

AUTOBIOGRAPHY AS FICTION IN *A PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST AS A YOUNG MAN*

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Abstract:

This paper looks into the artful way in which James Joyce fictionalizes his autobiography in his Künstlerroman *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Joyce projects his essentially artistic self onto the fictional character Stephen Dedalus, the namesake of the classical ‘cunning’ ‘artificer.’ In his turn, Stephen dreams of becoming Joyce and writing *Ulysses*. Thus, Joyce’s personal history and Dublin’s geography lose their recognizable ‘reality’ in a blueprint of the artist’s mind that charts a Dublin and a self reshaped by his imagination.

Keywords: *autobiography, fiction, artist, impersonality, patterning, structure*

James Joyce was born in the Ireland of the late 19th century into a family from which he preferred to detach himself since his childhood. The Irish situation was assimilated both by John the father and by James the son with the decline of the Joyce family. The landmark of this downfall was Parnell’s almost mythical stance – an emblem of national pride stifled by a national inclination towards betrayal. John Joyce regarded Parnell’s martyrdom as simultaneous with his family’s misfortune. James Joyce considered Parnell’s life as a “lost leader” an epitome of the propensity his fellow countrymen had for betrayal, a theme which was frequently sounded in the Joyce household and henceforth in James Joyce’s writings. In *A Portrait* Joyce the son makes Stephen Dedalus voice his own disgust with what, according to Stephen / Joyce, becomes a long history of betrayal: “No honourable and sincere man, said Stephen, has given up to you his life and his youth and his affections from the days of Tone to those of Parnell but you sold him to the enemy or failed him in need or reviled him and left him for another.” (Joyce 1992, 220)

It was by these treacherous, stifling and paralyzing nets that Joyce, and his fictional persona Stephen Dedalus, wanted to fly. To a nationalist like Davin, Stephen Dedalus explains: “When the soul of a man is born in this country there

are nets flung at it to hold it back from flight. You talk to me of nationality, language, religion. I shall try to fly by those nets.” (Joyce 1992, 220)

The whole of *A Portrait* is actually about this flight, which is further associated with Dedalus the maker of wings, the artist who escaped the incarcerating island of Crete by fashioning wax wings for himself and his son Icarus. Through this reference to Dedalus, Joyce obviously meant to imply that he fictionalized himself as Daedalus the artist. When he mentions the three weapons he will use, by “cunning” he means the ingenuity of the artist, an implicit reference to Daedalus’s skills and resourcefulness. In other words, Joyce implies that he created the text and himself as a creator at the same time.

Stephen / Joyce the artist is both a *poeta faber* and a *poeta vates*. Like Daedalus the cunning artificer and maker of wings whose name he bears, Stephen goes “to forge in the smithy of [his] soul the uncreated conscience of [his] race.” (Joyce 1992, 276) Very significantly, one of the weapons he declares he will allow himself to use is “cunning,” a combination of skill and deception, or rather “skill in deception,” which he needs in order to find a cunning way to escape his entrapping environment and then create a world of his imagination. As Gian Balsamo argues, ‘the identification of poeta and vates goes back to the religious world of the Romans. The ancient poets “were called *vates* and interpreters of the gods, and reputed able to speak *afflante numine* [with the inspiration of the god].”’ (Balsamo, 84) Authors were designated as ‘vates’ because of the strength of their creative minds, therefore the poets who wrote in Latin were called ‘vates’ and their writings *vaticinations*. The artist was the one capable of unveiling with his enlightened mind the secrets of divine revelations to others. Likewise, Stephen / Joyce conceived his writing as epiphanic, i.e. having an essentially revelatory function. From this to the status of a prophet there was just one step, and as Balsamo shows, “the Roman tradition that identified the terms poeta and vates, or vaticinator, supports also, in turn, the later identification of vates and prophet.” (Balsamo, 84) Indeed, the lines that close *A Portrait* are a prayer to the “Old father,” who is also the “old artificer,” an identification of the two hypostases of the artist, to “stand [him] now and ever in good stead.” (Joyce 1992, 276)

Discussing the way in which Joyce’s abandoned manuscript *Stephen Hero* relates to *A Portrait*, Jeri Johnson argues that

events and characters of *Portrait* take their significance from Stephen. While there is still a third-person narrator, that narrator presents Stephen’s perceptions: the attitudes towards others and events are his; they are ‘seen’ by or ‘focalized’ by him. And because they are viewed by him, they reflect something about him. All go to the ends of characterizing the young artist-in-the-making. (Johnson, xiii)

Showing that *A Portrait* is essentially an art novel whose patterning and structure serve this particular genre, Johnson insists on the progress from autobiography to fiction Joyce made from *Stephen Hero* to *A Portrait*: while *Stephen Hero* is roughly autobiographical, having led Joyce to a dead end, *A Portrait* is a result of compression and selection, a process of “arranging things to suit the aesthetic pattern of the novel, not to accord with the timing of his life history.” (Johnson, xiii)

The very opening of *A Portrait* is an introduction to a story about a moocow told by baby tuckoo’s father. The earliest memory is a bed time story, probably repeated every night, and the essential characteristic of that story is its repetitiveness and rhythmical flow, which abolishes the chronological progress of history. Therefore, the chronological order of events in Joyce’s life history is transfigured into the rhythmical-epiphanic and symbolic story of the formation of Stephan Dedalus the artist.

In *A Portrait*, the relevance and significance of chronology is superseded by the significance of each of the five phases of the birth of Stephen’s soul. The first phase shows us Stephen the child experiencing life through the senses, becoming aware of the Saussurian pair of signified and signifier, of the universe, of God, of political frictions, and emerging triumphant from unjust punishment. The second phase essentially shows Stephen’s budding sexuality between romanticizing and physically experimenting, and the chapter ends with Stephen’s visit to a prostitute. Phase three is dominated by Stephen’s religious reawakening which culminates with his repentance and confession. Chapter four, which is a rhythmical counterpoint in the patterning of Stephen’s story, is an impressive rendering of the gradual disintegration of his religious devotion. At the end of Chapter four, in what to many readers is the most memorable epiphany of the novel, Stephen realizes that his soul is called to a celebration of profane beauty and that art is his religion. The last chapter focuses on Stephen’s “non serviam” attitude in discussions about language and art (with the dean of studies), Irish politics (with Davin), theories of art (with Lynch), love and apostasy (with Cranly). In the last pages of the novel, point of view shifts from the third person to the first person with Stephen’s diary as he prepares to take flight and prays to the Old father to support his art of forging “in the smithy of his soul the uncreated conscience of [his] race” (Joyce 1992, 276), which is a reinforcement of the artist’s cunning.

Flying by the nets of stifling conventions, Stephen / James aims at crystallizing the very best of his community’s soul, an act of creation. Seamus Deane finds it significant that “it is in relation to the collective, the race, that he formulates his individual aspiration.” (Deane, vii) Stephen creates himself not just as an artist, but also as a community member, through a decanting process,

which occurs in isolation. His private condition echoes the condition of the Irish race, and the story he prepares to tell at the end of *A Portrait* is decanted history.

Towards the end of *A Portrait* Stephen draws the portrait of the artist Joyce has been creating so far: “The artist, like the God of the creation, remains within or behind or beyond or above his handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent, paring his fingernails.” (Joyce 1992, 233) It seems that in order for the work of art to transcend and transfigure the immanence and transitoriness of reality / history into the transcendence and permanence of art / fiction, the creator – in a process similar to God’s act of creation – must detach himself from it, and then he must dismember and dissolve into his own creation.

Joyce was convinced that it was not his art that mirrored nature; on the contrary, it was nature that mirrored his art. Thus, Stephen is not merely a fictional projection of his author; Joyce the author is a figment of Stephen’s mind: Stephen-the character projects himself as Joyce-the author. Sheldon Brivic shows that “Stephen would like to become Joyce and write *Ulysses* – in fact he is determined to – but he doesn’t know what Joyce or *Ulysses* are. These ideals are potential in him, but their specific forms lie beyond his consciousness in the realm of destiny.” (Brivic, 155) From this perspective, Joyce’s destiny is a fulfillment of Stephen’s potential in *A Portrait*. In his next novel *Ulysses* we meet Stephen again, a few years older, returned from Paris, an embittered person. His embitterment may be an echo of Joyce’s own disgust with his contemporary society, which constantly rejected his work.

In *Încercarea labirintului / Ordeal by Labyrinth*, Mircea Eliade states that “any native land is a sacred geography.” He then adds that “for those who left it,” which is also Joyce’s case, “one’s childhood and adolescence place always becomes a mythical one.” Eliade confesses that for him “Bucharest is the centre of an inexhaustible mythology. Due to this mythology I managed to know its true history. Maybe that of myself, too.” (Eliade, 34, my translation) As the artist dismembers himself and dissolves into his creation, Stephen / Joyce in *A Portrait* dissolves and blurs the recognizable contours of Dublin in order to recreate the city as a blueprint of his mind, coloured by his own readings and moods, which occur to him as he frequently walks its avenues:

The rainladen trees of the avenue evoked in him, as always, memories of the girls and women in the plays of Gerhart Hauptman; and the memory of their pale sorrows and the fragrance falling from the wet branches mingled in a mood of quiet joy. His morning walk across the city had begun, and he foreknew that as he passed the sloblands of Fairview he would think of the cloistral silverveined prose of Newman, that as he walked along the North Strand Road, glancing idly at the windows of the provision shops, he would recall the dark humour of Guido Cavalcanti and smile, that as he went by Baird’s stonemasonry

works in Talbot Place the spirit of Ibsen would blow through him like a keen wind, a spirit of wayward boyish beauty, and that passing a grimy marine dealer's shop beyond the Liffey he would repeat the song by Ben Johnson which begins:

I was not wearier where I lay. (Joyce 1992, 190)

Stephen “foreknows” the associations he is going to make because for him walking is what Seamus Deane calls “a mnemonic device for his reading.” As an “intellectual dandy” or “flâneur” Stephen walks in order to rehearse his role as a reader: reading the city he re-reads his favourite or relevant authors, and practises the free association of thoughts, which is an essential device of stream of consciousness. However, Stephen is not any kind of reader, and, as Seamus Deane argues, “the very obscurity of the associations is itself the sign of his preciousness.” (Deane, xiii) Stephen / Joyce is an artist. His associations are peculiar to himself, idiosyncratic. His is not exactly everybody else's city. His Dublin is, like in a dream, the Dublin on the map turned into the Dublin of his mind. The artist felt suffocated by real-life Dublin, like Stephen. Stephen, like Joyce, transfigured the grimy reality of Dublin through those bookish associations, and filtered the geography of the city through his readings, a twofold process of de-creation and re-creation, a re-shaping of the real-life configurations of the city seen through the artist's eyes.

In her essay “Modern Fiction” Virginia Woolf urged her fellow artists to “examine for a moment an ordinary mind on an ordinary day” and by this she meant the “myriad” of “impressions” coming “from all sides”. She further urged them to “record the atoms as they fall upon the mind in the order in which they fall”, tracing “the pattern, however disconnected and incoherent in appearance, which each sight or incident scores upon the consciousness.” (Woolf, 286) The aesthetic principle formulated by Woolf here is impressionistic and it matches Joyce's narrative mode in *A Portrait*. In this impressionistic key, the city's real-life contours get blurred and Dublin becomes a projection of the artist's mind.

This spatial intersection of personal and communal geography implies an intersection of subjective and objective time – history. In Bakhtin's terms, this fusion is a chronotope. According to the Russian critic, chronotopes are “points in the geography of a community where time and space intersect and fuse. Time takes on flesh and becomes visible for human contemplation; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time and history and the enduring character of a people...Chronotopes thus stand as monuments to the community itself, as symbols of it, as forces operating to shape its members' images of themselves.” (Bruner [ed.], 44-45) Joyce's Dublin is a fundamental chronotope in *A Portrait*, in which the motif of street walking, provincialism¹,

¹ Bakhtin argues that the provincial town is a chronotope in Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*. It can also be found “in many variants” in Gogol, Turgenev, Chekhov, etc.

spiritual renewals, and what Bakhtin called “biographical time” interfuse. Bakhtin argues that in Tolstoy biographical time falls smoothly in the interior spaces. The interior spaces of Joyce’s Dublin are not only rooms and houses, but also – very significantly – the whole geography of the city which is internalised by Stephen Dedalus. Like Pierre Bezukhov’s spiritual renewal in Tolstoy’s *War and peace*, Stephen’s is lengthy and gradual. The epiphanic moments, which are the landmarks of Stephen’s journey through life in Dublin, occur at significant intersections of space-time. The one in which Stephen realises that his vocation is not priesthood but art takes place on Dublin’s strand before the last phase of his formation as a young artist. The place is an ambiguous borderline – neither land nor water, and the girl standing “before him in midstream, alone and still, gazing out to sea” and having “the likeness of a strange and beautiful sea-bird.” (Joyce 1992, 185) is no less ambiguous. The ambiguity of the strand chronotope is a metaphorical reinforcement of the illusive geography of *A Portrait* and of Dublin’s dreamy quality.

With the image of this “angel of mortal youth and beauty” “passed into his soul for ever” (Joyce 1992, 186) Stephen moves to that stage of his development when he crystallises his aesthetics and becomes a self-conscious artist determined to voice both himself and his race.

Stephen’s aesthetics are produced by a *forma mentis* in which the spirit of Daedalus is shadowed by the spirit of Icarus.² The principle of the *impersonalization* of the artist and *impersonality* of art is a major aspect of Joyce’s poetics. It is this principle which compelled Joyce to efface the obviously autobiographical marks of his personality and create his own artist persona in *A Portrait*. Similar theories had already been devised by Mallarmé, Baudelaire, Flaubert, and closer to Joyce’s own times by Pound and T. S. Eliot.

Joyce’s impersonal work appears to be a self-centred object, a refined mirror-image of both life and the self in which echoes and references to the artist’s personal experience enter into new combinations to be contained by the aesthetic object. The object itself, which in this case is the text of *A Portrait*, aspires to the *intergritas* which is one of the prerequisites of universal beauty, the substitute of life itself.

The ultimate and essential purpose of art is to “arrest” the mind by “the luminous silent stasis of aesthetic pleasure,” which is a “spiritual state” likened to “a fading coal” (Shelley) or “called the enchantment of the heart” (Luigi Galvani). (Joyce 1992, 231) As Stephen / Joyce argues, this is a mysterious moment, an instant of intensity that borders on the ineffable, and not the purity

² Umberto Eco sees the spirit of Daedalus as the source of the ‘artifice,’ which superimposes strict logic onto a flickering intuition. On the other hand, doubt, which is the mark of the spirit of Icarus, is “a ‘chiaroscuro’ state of the logos, the crepuscular thought, the mental shadow” of a mind (Eco, 20) whose geometric order is Daedalic.

and serenity of aesthetic contemplation. This notion of aesthetic pleasure came to Joyce through the Romantics, through Walter Pater's doctrine's of art for art's sake, through the symbolists and d'Annunzio. For these aesthetes, pleasure is no longer the result of some objective perception but the subjective response to a flickering moment of experience whose epiphanic nature they transfix and mold into a linguistic equivalent of the real. In so doing, "Joyce's artist, the last heir of the Romantic tradition, extracts meanings from a reality which would otherwise remain amorphous, and so he claims the world and becomes its centre." (Eco, 80, my translation)

A Portrait is a significant stage in the evolution of Joyce's mythpoeic art. In the third chapter of *Ulysses*, the same yet older and more embittered Stephen Dedalus walks along the Sandymount Strand and plunges into memories of his younger self, the self of *Spehen Hero* and *A Portrait*:

Remember your epiphanies on green oval leaves, deeply deep, copies to be sent if you died to all the great libraries of the world, including Alexandria? Someone was to read them there after a few thousand years, a mahamanvantara. Pico della Mirandola like. Ay, very like a whale. When one reads these strange pages of one long gone one feels that one is at one with one who once... (Joyce 1946, 41)

This train of thoughts ending in a sense of one's artistic self as a protean entity, which despite transformations can still be identified as one's self, puts into perspective Joyce's achievement in the early stage of *A Portrait*. What Umberto Eco reads in the title of Joyce's Künstlerroman is "a cultural situation which the mature Joyce recognizes and objectivizes." (Eco, 82, my translation). That cultural situation is the conflict in the artist's mind between a whole set of values and principles conceived *ad mentem divi Thomae* on the one hand, and the demands of a new modern sensibility, on the other.

Thus, through a process of *impersonalization*, Joyce's *A Portrait* ceases to be the portrait of a particular artist and becomes a portrait of the Artist tugged between two conflicting orders: "the traditional order and the new view of the world." Stephen's conflict is the epitome of the conflict of the artist "who strives to shape the chaos of the world around, but always finds the tools of the old Order because he hasn't succeeded in replacing them yet." (Eco, 82, my translation) In her essay "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown" Virginia Woolf captured the same spirit of an age in which the old order persists while new vistas open before the artist. Joyce serves as an example of "a desperate man who feels that in order to breathe he must break the windows." Woolf's "windows" keep the fresh air of novelty from entering the old house of fiction. When the window is broken, Woolf finds Joyce "magnificent." (Woolf, 334) Woolf herself struggled with this "season of failures and fragments" and projected the struggle onto Lily Briscoe, her artist figure in *To the Lighthouse*, and Bernard, "the phrase-maker"

who feels he can never finish his stories in *The Waves*. All these projections of the artist internalize a sense of “the spasmodic, the obscure, the fragmentary, the failure” (Woolf, 337) which are signs of a cultural seism.

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