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Joyce's "Surrender" to the Interior Realm: the Subjective Consciousness of Stephen Dedalus in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*

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"small and weak amid the throng of players" (Joyce 6)

In the posthumously published draft for *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916), James Joyce's Stephen Dedalus, disillusioned with the "indignity of life forced... upon him", finds himself "enamoured of an idealising, a more veritably human tradition"; that is, writing (*Stephen Hero*, 25). In the final publication of Stephen's adolescent years, his internal, subjective idealisation of an often bleak reality into something more aesthetically palatable remains central to the novel. This is not, however, through the explicit description of his thoughts as presented by the detached and external narration of *Stephen Hero*, but through the flowing, "more impressionistic" free indirect discourse of *Portrait* (Naremore 333). This infects the reader's experience of the novel with an innate and all-consuming Stephen-ness. In this way, Joyce expresses the young protagonist's descent into a transient, conscious realm of constant negotiation, in which he recreates and reorders reality over and over in an attempt to reconcile real, objective facts with detached, subjective perception. The young artist's resultant method of negotiation is his linguistic aestheticization of life, which ultimately becomes his way of relieving the external pressures of religion, family, friends, and nation. Through the form of the *Künstlerroman*, Joyce therefore evokes the evolution of Stephen's "infant consciousness"; from an early curiosity for life which he begins to outline in words and names, to his adolescent literary renderings of the world, and, eventually, to the ultimate physical detachment from the external world which manifests in the form of his exile at the end of the novel (Naremore 333).

From the very first chapter of *Portrait*, Joyce evokes the inescapable dissonance between Stephen's interior consciousness and the exterior - and often oppressive - reality around him, which, as Harry Levin writes, are "continually played off" against each other (Levin 14). On the school field Stephen finds himself "on the fringe of his line", "small and weak amid the throng of players", characterising the protagonist as an observer of the world, on the edge of his peers and already detached from a corporeal experience of reality (Joyce

6). Young Stephen instead retreats into his own mind to make sense of the reality before him, labelling each classmate as “a decent fellow” or “a stink”, reordering and categorising the multiple, chaotic, and severe world around him (Joyce 6). This tendency, as Levin describes, “exalts the habit of verbal association into a principle for the arrangement of experience”, allowing Stephen a sense of artificial and internal power over a world where he feels individually powerless; a power which he will reassert over and over (Levin 16). For example, in Chapter II, whilst struggling to write verses of love poetry “To E—C—”, he finds himself “desisting” and instead writes out the “names and addresses of certain of his classmates” on the page (Joyce 61). He has falsely but successfully “thought himself into confidence”, revealed by the connotation of “desisting” as a physical arrest or detachment from the world, and he instead rewrites the world according to his subjective experience of it, and notably experiences a sense of pleasure in this (Joyce 61). Regarded by Levin to be Stephen’s “literary” “conditioned reflexes”, this tendency grants him a sensation of newness and hope in its role of a continual “rebaptism of the mind”, as Richard Ellmann describes, allowing him to continue to move – however artificially – towards his goal of becoming an artist (Levin 16, Ellmann 101).

Despite Stephen’s internal attempts to make sense of the world through words, he is constantly confronted with the dissonance between his aestheticized version of the world and its reality; for instance, in the inciting moment when he goes to visit Queen’s College in Cork with his father. In the empty anatomy theatre, Stephen notices the word “*Foetus*” etched in the “dark stained wood”, an image which “startled his blood”, and he starts to “feel the absent students of the college about him” and “shrink from their company” (Joyce 78). Echoing the images of social detachment and corporeal fragility of Stephen on the school field, Joyce’s adolescent protagonist comes face to face with a horrifying biological reality that he cannot linguistically aestheticize; one that is engraved into existence. Indeed, presented with this

“uncanny” word, as Garry Leonard puts, which notably connotes purity, birth, and innocence, he is “shocked” to discover that “a trace of what he had deemed... a brutish and individual malady of his own mind” can also be found in the “outer world” (Leonard 88, Joyce 79). Joyce hereby combines the young man’s realisation of his distance from childhood innocence with the equally shocking young artist’s realisation of the futility of attempting to recreate a world that mocks these artistic attempts. Nevertheless, Stephen will inevitably continue his aestheticizing approach in spite of this corporeal confrontation with life, reflected through how he reverts to his habit of naming:

—*I am Stephen Dedalus. I am walking beside my father whose name is Simon Dedalus. We are in Cork, in Ireland. Cork is a city. Our room is in the Victoria Hotel. Victoria and Stephen and Simon. Simon and Stephen and Victoria. Names.*

(Joyce 81).

Here, Stephen once again ‘rebaptises’ himself, repeating words as a method of self-preservation that places the ordered concept of “Names” over the disorder of reality; an order which is emphasised by the rhythmic repetition. “[Suddenly] estranged from what should be most familiar – his own thoughts”, Stephen reverts to familiar linguistic reminders of his own identity, re-vocalising and thus legitimising his subjective perception of the world, against the reoccurring threat that reality poses to his individual artistic mind (Leonard 88).

Moreover, Joyce presents how Stephen’s infantile tendency to internally reorder reality through words further evolves into something more literary and overtly Romantic, as he grows as an artist. Surrounded by his father’s friends in Cork, Stephen feels increasingly disillusioned and isolated by the lame reality of life and turns to Percy Bysshe Shelley for comfort: “*Art thou pale for weariness... Wandering companionless...?*” (Joyce 84).

Romantic ideas of wandering, isolation, and being awestruck by nature begin to reverberate through Joyce's free indirect discourse, reflecting Stephen's attempts to align himself with his Romantic predecessors and subsequently render his chronic loneliness an experience that is essential to his journey towards literary greatness, rather than a depressing social flaw. Forgetting "his own human and ineffectual grieving", Stephen claims to find something wholly comforting in his regurgitation of Romantic poetry, as he reduces a complex, depressing and uncomfortable reality into a singular, poignant, and aesthetically palatable verse of poetry that is far from Joycean realism (Joyce 84).

Whilst his protagonist's sense of confidence, or self-importance, grows as he develops and hones his Romantic sensibilities and knowledge, Joyce simultaneously highlights an artifice and even delusion in Stephen's self-declared status as 'artist'. After his conversation with the director about joining the priesthood, Stephen claims to vehemently reject the exterior "social or religious orders" of Catholic Ireland, discerning that his true "destiny" is instead to "learn his own wisdom apart from others... wandering among the snares of the world" (Joyce 142). Overtly echoing the sentiments of Shelley – "wandering among" – he looks to assume an identity as the outcast artist, "smarting from pain which has chosen to bear", as Ellmann aptly writes (Ellmann 89). Nevertheless, Joyce evokes an artifice surrounding this sudden, decisive action toward a certain "destiny" in the climactic final scene of Chapter IV. Alone on a beach, "unheeded, happy and near to the wild heart of life", Stephen observes a girl whom he idealises into a "strange and beautiful seabird" and imagines that she returns his look "without shame or wantonness" (Joyce 150). Despite the flowery, romantic language of Stephen's thoughts and the overt literary allusion to John Millington Synge's 'The Birdgirl on the Shore', a Joycean irony seeps into this seemingly epiphanic pinnacle, rendering it unconvincing as a moment of real growth in Stephen's struggle with the external pressures of the world (Synge 272). Stephen's continued insistence

on being “near” to life, his abstract assumptions of others’ thoughts, and the fleeting nature of his metaphoric symbols highlight the continuation of the dissonance between his interior, artistic consciousness and reality. He inadvertently reveals the artifice behind his moment of artistic inspiration in claiming to “recreate life out life”; his art is a static *recreation*, rather than a kinetic creation (Joyce 150). Thus, his Pateresque “swooning into some new world” at the end of this chapter can be read as a temporary and superficial escape that takes place solely in Stephen’s subjective consciousness, away from “brutish” corporeal existence (Joyce 151).

Stephen’s desire for detachment continues to develop, and by the end of the novel he decides that in order to achieve artistic freedom – which, for Stephen, requires distance from life – he must leave Ireland. Eugene Waith argues that Stephen’s flight, like that of Daedalus, is “a widening of consciousness”, suggesting a hope for artistic growth; however, as Naremore contends, Joyce’s continued “subtle parody” of Stephen’s “florid imagination” through to the novel’s final lines suggests that this departure is neither as authentic nor fruitful as Stephen idealises it to be (Waith 121, Naremore 335). This subtle criticism is understood, for instance, through the voice of Cranly, Stephen’s friend. Cranly questions his seemingly dramatic rejection of the Catholic church – “But why do you fear a bit of bread?” – and challenges Stephen’s contradictory ideas as, despite claiming to “disbelieve” in religion, his friend finds that Stephen’s “mind is supersaturated with [it]” (Joyce 215, 212). Moreover, Joyce’s abhorrence for Stephen’s hypocrisy is made clear in his response:

“I imagine, Stephen said, that there is a malevolent reality behind those things I say I fear.”

(Joyce 215).

The syntactic placement of the dialogue tag after “I imagine” highlights the dissonance

between the imagined and the real, and, along with Cranly's flippant tone, undermines the seriousness with which Stephen speaks. Towards the end of their conversation, Stephen's assertive internal declaration, "Yes: he would go.", is further undermined by a concealed Joycean irony in the protagonist's reasoning that "he could not strive against another" (Joyce 126). To Joyce, for whom "the position of the artist involves constant change", the act of "striving" – a kinetic action – is undoubtedly more heroic than Stephen's idealised image of a liberating flight towards artistic creation that is adorned with – and undermined by – frivolous literary metaphor and endless false epiphany (Brivic 457). Thus, Stephen's decision to detach himself from the real world, and this time from Ireland, and to instead retreat into the interior, subjective reality in his head, is perhaps doomed for disappointment "for the millionth time" (Joyce 224).

His false epiphanies and embellished meditations on aesthetic theory "enable Stephen to proceed by means of contradiction" and continue in his pursuit of artistic status; indeed, he is eventually incited to undertake the *real* decision of exile (Riquelme 115). However, Joyce's sustained irony throughout the novel suggests that, by surrendering to an idealised, literary interior realm, Stephen's artistic methods become increasingly deluded and self-serving, rather than nation-serving, as he would declare. Once again, the transferral of action "from the social to the psychological sphere" between Joyce's original version and the finalised novel is pertinent; "the actual struggles [take place] within the mind of Stephen", as does his negotiation of these struggles as a way of evading and escaping them (Levin 14). Overall, the presentation of Stephen's subjective perception of the world through internal epiphanic outbursts and literary loquacity provide the text with an essential "individuating rhythm", in Boes' words, that can be regarded as the early stages of Joyce's Modernist experimentalism (Boes 767). Through this Modernist style, Joyce maintains the novel in a Pateresque – and rather Icarian – "perpetual flight" that mirrors his young artist's naïve hope to achieve real

artistic success through a detachment from reality (Pater 299).

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