivy Day in the Committee Room." A somewhat fuller description is contained in Stephen's famous remarks on Simon, which do not add lustre to the picture: "A medical student, an oarsman, a tenor, an amateur actor, a shouting politician, a small landlord, a small investor," etc., etc.² Yet the bitterness here scarcely conceals the fact that Stephen, like Joyce, was born into what his friend Cranly calls "the lap of luxury" (241). We know that the Joyce forebears were modest men of property in Cork; they claimed to have descended from the noble families of Galway (Joyce's father carried a coat of arms wherever he moved), and they were distantly related to several nationalist leaders, including Daniel O'Connell. Joyce's grandfather was also sometimes a bankrupt, but he held down the cosy government job of inspector of hackney coaches and was able to maintain a family in the fashionable suburb of Sunday's Well. When Joyce's father was twenty-one, he inherited the Cork properties, which produced an income of £315 a year, plus an additional bequest of £1000 from his grandfather, John O'Connell. By the time he was settled down with a family of his own, he had tied his fortunes to Parnell's rising star.³ He started life as a member of the comfortable Irish Catholic bourgeoisie; he regarded himself as a gentleman, and he had social ambitions for himself and his son.

The identical fatherly ambitions can be seen everywhere in the early chapters of *A Portrait*, and they have a good deal to

do with the developing psychology of Stephen Dedalus, who grows up convinced of his special place in the society. At the age of six he is sent to Clongowes Wood to acquire the best class of schooling. "Christian brothers be damned!" Simon later says. "Is it with Paddy Stink and Mickey Mud? No, let him stick to the jesuits in God's name, since he began with them. They'll be of service to him in later years. Those are the fellows that can get you a position" (71). Almost immediately at Clongowes, Stephen encounters the characteristic snobbery of the place:

—What is your name?

Stephen had answered:

—Stephen Dedalus.

Then Nasty Roche had said:

—What kind of a name is that?

And when Stephen had not been able to answer Nasty Roche had asked:

—What is your father?

Stephen had answered:

—A gentleman.

Then Nasty Roche had asked:

—Is he a magistrate? (8-9)

Despite such bullying, or partly because of it, Stephen identifies with his father's hero, the aristocratic Parnell, and with the fabled nationalists and churchmen who are memorialized everywhere around him.⁴ On the playground, he looks up at the castle and thinks of the patriot Hamilton Rowan; in the classroom, he wears the white rose of York, and leads his faction into battle against Jack Lawton's group of Lancastrians. His developing pride in what he takes to be his heritage will remain to haunt him in the final part of the book, when the repellent Temple, obsessed with heredity and the noble families of Ireland, bestows such fawning admiration. "I know all the history of your family," Temple says. "Do you know what Giraldus Cambrensis says about your family?" (230).

In the first chapter, when Stephen returns home for the holidays, he is surrounded by warmth and prosperity. He

undergoes an initiation rite; dressed in a stiff Eton collar, he is brought down to the family circle like his father before him. In this setting, Mr. Dedalus becomes a symbol not just of masculinity but of high social status and security. Every inch the *paterfamilias*, he stands before a roaring fire, backed by a pier glass and a large mantel piece, twirling his moustache and spreading his coattails in satisfaction; he ceremoniously pours whiskey from a decanter for the household pet, Mr. Casey; and later, when the family servants have brought the meal, he lifts a "heavy cover pearléd round the edge with glistening drops" to reveal a plump turkey. Stephen thinks immediately of the circumstances under which the bird was purchased:

He knew that his father had paid a guinea for it in Dunn's of D'Olier Street and that the man had prodded it often at the breastbone to show how good it was: and he remembered the man's voice when he had said:

—Take that one, sir. That's the real Ally Daly. (29)

In virtually every detail, the Christmas dinner functions to emphasize Stephen's conception of his father as a prosperous "gentleman" who presides over a large family and wields influence in the affairs of the country. Even the antagonism between the Ribbonman Casey and Dante Riordan grows out of the great national split, and the climactic moments of the episode, with Casey sobbing out for his "dead king" and Stephen gazing in terror at his father's tears, are designed to convey the boy's feelings of tragic nobility.

Stephen's disillusionment coincides with his father's money crisis, which in turn is indirectly linked to the fall of Parnell. Thus, by the end of chapter 2, Stephen is almost completely unsettled when Heron remarks, "O by the way . . . I saw your governor." He quails, noting that "any allusion to his father by a fellow or a master put his calm to rout in a moment" (76). By chapter 5, the family fortunes have undergone a complete reversal, and Stephen is intensely, almost obsessively aware of what he calls the "disorder" of his life. Instead of a Christmas dinner, he eats a solitary breakfast while staring at a set of

greasy pawn tickets. Everything in the household seems filthy and makeshift: a battered alarm clock lying on its side tells the time; baths are administered in the kitchen sink and the bather has to dry with a pair of damp overalls. The children, who were discreetly tucked away at the beginning of the novel, are now everywhere underfoot, their voices chanting confusedly about who should prepare a place for Stephen to wash. The house is large enough to have an upstairs (an indication that the family still clings to its station), and from somewhere above we hear Simon's whistle, followed by a shout: "Is your lazy bitch of a brother gone out yet?" Stephen's only response to this brilliant oath is to comment archly on its lower-class confusion of genders (175).

As Stephen's economic situation forces him more and more into association with the common world of Dublin streets, as he becomes increasingly disillusioned with the shabby hypocrisies of his father, he suffers a psychic pain. This pain sets in as early as the second chapter, when he begins to understand "in a vague way" that money troubles will keep him from returning to Clongowes in the fall: "For some time he had felt the slight changes in his house; and these changes in what he had deemed unchangeable were so many shocks to his boyish conception" (64). The "boyish conception," however, is never really abandoned. He tells us at the close that he longs for a beauty which "has not yet come into the world" (251), but his longing has a clear basis in the gentlemanly prosperity of his childhood. From the beginning he has been depicted as a sensitive plant; the youngest child at Clongowes, he instinctively and understandably draws back from the rough, dirty atmosphere of the schoolyard, just as he will later understandably shrink from too close a contact with gritty Irish poverty. Throughout the novel he continues to seek out "nobility," using the only means left open to him—childhood fantasy, religion, and aestheticism.

Even before the money crisis arrives, Stephen has grown fond of imagining himself in the role of the Count of Monte Cristo; but these idealized fantasies are not enough to compensate for his first experiences with Dublin, which leave him

feeling uneasy and oppressed. The family's move from the "comfort and revery" of suburban Blackrock is precipitous and confusing. Dublin is a "new and complex sensation," associated with the growing senility of Uncle Charles and the "bare, cheerless house" where the family portraits stand aimlessly about (66). The city streets are filled with anonymous crowds and "illdressed bearded policemen"; the water along the quays is dotted with multitudes of corks, bobbing in a "thick yellow scum"; "amid this new bustling life he might have fancied himself in another Marseilles," Stephen feels, "but he missed the bright sky and the sunwarmed trellises of the wineshops" (66). Somewhat later, after he has cashed his essay and exhibition prize, he is able to impose a kind of order on the new house; he sends the family to the theater, arranges the bookshelves, begins to overhaul his room, and takes great pleasure in setting up an elaborate loan bank. Soon, however, the money disappears; disorder returns, and the flurry of activity closes with the epiphany of a half-finished bedroom and a pot of pink enamel paint.

To the older Stephen, Dublin becomes a place of terrible squalor and confusion, completely different in his imagination from Paris, where he hopes to find refuge. He continually seeks to evade what he at one point calls "consciousness of place" (141), and one avenue for such an escape is the church, a powerful force of tradition and order which he recognizes, even after he has left it, as a "symbol behind which are massed twenty centuries of authority and veneration" (243). In chapter 3, for example, he makes his way to confession through the drab back streets of Dublin. In the midst of his overwhelming sexual guilt and his feelings of insignificance in the eyes of God, he becomes dimly aware of his surroundings:

The squalid scene composed itself around him; the common accents, the burning gasjets in the shops, odours of fish and spirits and wet sawdust, moving men and women. An old woman was about to cross the street, an oilcan in her hand. He bent down and asked her was there a chapel near.

—A chapel, sir? Yes sir. Church Street chapel. (141)

Inside the church, however, the atmosphere is quite different. As he kneels among the poor celebrants of the mass, the young scholar is overcome with beatific peace: "The board on which he knelt was narrow and worn and those who knelt near him were humble followers of Jesus. Jesus, too, had been born in poverty and had worked in the shop of a carpenter, cutting boards and planing them, and had first spoken of the kingdom of God to poor fishermen, teaching all men to be meek and humble of heart" (141). Clearly Stephen does not associate the humble carpenters and poor fishermen of Jesus' ministry with the odors of fish and wet sawdust he has just experienced outside the church. The images of pretty, patient poverty in his fantasies have become a comfortable substitute for the real thing.

For a while Stephen believes the church will spare him the torments of hell, leading him upward to a prosperous, aesthetized heaven: "At times his sense of such immediate repercussion was so lively that he seemed to feel his soul in devotion pressing like fingers the keyboard of a great cash register and to see the amount of his purchase start forth immediately in heaven, not as a number but as a frail column of incense or as a slender flower" (148). In such moments, the young simoniac is already beginning to use the language of a Decadent poet. Indeed his feelings are brought on by a "pressure" which has something in common with the "dark pressure" of the prostitute's lips in an earlier scene.

As he grows older, however, Stephen cannot preserve such illusions. His immediate fear of punishment subsides, and he begins to conceive of heaven as "an eternity of bliss in the company of the dean of studies" (240). In chapter 4 he acknowledges his false humility and his affection for the pomp and aristocratic ceremony of the priesthood: "If ever he had seen himself celebrant it was as in the pictures of the mass in his child's massbook, in a church without worshippers . . . at a bare altar and served by an acolyte scarcely more boyish than himself" (159). But the religion of beauty to which he now

turns functions in much the same way as the church, as we can see from the way Joyce counterpoints his aesthetic musings with the chaotic sights and sounds of the city. A dray filled with iron comes round the corner of Sir Patrick Dun's hospital, drowning Stephen's remarks on "esthetic apprehension" with the "harsh roar of jangled and rattling metal" (209). Stephen argues on behalf of a serene, godlike artist, detached from his creation, paring his fingernails; but the image reminds us of the effeminate Tusker Boyle, and of Stephen's desire to keep the clean hands of a gentleman. Significantly, Joyce gives Lynch the final word on Stephen's artistic credo: "-What do you mean, Lynch asked surlily, by prating about beauty and the imagination in this miserable Godforsaken island? No wonder the artist retired within or behind his handiwork after having perpetrated this country" (215).

In other words, Stephen's theories are an elaborate defense mechanism, a withdrawal from life. The disparity between his real circumstances and the nobility he conceives for himself has become too great. Recoiling from his family and his society, he makes himself a member of a bohemian elite, and convinces himself that he has been born in the wrong time and the wrong place. Like Yeats, whose writings he quotes several times in the last chapter, he thinks of himself as an artist-aristocrat, using imagination to free himself from twentieth-century Dublin. He wanders the ugly, commercialized streets of the city, meditating on art in order to ward off reality. Passing the sloblands of Fairview, he thinks about "the cloistral silverveined prose of Newman" (who, we remember, gave us the definition of a gentleman); noticing the provision shops on North Strand Road, he calls up the "dark humour of Guido Cavalcanti"; in front of Baird's stonecutting works in Talbot Place he evokes Ibsen and, ludicrously, "a spirit of wayward boyish beauty"; the "grimy marinedealer's shop beyond the Liffey" causes him to repeat a rather ninetyish line from one of Ben Jonson's songs: "*I was not wearier where I lay.*" As a result he feels that "the spirit of beauty had folded him round like a

mantle and that in revery at least he had been acquainted with nobility." In the midst of "common lives," surrounded by what he calls the "squalor and noise and sloth of the city," he walks on "fearlessly and with a light heart" (176-77).

The effect of such attitudes, as S. L. Goldberg has observed, is to "extend the exile of the artist into the exile of art."⁵ By the end of *A Portrait of the Artist*, Stephen has not yet resolved the problems which beset him. Unable to come to a recognition of necessity, he uses artistic theory to repudiate his circumstances. His religion of art functions as an instinctive and in one sense quite justified rejection of his personal and national history.

II

But Stephen's attraction to the church and later to the priesthood of art, his implicit distaste for what his father calls "Paddy Stink and Mickey Mud," are more complex matters than a simple longing for the comforts of an upper social class. Stephen, who is always a good student, has been brought up in the repressive atmosphere of puritanical Irish Catholicism, which teaches that there is a clear distinction between soul and body ("soul" remains one of the most important words in his vocabulary, even after he has ostensibly left the church). Throughout his later life he will suffer from the effects of this false duality. He is fascinated with his own bodily functions—the smell of urine on oilcloth, for example—but he is taught that expressions such as "he'd give you a toe in the rump" are not "nice" things to say, and that rough boys like Nasty Roche are "stinks" (8-9). He is educated by priests in a boys' school where sexual feelings are expressed in forbidden games, and he develops an ambivalence toward dirt, excrement, and sexuality itself. Given such a background, the growing poverty of the Dedalus family exerts a profound psychological threat for Stephen. Contact with the poor means contact with dirt, and dirt evokes a powerful anxiety.

In chapter 2, for example, Stephen goes for a ride with the

milkman, and is delighted to have the chill night air blow away his memory of the cowyard, quieting his repugnance at the "cowhairs and hayseeds" on the driver's coat. He is pleased chiefly by the comfortable houses he sees along the roads of Blackrock: "Whenever the car drew up before a house he waited to catch a glimpse of a wellscrubbed kitchen or of a softlylighted hall and to see how the servant would hold the jug and how she would close the door." It might be possible to enjoy such a job as the milkman's, he thinks, "if he had warm gloves and a fat bag of gingernuts in his pocket to eat from" (64). But the actual contact with the "moocow" he first learned about in nursery stories is another matter; throughout his later life he unconsciously associates milk and cows with an uncivilized, debased world which he is trying to transform or escape. To Stephen, Ireland itself becomes an old sow that eats her farrow; the antithesis of Art he conceives as a man hacking in fury at a block of wood, accidentally forming the image of a cow; and the "true" artistic emotions evoked by the Venus of Praxiteles he imagines as having nothing to do with her breasts and thighs, her ability to bear "burly offspring" or give "good milk to her children."

A similar process can be seen in the development of Stephen's ideas about the Irish peasantry. Early in the book, in a passage so filled with joy that it breaks into rhyme, he fantasizes about returning home from Clongowes to the cheers of farming people along the way: "They passed the farmhouse of the Jolly Farmer. Cheer after cheer after cheer. Through Clane they drove, cheering and cheered. The peasant women stood at the halfdoors, the men stood here and there. The lovely smell there was in the wintry air: the smell of Clane: rain and wintry air and turf and smouldering corduroy" (20). But later in the novel, as Stephen loses his secure distance from the poor classes and sheds some of his boyhood naïveté, the smells of corduroy and turf give way to dung and horsepiss; the figure of the peasant, once a pretty picture on the roadside, becomes a far more complex symbol of ignorance and betrayal, taking on

characteristics of the old harridan Mr. Casey spits at in the train station. In the last chapter, for example, the "womanhood" of Ireland becomes associated in Stephen's mind with the women at Clane, whom he begins to imagine as slightly sinister but amoral souls, possessing the secret of the Irish "race." He equates E. C. with one of these threatening, vampirelike women, and when he becomes jealous of her flirtations with a young priest, he blatantly expresses his class pride: "His anger against her found vent in coarse railing at her paramour . . . a priested peasant, with a brother a policeman in Dublin and a brother a potboy in Moycullen. To him she would unveil her soul's shy nakedness, to one who was but schooled in the discharging of a formal rite rather than to him, a priest of eternal imagination" (221).

Stephen's social snobbery is therefore distantly related to his attitudes about sex. In fact, his fear of sinking into common Dublin life is intensified because the family money troubles coincide directly with his adolescence, a period when, he later remembers, "in what dread he stood of the mystery of his own body" (168). For Stephen both the church and art become means not only to acquire "nobility," but to enter a realm of pure spirit, shedding the repellent flesh forever.

As an adolescent Stephen associates sexuality with evil, and evil, in turn, he expresses in excremental imagery. His first sexual encounter is with a prostitute, whom he equates with the "obscene scrawl which he had read on the oozing wall of a urinal" (100). When he suffers the torments of sexual guilt, he has a vision of his own personal hell, which, like many religious authorities before him, he conceives not as a fiery pit but as a dung heap:

A field of stiff weeds and thistles and tufted nettlebunches. Thick among the tufts of rank stiff growth lay battered cannisters and clots and coils of solid excrement. A faint marshlight struggled upwards from all the ordure through the bristling greygreen weeds. An evil smell, faint and foul as the light, curled upwards sluggishly out of the cannisters and from the stale crusted dung. (137)

Terrified that he will be doomed to this hell, he regards his penis with horror:

But does that part of the body understand or what? The serpent, the most subtle beast of the field. It must understand when it desires in one instant and then prolongs its own desire instant after instant, sinfully. It feels and understands and desires. What a horrible thing! Who made it to be like that, a bestial part of the body able to understand bestially and desire bestially? Was that then he or an inhuman thing moved by a lower soul than his soul? His soul sickened at the thought of a torpid snaky life feeding itself out of the tender marrow of his life and fattening upon the slime of lust. O why was that so? O why? (139–40)

Stephen hopes to save himself by entering the church, but Joyce makes it clear that the religious experience is not really an escape from sexuality, only a repression and displacement of sexual desires. Stephen does everything possible to suppress the temptations of the flesh, dedicating his life to a ceaseless round of prayer and mortification. He fasts; he walks the streets with downcast eyes; he sits in the most uncomfortable positions, refusing even to scratch when he itches; he will not allow himself to sing and he deliberately subjects himself to unpleasant noises; still fascinated with urine, he seeks out a “stale fishy stink” in order to offend his sense of smell. But as he walks down the street staring at the pavements, he fingers a set of rosary beads in his pocket, in a surrogate masturbation. He imagines the beads are “flowers” (one inevitably thinks of Bloom’s “flower” in the bath), and yet flowers of a “vague unearthly texture,” without odor or name (148). Fastidious as ever, he finds it extremely difficult to “merge his life with the common tide of other lives,” and he is attracted to exotic religious texts, such as the “neglected book written by saint Alphonsus Liguori,” which he describes in erotic, Paterian language:

A faded world of fervent love and virginal responses seemed to be evoked for his soul by the reading of its pages in which the imagery of the canticles was interwoven with the communicant’s prayers. An

inaudible voice seemed to caress the soul, telling her names and glories, bidding her rise as for espousal and come away, bidding her look forth, a spouse, from Amana and from the mountains of the leopards; and the soul seemed to answer with the same inaudible voice, surrendering herself. (152)

Notice that the eroticism here is presented in traditionally "feminine" terms, the soul pictured as a female "surrendering herself" in passionate espousal to her lover, identified only as an "inaudible voice." The passage is only one of many instances in which Joyce suggests latent homosexuality disguised as priestly idealism, and this threat of homosexuality becomes one of the unstated though clearly implied reasons for Stephen's disillusionment with the Jesuits.

But the priesthood of art, the pure aestheticism which Stephen embraces after he has forsaken the church, functions as yet another means of rejecting the body. Joyce understands, as Stephen does not, that art cannot be disassociated from the human passions which inspire it. Stephen continually tries to make this separation: for example, he spiritualizes the girl he encounters on the beach, making her seem a visionary apparition even while he is aware of being erotically stimulated by the "profane joy" of her upraised skirts (171). Likewise, Stephen's inspiration for his villanelle comes as a result of a wet dream; the temptress in the verse remains a highly sexual creature, masked, like the Virgin Mary before her, in a religious imagery. One reason the poem is so poor is that it is dishonest to the emotions that led to its creation.

Even though he would have himself believe that the proper artistic response to the Venus Praxiteles is a dispassionate stasis, most of Stephen's attempts to write poetry are intimately connected with his sex life. Except for his abortive try at a poem about the betrayal of Parnell, his earliest verses are attempts to express erotic feelings. In chapter 2, for example, he tries to write lines to "E—C—." He wants to recapture the mood of the evening before, when he was feverishly agitated by a flirtation on a tramcar. Joyce has already shown

us the previous evening with all the intensity of poetry, brilliantly capturing the welter of the boy's emotions. He makes us sense the tapping of the girl's shoes on a glassy winter road, the tramhorses with their jangling bells, the green light of the tram, the empty seats littered with colored tickets. We feel the boy's overpowering desire to kiss the girl, and his deflated emotions when his courage fails and he is left on a deserted car, staring at the corrugated footboard. But when Stephen himself tries to write about this incident, he leaves out the details, imagining them to be "common and insignificant." At the top of the page he enters the Jesuit motto "A.M.D.G.," and then tries to record an "undefined sorrow":

There remained no trace of the tram itself nor of the trammen nor of the horses: nor did he and she appear vividly. The verses told only of the night and the balmy breeze and the maiden lustre of the moon. . . . After this the letters L.D.S. were written at the bottom of the page and, having hidden the book, he went into his mother's bedroom and gazed at his face for a long time in the mirror of her dressingtable. (70-71)

We can forgive the child for his narcissism and his bad poetry, but the process Joyce describes is symptomatic of a more serious problem that confronts Stephen as he grows older. The circumstances surrounding the composition of the villanelle of the temptress are not much different from the ones we find here. The later poem is very much in vogue with the literary atmosphere of the nineties, but like most of the poems in that style it is rarified nearly out of existence. Even in his later, "artist" phase Stephen is continuing to react against what he regards as the "common and insignificant" reality, continuing to pare his fingernails above what he no doubt feels are the base and dirty aspects of his life. He hopes to escape into the free, pure air of art; but until he recognizes that no life is completely isolate, until he learns to accept and properly criticize his actual experience, he cannot be a poet or even a mature individual.

III

Imagining that he can deny his past, Stephen adopts a new father, an “artificer” more in keeping with his noble image of himself, and proposes to exchange Dublin for Paris. And yet even the form of the novel tends to underscore his naïveté, showing that his experience in Ireland has influenced all his responses to the world, down to his very speech. Joyce makes us aware of this fact by presenting the story through a sort of pastiche of Stephen’s consciousness, a series of “styles” designed to present the *quidditas* of the character. This impersonal technique not only gives the novel its powerful immediacy, it reveals Joyce’s deep understanding of the historical, geographical, and psychological determinants of language.

Stephen himself has nearly the same gift, as we can see from the way he is attuned to the speech of all the Irish social orders. He fantasizes about the “sleek lives” of the Anglo-Irish patricians, who “knew the names of certain French dishes and gave orders to jarvies in highpitched provincial voices which pierced through their skintight accents” (238). He listens to the aged captain in the National Library and remarks on his “genteel accent, low and moist, marred by errors,” wondering if this speech implies “noble” blood thinned by an “incestuous love” (228). He is sensitive to the fact that the dean of studies does not recognize *tundish* and pronounces *home, Christ, ale, master* with an English inflection. He notes that Cranly’s drawl comes from “the quays of Dublin,” and his eloquence from a “Wicklow pulpit” (195). Typically, he patronizes the “peasant” Davin, who calls him “Stevie”: “The homely version of his christian name on the lips of his friend had touched Stephen pleasantly when first heard” (180). “Stephen had turned his smiling eyes towards his friend’s face, flattered by his confidence and won over to sympathy by the speaker’s simple accent” (181–82).

Stephen’s own rather prissy, formal way of speaking is, as he himself tells us, a carefully acquired habit, an attempt to disentangle himself from his environment and the “nets” which

have been flung at him. But the tie between language and social reality cannot be so easily severed. It is possible for Stephen to affect a formal speech, but this only marks his desire to achieve a superior status. It is therefore important that we not mistake the often florid language of the book for the voice of Joyce or his persona. Otherwise we are likely to miss the full implications of passages like this one from the second chapter:

He became the ally of a boy named Aubrey Mills and founded with him a gang of adventurers in the avenue. Aubrey carried a whistle dangling from his buttonhole and a bicycle lamp attached to his belt while the others had short sticks thrust daggerwise through theirs. Stephen, who had read of Napoleon's plain style of dress, chose to remain unadorned and thereby heightened for himself the pleasure of taking counsel with his lieutenant before giving orders. (63)

Out of context, this reads like conventional exposition, and if we encountered it in the ordinary novel we could deduce certain attributes of the narrator's personality. In *A Portrait*, however, the prose takes on the function of characterization. The slight disparity we feel in this passage between language and content, the rather "adult" terms used to describe children's games ("ally," "adventurers in the avenue," "unadorned," "taking counsel with his lieutenant") is a way of indicating how Stephen sees himself in relation to the other boys. His Napoleonic social ambitions, his romantic tendency to become aloof and superior even while he is enjoying play, are conveyed not only by what is said but by the very diction in which it is couched.

Likewise, in subsequent sections of the book, the prose reflects Stephen's intellectual or spiritual life, becoming what Hugh Kenner has called a "meticulous pastiche of immaturity."⁶ We have, for example, the dense ecclesiastical language at the beginning of chapter 4, when Stephen is immersed in religious duties:

By means of ejaculations and prayers he stored up ungrudgingly for the souls in purgatory centuries of days and quarantines and years; yet

the spiritual triumph which he felt in achieving with ease so many fabulous ages of canonical penances did not wholly reward his zeal of prayer since he could never know how much temporal punishment he had remitted by way of suffrage for the agonising souls: and, fearful lest in the midst of the purgatorial fire, which differed from the infernal only in that it was not everlasting, his penance might avail no more than a drop of moisture, he drove his soul daily through an increasing circle of works of supererogation. (147)

This is very different from the baby talk that opens the book, but it is far from being "mature"; in fact it is more obfuscating than ever. Notice that the lengthy period is made up of three complete statements, the first ending with a semicolon and the second with a colon. All three sentences are imbedded with qualifications and fine distinctions, until the reader's head, like Stephen's, begins to spin through "an increasing circle of works of supererogation."

By contrast, consider this language, which occurs just after Stephen has rejected the church and just before he experiences his poetic vision on the beach:

A veiled sunlight lit up faintly the grey sheet of water where the river was embayed. In the distance along the course of the slowflowing Liffey slender masts flecked the sky and, more distant still, the dim fabric of the city lay prone in haze. Like a scene on some vague arras, old as man's weariness, the image of the seventh city of christendom was visible to him across the timeless air, no older nor more weary nor less patient of subjection than in the days of the thingmote. (167)

This, clearly, is the way a young aesthete of the nineties might talk to himself, composing phrases which have a delicate and fatigued music. In his mood of world-weary sensuality, Stephen sees nothing that is not faint, dim, distant, vague, or veiled. Everything is languid and fragile, from the "slowflowing" Liffey to the "slender masts" to the "dim fabric of the city." Notice also that even though Stephen has turned away from Catholicism, he retains the aesthete's nostalgia for an aristocratic, medieval Christianity, suggested here in the "vague arras," the "seventh city of christendom" and the "days of the thingmote."

The later chapters of the book are filled with near-parodies of Pater, the pre-Raphaelites, and the Decadents, but occasionally we can hear another voice, as when Stephen meditates bitterly on the dean of studies in chapter 5:

It seemed as if he used the shifts and lore and cunning of the world, as bidden to do, for the greater glory of God, without joy in their handling or hatred of that in them which was evil but turning them, with a firm gesture of obedience, back upon themselves; and for all this silent service it seemed as if he loved not at all the master and little, if at all, the ends he served. *Similiter atque senis baculus*, he was, as the founder would have had him, like a staff in an old man's hand, to be left in a corner, to be leaned on in the road at nighfall or in stress of weather, to lie with a lady's nosegay on a garden seat, to be raised in menace. (186)

These sentences, in spite of their somewhat anticlerical bitterness, might have come from a skillful preacher. The leisurely syntax, the flair for allusion and analogy, the ear for what used to be called "cadence"—all this probably derives from Cardinal Newman, whom Stephen regards as the greatest writer of prose in English. In fact Newman is mentioned only a page and a half later: "I remember a sentence of Newman's," Stephen says, perhaps unconsciously acknowledging his master.

Therefore, the self-consciously literary style Stephen adopts in the closing chapters, the emporpled Paterian eloquence and the Newmannesque phrasemaking, serves to make him a recognizable type. He is a literary intellectual whose philosophy and poetry are supersaturated with the Catholic influences of his upbringing, and he is highly representative of the English and Anglo-Irish artists of the eighties and nineties. Like those artists he reacts against society by trying to create a priesthood of art. Like them he draws "less pleasure from the reflection of the glowing sensible world . . . than from the contemplation of an inner world of individual emotions mirrored . . . in a lucid supple periodic prose" (166-67). He says at the end of the book that he is going forth to encounter the "reality" of experience so that he may create a "consciousness" for his "race." His

rebellion has undeniably heroic aspects; for example, his unwillingness to commit even small hypocrisies out of fear of a “chemical reaction that would be set up in my soul by false homage” (243). In fact, however, his journey to Paris is at least partly an attempt to escape the oppressive reality of a déclassé family and a country which was widely regarded as the social inferior of Europe. He is in no position to give Ireland a new consciousness, because his own consciousness is so completely derived from the minor poets of decadent literature.

IV

Nevertheless, if Joyce implicitly criticizes Stephen’s aesthetics, Joyce himself remains an artist who has evolved from a position very like Stephen’s. Joyce’s politics, for example, although far more complex and progressive than those of Dedalus, resemble the young man in certain ways. As a novelist Joyce is never the apolitical aesthete he is sometimes made out to be. In *Ulysses* he gives support to Griffith’s movement, even while he criticizes the anti-Semitism and elements of reaction in other areas of Irish nationalism. And yet for Joyce, as for Stephen, Irish history seems almost to have stopped with the collapse of his father’s job prospects. The aristocratic leadership of Parnell had been lost forever, replaced by a more commonplace Fenianism from which both Joyce and Stephen chose to disassociate themselves. History would treat such attitudes ironically. For example, Stephen jokes about his college friends’ “rebellion with hurleysticks” (202), but two real-life counterparts of these boys would subsequently die from British gunfire. Like Stephen, Joyce often spoke of his countrymen as faithless betrayers; but to make this attitude intellectually respectable, he had to freeze time, never moving beyond Bloomsday.⁷

We know also that the young Joyce’s attitudes about aesthetics in the Pola notebooks are almost identical with some of the ideas found in the fifth chapter of *A Portrait*. Through a

process of intensive and courageous self-analysis, Joyce matured into a literary genius, yet if there is any knowledge to be gained from the experience of Stephen Dedalus, it is that a man never completely escapes his past. Joyce could learn to criticize his life, but he could not change his entire consciousness and become another man. He was able, as a mature artist, to record all the unpleasant details of life in dear dirty Dublin, but he remained an uncommitted exile, a literary aristocrat who regarded himself, for a while at least, as the unacknowledged legislator of Ireland. He was able to write about Molly Bloom as an explicitly sexual creature, but not without making her an amoral, essentially ignorant being who is mystified into an archetypal earth mother. He was able to confront the human body more directly than anyone before him, but he had to maintain a thin line of defense against the subject, aestheticizing raw life with the most carefully wrought prose in the history of the English novel. Along with Stephen, Joyce continued to see life in terms of a dualism, a division between matter and spirit which his novels would attempt to reconcile. He chose a severe classicism as his means, rejecting Stephen's romanticism, but his problem remained the same as that of his hero. Like many Irishmen before him, he had been given an "excremental vision," and it is difficult to find a page of his later writings where references to dirt and bodily functions do not coexist with the rarified lyrical temperament we associate with Stephen Dedalus.

Psychologists tell us that we can understand and cope with anxieties, but not that we can do away with them entirely. Joyce had a similar view of human personality, and it is no surprise that he partly retained the defensive aestheticism he criticizes in *A Portrait*. In fact, the aloof, "impersonal" narrative technique of the novel indicates that in still other respects the boy has been father to the man. Pastiche and parody, Joyce's chief technical devices, are relatively undetermined ways of using language; they allow the speaker to detach himself from his own mannerisms so that he may exercise the

limited freedom of imitating someone else. Joyce, as much as Stephen, wanted freedom, and he therefore chose to become a sort of literary forger, deliberately composing books out of a mixture of styles, trying to keep his own language as transparent and impersonal as possible. By this means he would cunningly evade the onus of personality; he would achieve an escape Stephen Dedalus could not manage; he would, at last, become like a god, clear in sight and unburdened by nature or the necessity which no doubt weighed so heavily upon his ordinary self. But his escape is only apparent. The ordinary Joyce, mortal after all, has been projected back into the novels in the form of autobiographical characters who live a socially determined existence.

NOTES

1. *Realism in Our Time* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), p. 26.
2. James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (New York: Viking Press, 1964), p. 241. All page references in the text are to this edition.
3. Richard Ellmann, *James Joyce* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), pp. 11-16.
4. On his first day at Clongowes, Joyce's own father reminded him that John O'Connell, his great-grandfather, had presented an address on those very grounds. The father then gave his son two five-shilling pieces, telling him never to peach on another boy (Ellmann, *James Joyce*, pp. 26-27).
5. *The Classical Temper: A Study of James Joyce's "Ulysses"* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1961), p. 64.
6. *Dublin's Joyce* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1956), p. 120.
7. Further comments on Joyce's politics can be found in Malcolm Brown's excellent study, *The Politics of Irish Literature* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1972), pp. 385-89.