

The Nets Worn Inward: Alienation as Method in James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*

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Abstract— James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* is usually read as a novel of growth, freedom and artistic awakening. Yet Stephen Dedalus does not grow simply or peacefully. He is formed by quarrels at home, strict religious schooling, sexual guilt, political bitterness and unease with the language in which he must think and write. This article argues that Stephen's movement from alienation towards artistic selfhood is the central drama of the novel, and that Joyce leaves it deliberately unfinished. Alienation in *Portrait* is both wound and resource. It cuts Stephen off from family, church, nation and human warmth, yet it also sharpens his perception and drives him towards art. Reading the novel alongside recent work on Joyce's composition, religion, language, form, gender and nation, the article shows that Stephen never escapes the nets he names. He learns instead to work inside them. Family decline, Jesuit discipline, colonial language and inward unrest are not obstacles he clears on the way to art; they are the material from which his style is made. On this reading the ending offers no finished identity. Stephen leaves Ireland with a voice still in formation, and the closing diary marks work begun rather than completed. The article also holds Stephen to account. The detachment that makes him an artist is the same detachment that makes him a difficult son, a distant friend and a poor reader of the women around him. Joyce grants him his vocation without granting him innocence.



Keywords— Alienation, Colonial Ireland, James Joyce, *Künstlerroman*, Modernism, Stephen Dedalus

I. INTRODUCTION

James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* is often described as the story of a boy who becomes an artist. The description is not wrong, but it is far too smooth. Stephen Dedalus does not move steadily from confusion to wisdom. He moves through fear, shame, pride, rebellion, desire, disgust and sudden bursts of clarity. He grows up in a household where money is short and tempers are shorter, under a church that measures the soul by its sins, inside a politics soured by betrayal, and in a language that feels borrowed from someone else. In such a world identity does not arrive ready-made. It has to be fought for, and even then, it stays unsettled.

The novel matters because Joyce refuses the comfortable answers. Stephen is neither a simple victim of

his society nor a genius rising clear of it. He is a divided young man. He wants freedom, yet he keeps looking for something to obey. He rejects the Church, yet its cadences govern his thought. He resists his family, yet its pain stays lodged in him. He longs to speak in a voice of his own, but every language within reach already belongs to history, to empire or to religion. That tension makes *Portrait* one of the strongest modern studies of a self in formation.

Much of the criticism on the novel reads Stephen's life through identity, alienation, religion and artistic growth. Bhatt argues that before Stephen becomes an artist, he is split among family, school, church and nation, and that art becomes the ground on which these scattered parts can be brought into relation (5, 8-9). Gillespie and Fagnoli, surveying the field, note how persistently readers have

organised the novel around Stephen's progress towards vocation (56-80). This line of reading is useful, but it needs sharpening. It can sound as though art cures Stephen. Joyce is tougher than that.

This article argues that Stephen's movement from alienation towards artistic selfhood is the central pattern of the novel, and that the movement is left incomplete on purpose. Alienation in *Portrait* is more than loneliness. It is a condition produced by family decline, Jesuit discipline, colonial language, sexual unrest and national pressure. Stephen turns that condition into a method, but he never works free of it. Art gives him a direction, not a cure. The argument has a sharper edge than the familiar one about rebellion. What Stephen refuses is never a single institution but a mesh in which schooling, faith, politics and language had already been tied together before he was old enough to name any of them. Read alongside recent scholarship on Joyce's composition, his handling of religion and language, his narrative form, and his treatment of women and nation, the novel's famous ending looks less like a victory than a threshold. Stephen does not close the book as a finished artist. He closes it as a young man who has finally agreed to the labour of making himself.

II. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Criticism on *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* has tended to divide along a small number of lines. The oldest of these is biographical. Because the novel follows the broad outline of Joyce's own early years, autobiographical readings have never gone out of use. Abu Jweid reads the book as a Künstlerroman shaped through episodic development and free indirect discourse, stressing how Joyce converts private material into artistic structure (5-9). Bhatt treats the novel as a revelation of the artist's self and argues that Stephen's divided inner life slowly finds direction in aesthetic awareness (5). Such readings remain valuable, since the novel clearly draws energy from lived experience. Yet Stephen is not Joyce in disguise. He is a shaped modern consciousness, and the shaping is the point.

Recent genetic criticism has made this clear in a way that older biographical reading could not. Gabler's collected work on the manuscripts reconstructs how the novel was built between 1903 and 1914, and shows that the Christmas dinner quarrel was moved into the first chapter late in revision, tying the book more tightly to the fall of Parnell (71-108). The scene that modern readers treat as the novel's political foundation was therefore a decision, not a memory transcribed. Van Mierlo's study of what he calls cultural genetics pushes the point further, reading the epiphanies and the early fiction as evidence that Joyce built an identity against the Revivalist

mainstream while remaining tied to its aims (77-99). Winnick's catalogue of roughly eight hundred previously unnoticed echoes, drawn from canonical poetry as readily as from hymns and advertisements, confirms how densely made the surface of the novel is. Together these studies move the autobiographical question onto firmer ground: the novel is not a record of a life but a construction out of one.

A second line of criticism concerns psychology and the unstable self. Bhatt reads Stephen as a divided figure broken by family hardship, religion, politics and cultural pressure (7-9). Farahmandian and Shao read him through Karen Horney's account of neurosis and argue that self-estrangement and inner conflict sit at the centre of his personality. Li and Dong extend the same framework in a direction criticism has usually neglected, treating Mary Dedalus as a compliant, self-effacing personality in her own right rather than as a background figure, and showing how her habit of appeasement produces dependency and self-defeat (490-504). The boldest psychoanalytic claim, however, belongs to the Lacanian tradition. Ramírez, working from Seminar XXIII, argues that Joyce made of his writing a *sinthome*: a knot that holds together a structure which would otherwise come apart, compensating for a paternal naming that Simon Dedalus never managed to transmit (1-14). On this account art is not self-expression at all. It is load-bearing. The reading is speculative, and it has the virtue of explaining why Stephen's vocation feels less like a choice than a necessity. This body of work takes Stephen's unrest seriously, and the attention to his mother is overdue. The risk is a vocabulary that turns a historical subject into a clinical one. Stephen's trouble is not only private illness. It belongs to a country where church, respectability and politics press hard on desire and thought.

Religion has been the most persistent subject of all. Akca shows how Catholic belief shapes Stephen's sense of self even where he seems to shake it off (52-61). Constandache argues that the novel should be read not as a rehearsal for *Ulysses* but as a finished modernist achievement, in which religious authority and creative freedom stay in live tension and Stephen negotiates his Aristotelian and Thomist inheritance instead of simply discarding it (31-48). Liu identifies three paternal figures in Stephen's path, the biological father, the priest and the artistic forebear, and argues that his search for a father is less a repair of psychological injury than a literary act of symbolic patricide (167-92). Choi's work on Jesuit education is the most politically pointed of the recent studies: Clongowes and Belvedere, he shows, served Catholic and nationalist interests while also training boys for imperial service, so that religious formation, games and

empire worked as one system (83-103). That argument matters for the present essay, because it means Stephen's quarrel with the Church was never separable from his quarrel with the state. Two further studies explain the mechanics of his refusal rather than its politics. Jones reads the novel through the psychology of associative learning and shows that Joyce pairs the priesthood with images of the skull, cold and decay early and unambiguously, so that the reader's aversion is in place well before Stephen is offered ordination (158-63). Rickard, tracing the word "instinct" through Joyce's early prose, argues that the refusal when it comes is bodily rather than reasoned, and that the body in *Portrait* has changed from the impediment it was in *Dubliners* into a source of knowledge in its own right.

Language and style form the fourth and perhaps the richest field. Attridge argues that in *Portrait* Joyce develops a technique that unmoors language from any single intentional source, so that the reader moves through a sequence of changing compositional methods rather than listening to one narrator describe a boy (24-34). Leahy shows that the novel begins not at the start of Stephen's life but at the start of his linguistic life, and that Joyce uses devices belonging specifically to print, italics, indentation, the broken-off ellipsis, in order to register the sound of speech (453-76). Sabbagh and Yazdanjoo supply quantitative support from an unexpected direction, using corpus stylistics to track how the dominant semantic fields of the novel shift measurably from chapter to chapter (53-76). What earlier critics described impressionistically as a change of voice turns out to be countable. Haughton adds a sharp historical correction, showing that the decision to serialise *Portrait* in *The Egoist* was Dora Marsden's rather than Pound's, and arguing that the novel both dramatises her philosophy of egoistic language and quietly undoes its solipsism (327-44). Raupp shows that Latin in the novel is not school decoration but a structure of prestige and ritual (181-90), and Hou and Shen demonstrate that even the word "nice" in the opening pages already carries the moral pressure Stephen will spend five chapters resisting (123-27). Fima, reading the novel against Cubist painting, argues that its fragmentation, simultaneous perspectives and layered time amount to a decisive break with traditional narration a full decade before *Ulysses*.

Studies of narrative form overlap with this group but ask a different question. Amerian et al. analyse the novel's shifts of time and show how pauses, repetitions and backward movements follow mental life rather than the calendar (1033-35). Mukhitdinova places the stream of consciousness and the artist-plot at the centre of the novel's modernism (224-26). Riquelme, writing in the third edition of the Cambridge companion, sets Stephen's formation

inside Ireland's colonial situation and argues that Joyce, like Wilde before him, invokes the Bildungsroman in order to subvert it, producing a protagonist who diverges from social norms rather than settling into them (31-46). Kim approaches the question through the diary, reading embedded diary passages in Orwell, Joyce and Woolf as a subversive form rather than a sentimental one, and treating Stephen's closing entries as the formal signature of his turn to artistic self-consciousness (31-55). Pérez-Simón approaches the same formal question comparatively, reading *Portrait* beside Luis Martín-Santos's unfinished *Time of Destruction* and drawing attention to the instability of the narrator's position and to the Nietzschean substrate the two novels share (72-85). Hall, from a different angle again, traces Stephen's habit of imaginative "telescoping" to late-Victorian popular astronomy, and argues that in the novel empirical observation and imaginative flight support one another instead of competing (339-55).

Gender criticism has developed quickly in the last few years and has become less forgiving of Stephen. Russ reads the women of the novel as sources of guidance rather than obstruction, arguing that they help redirect him from gross desire towards a more reflective way of seeing (12). Koo takes the harder view and argues that Stephen's aesthetics in *Portrait* fail precisely because they can only treat women as idealised abstractions, his mother most damagingly of all, and that the failure is built into his theory rather than incidental to it (9-29). Ko turns to the act of narration itself, showing how refusals of food by women in Joyce's early fiction register a resistance that the male narrator distorts in the telling (9-38). Rickard arrives at a similar verdict from the direction of the body, noting that Stephen registers the wading girl as physically present, even down to the "crane" of her leg, and then promptly converts her into an angel. Taken together, these studies make it difficult to read the bird-girl scene as a simple artistic liberation. Someone is being looked at, and the looking has costs.

Myth, nation and exile make up the last cluster. Monteiro reads Stephen as an artist-hero shaped by Daedalian patterns of trial, separation and escape (40-41, 77-78). Sharma continues this line by arguing that Stephen's journey from childhood to exile reworks the mythical hero in a modern frame (91-98), and Cappelluti sets the figure inside the opposed centripetal and centrifugal pulls of the Ulysses myth in Joyce's work as a whole (157-83). On the national question, Ó Cuileagáin tracks Joyce's changing treatment of the Irish peasantry from *Stephen Hero* into *Portrait*, through Davin's stories, the man in the mountain cabin and the closing diary, and places the novel inside a rural Ireland that Dublin-centred criticism has tended to overlook (104-38). Callanan's

political biography argues at book length that Joyce was an original and dissenting Irish nationalist formed by the Parnell split rather than a writer indifferent to politics. Conde-Parrilla supplies the closest textual demonstration of the colonial argument. Reading the novel's historical allusions as metonymic signs, she shows that they function as portals opening onto a second portrait, that of Ireland as a British colony, and that they are concentrated in the first and fifth chapters (13-25). Her work is particularly valuable because it locates the politics of the novel in details a reader can check rather than in atmosphere. Mazlounian offers the most immediately useful recent idea for the present argument: reading the novel's spaces through Foucault's heterotopia, she shows that Stephen repeatedly finds counter-spaces outside the reach of the dominant order, and that these are where he recognises that other forms of selfhood are possible (451-57). Jamili and Arshadi approach the same material through the idea of home, arguing that identity in the novel is inseparable from place and that the very notion of a home rests on the repression of differences within the self (44-50).

What emerges from this body of work is a field that is rich but strangely compartmentalised. One set of studies attends to composition, another to neurosis, another to religion, others to time, style, gender, myth or nation. Each illuminates something real. Few of them let these pressures act on Stephen at the same moment. The present article takes the opposite approach. It argues that Stephen's alienation is psychological, spiritual, linguistic, sexual and political at once, and that Joyce's achievement lies in refusing to let these forces take turns. They arrive together, they contradict one another, and it is out of their collision that a method, and eventually a style, begins to form.

III. THE NOVEL AS A MODERNIST BILDUNGSROMAN

One reason *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* still feels alive is that it stands between literary traditions. It belongs to the Bildungsroman, the novel of formation, because it follows Stephen from early childhood into early adulthood. It belongs to the Künstlerroman, because the growth it traces is specifically the growth of an artist. Joyce does not simply repeat either form. He bends both. The novel ends not in social settlement or moral balance but in departure, uncertainty and a diary. Stephen's life is left unfinished, and the lack of finish is doing work.

Riquelme's account of this manoeuvre is the most useful recent one. He argues that Joyce, following Wilde, invokes the conventions of formation in order to break them, so that the protagonist diverges from social expectation instead of growing into it, and that the

divergence is where the possibility of a different Ireland is lodged (31-46). Stephen repeatedly tries to read his own life as though it were moving towards destiny. He wants revelation, mission, a chosen role, a final shape. Joyce surrounds those wishes with irony. The beach epiphany feels like an arrival, yet the novel runs on for another chapter. The aesthetic arguments of the fifth chapter sound magisterial, yet they settle nothing emotionally. The diary closes the book in a voice full of confidence and full of gaps. Stephen has chosen a direction. He has not solved himself. Pérez-Simón's comparative reading is instructive here, since setting *Portrait* beside a novel its author never finished throws the deliberateness of Joyce's own incompleteness into relief (72-85). Martín-Santos stopped; Joyce chose to stop.

The novel's modernism lies partly in this refusal and partly in its method. Mukhitdinova points to the stream of consciousness, the inward movement and the stylistic experiment as responses to a world whose institutions can no longer command easy trust (224-26). Fima makes a stronger claim, reading the novel's fragmentation, simultaneous viewpoints and layered time as a Cubist construction, and insisting that the decisive break with traditional narration happens here rather than in *Ulysses*. Constandache argues along the same lines from a different starting point, treating *Portrait* as a completed modernist work in which sound and rhythm carry meaning that statement cannot (31-48). Both are right to resist the old habit of reading the novel as an apprentice piece. Its language changes with Stephen's age: at the start it arrives as fragments of sound, smell and rhythm; later it turns complex, self-conscious, analytical, even theatrical. Joyce does not tell us that Stephen develops. He makes the development audible.

Attridge's account of how this is done repays attention, because it explains why the effect is so hard to paraphrase. In *Portrait*, he argues, Joyce unmoors language from any single intentional source, so that the reader passes through a series of compositional methods rather than hearing one narrator report on a boy (24-34). The novel accordingly offers not one self slowly coming into focus but a succession of provisional selves: the frightened, sensory child of Clongowes; the romantic adolescent full of literary pose; the pious and tormented penitent; the proud university student assembling an aesthetic system. These selves do not replace one another tidily. They overlap. The religious self still echoes inside the artist. The frightened child survives in the proud young man. Identity in the novel is layered rather than linear, and corpus analysis bears this out: Sabbagh and Yazdanjoo find the dominant semantic fields of the text shifting measurably from chapter to chapter, which is to say that the change of voice

readers have always sensed is present in the vocabulary itself (53-76).

Joyce's handling of time strengthens the same effect. Amerian et al. show that the novel does not move forward in a straight line but uses pauses, repetitions, memory loops and uneven pacing to give shape to inward experience (1033-35). Some years pass in a sentence. Some afternoons are stretched until ordinary time seems to stop. The retreat sermons, the Christmas quarrel, the beach epiphany and the final diary pages all burn more brightly than the years around them, because Joyce measures duration by consciousness rather than by the calendar. The result reads less like a complete life than like a pattern of awakenings. Stephen becomes most real at the point where he is least settled, and the novel is finished precisely because it refuses to finish him.

IV. CHILDHOOD, FAMILY, AND THE MAKING OF ALIENATION

Stephen's alienation begins early, and Joyce takes care not to trace it to a single dramatic cause. It grows out of ordinary experience: schoolyard shame, bodily weakness, quarrels at home, money trouble, religious fear and a steady sense of not fitting. At Clongowes he is marked out from the start. He does not move easily among the other boys, does not enjoy rough games, feels his body as small and breakable, and is far more alert to humiliation than to belonging (Joyce, ch. 1). The early sensitivity shapes everything that follows. Stephen learns very young that the world has to be watched closely, because it is not naturally safe.

Monteiro is right to read the first chapter as the beginning of an outsider's consciousness rather than as a schoolboy sketch (40-41). Clongowes is not merely a setting; it is Stephen's first training in estrangement. The boys' slang confuses him. Their confidence is not his. He is anxious about small things, haunted by illness, and made sharply aware of unfair power in the pandying episode. When he takes his complaint to the rector, the moment matters not because it makes him brave but because it teaches him that language can be turned against authority. Speech, he discovers, may defend the self in a world that will not. Even his retreat into abstraction begins here. Hall shows that Stephen's habit of imaginative telescoping, visible already in the flyleaf list that runs from his own name out to the universe, draws on the popular astronomy of the period, and that in Joyce's hands observation and imaginative flight reinforce rather than oppose one another (339-55). The boy who cannot win a game learns instead to change the scale at which he looks.

What Clongowes teaches, however, is not only estrangement but a politics, and Joyce plants it in the child's mind before the child can examine it. Conde-Parrilla's study of the novel's historical allusions shows how thoroughly the first chapter is worked: Father Arnall divides Stephen's class into rival parties named York and Lancaster, so that the English Wars of the Roses are re-enacted as a classroom competition, and the grammar book has Wolsey dying in Leicester Abbey (13-25). Stephen, beaten in the sum and already feverish, drifts into colour instead: white roses and red roses were beautiful to think of, and then the thought that you could not have a green rose, though perhaps somewhere in the world you could (Joyce, ch. 1). The passage is one of the most quietly devastating in the novel. White and red are England's colours and green is Ireland's, and the boy has arrived, by way of a daydream about pretty cards, at the exact impossibility that governs his future: he is loyal to a country whose colour has no place in the scheme he is being trained to win inside. He has no word for colonialism. He has already felt its shape. The nets of the fifth chapter are not a discovery Stephen makes as a young man; they are a description of the room he was put in as a child.

Home offers no shelter from any of this. One of the hardest truths in the novel is that the family itself is unsafe. Simon Dedalus is lively, sentimental and often very funny, but he is also unreliable, careless with money and incapable of moral steadiness. Mary Dedalus is gentler, yet she is bound to Catholic expectation and cannot follow her son inward. The family's slide down the social scale means that Stephen grows up with constant material insecurity. Houses change. Money vanishes. Hopes shrink. Poverty in *Portrait* is not only economic lack; it is embarrassment, dependence and slow emotional wear. Jamili and Arshadi are right that identity in the novel cannot be separated from place, and right too that the idea of a home rests on the repression of differences within the self (44-50). Stephen's trouble is that the repression fails. The differences keep surfacing, and the house cannot hold them.

Bhatt argues that Stephen's self is broken apart by exactly these pressures of family, school, nation and church before art offers any form of integration (5, 8-9). The word integration should be used with care, since Stephen never becomes settled, but Bhatt is right that his division is produced rather than innate. The family's hardship does real damage. Simon's failures do not merely disappoint his son; they alter Stephen's whole relation to adulthood. The journey to Cork is cruellest in this respect. Simon lives inside his memories, joking and reminiscing in a way that warms him and estranges the boy beside him. Stephen does not inherit a usable father. He inherits a

damaged image of what a man in authority looks like. Liu's account of the three fathers of the novel helps explain what follows: the biological father, the priest and the artistic forebear are successive attempts at the same vacancy, and Stephen's turn to Daedalus at the close is less a cure than a symbolic patricide that lets him work (167-92). Ramírez pushes the claim as far as it will go, arguing from Lacan's late seminar that the writing itself does the work a father's naming would have done, holding a structure together rather than expressing a personality (1-14). Whether or not one follows the psychoanalytic machinery, the observation it rests on is sound. The last words of the novel ask an invented father for help, and the invention was necessary because the real one could not supply it.

Conde-Parrilla's reading also exposes something unflattering about Simon that is easy to miss. He is a Parnellite who reveres the Patriot parliamentarians, attends the centenary commemorations of 1798 and boasts of a Whiteboy grandfather, and he still refuses to send his son to the Christian Brothers, with their Irish history and Irish language, because he will not have him among "Paddy Stink and Mickey Mud"; the Jesuits, he observes, can get a boy a position (13-25; Joyce, ch. 2). His nationalism is sincere as feeling and useless as principle. The moment it costs anything, social ambition wins. Stephen's later contempt for patriotic rhetoric is not adolescent posturing. He has watched it up close at his own table.

The Christmas dinner scene sharpens all of this by letting politics and religion erupt inside the house. Stephen watches adults tear at one another over Parnell with a violence he cannot follow but can certainly feel, and he understands enough to see that the structures meant to guide a life are themselves broken. Family, church and nation appear not as sources of truth but as rivals quarrelling in front of a child. Gabler's genetic work gives the scene an extra weight, since he shows that Joyce moved it forward into the first chapter late in revision, deliberately binding the novel's opening to the fall of Parnell (71-108). The placement is a designed effect rather than a remembered sequence. After that dinner, authority is never innocent for Stephen again, and the reader has been told so before the boy is old enough to say it.

This early distrust becomes the ground of the later rebellion. Bhatt notes that Stephen's alienation from family, school, religion and nation culminates in voluntary exile (40-42), and the ending does not come from nowhere. Exile grows out of years of partial belonging. Stephen does not wake one morning and choose Europe out of ambition. He has been learning, scene by scene, that every institution around him requires a version of himself

he cannot inhabit. Alienation is not simply his temperament; it is a response to repeated experience of misfit.

Joyce does not flatter the result. The habit of standing apart sharpens Stephen's mind, and it also makes him proud, awkward and poor at ordinary warmth. This is why the family chapters matter so much. They block the romantic reading in which the artist is a fine soul rising above the crowd. Stephen is shaped by pain, and pain does not ennoble him automatically. It leaves marks: withdrawal, defensiveness, a preference for distance over intimacy. Alienation begins as injury. Only later does he learn to make it work.

V. RELIGION, GUILT, AND THE CRISIS OF FAITH

If family life teaches Stephen distrust, Catholicism teaches him intensity. Joyce does not present religion as an external force that can be put down at will. The Church shapes Stephen's language, his imagination, his sense of his own body and even his idea of what a vocation is. That is why his crisis of faith carries such weight. He is not giving up a set of rules. He is trying to loosen a system that has entered the structure of his feeling.

Akca's study of religion and identity remains useful because it shows Catholic belief woven into Stephen's self-understanding rather than standing outside it (52-61). From childhood, religion supplies order, ritual, explanation and fear. The Jesuit schools give him a formidable intellectual training and also teach him to see life through guilt and judgement. The retreat sermons of the third chapter make this plain. Father Arnall's language of death, doom, hell and heaven reaches Stephen not as distant doctrine but as sensory assault: he feels decay, flame, stench and terror in the body (Joyce, ch. 3). Joyce's achievement in this passage is to make theology physical. Ramírez notes, following Lacan, that the ear is the one opening in the body that has no lid and cannot be shut (1-14). The observation is almost too apt for this chapter. Stephen can close his eyes against the picture of hell. He cannot close them against Arnall's voice, and Joyce puts him in a room where for three days there is nothing to do but listen.

That physical force matters because Stephen's sins are physical too. His visits to prostitutes are not presented as healthy sexual development. They are tangled with shame, excitement, loneliness and compulsion. When the sermons strike, they strike a conscience already prepared by fear. For a time confession brings relief, and Stephen returns to prayer and devotional routine with something close to fanaticism (Joyce, ch. 3). Even here Joyce declines the easy shape of a conversion story. The peace Stephen finds

is narrow and brittle. It depends on routine rather than on freedom, and it cannot survive a question.

The offer of the priesthood in the fourth chapter therefore carries more weight than it first appears to. It tempts Stephen because it answers several needs at once: order, distinction, intellectual labour, distance from ordinary life. It offers a ready-made form for an exceptional self. In that respect the priesthood resembles art more closely than Stephen yet realises; both present themselves as vocations of separation. What he senses is that ordination would mean surrendering the part of him that wants to test experience rather than obey it. Two recent readings show how carefully the refusal has been prepared, and how little of it is argument. Jones demonstrates that Joyce has been conditioning the reader from early in the novel, pairing the priesthood with the skull, with cold and with the silence of the grave, firmly enough at first for the association to take and subtly enough afterwards for it to work below conscious notice (158-63). By the time the director makes his offer, the reader's misgiving is already in place and feels like intuition rather than instruction. Rickard describes the same event from inside Stephen, arguing that he turns the priesthood down instinctively, through a bodily recoil rather than a weighed decision, and that this is the moment at which the body stops being an obstacle to truth in Joyce's work and starts being a way of knowing it. Both accounts improve on the view that Stephen reasons his way out of the Church. He feels his way out, and the feeling has been trained.

The novel is full of voices trying to name Stephen before he can name himself, and religion offers the most powerful of those names. He refuses it not because the Church has meant nothing to him but because it has meant too much. It has become a structure that cannot hold the whole of what he is. Constandache is helpful here, insisting that his aesthetic choice is a critical negotiation with tradition rather than a childish break from it (31-48). Even after the refusal, Stephen goes on thinking in forms the Church gave him. His vocabulary of vocation, revelation, epiphany and near-priestly dedication to art proves it. He leaves Catholic life and keeps Catholic habits of mind. The art is born out of that contradiction, not outside it.

Choi's work on Jesuit education adds a dimension the older religious criticism missed. Clongowes and Belvedere were not only spiritual institutions but imperial ones, advancing Catholic and nationalist interests while training boys in a muscular, games-playing masculinity well suited to service in the Empire (83-103). Conde-Parrilla reaches the same conclusion from the archive, noting that colleges

of this kind were modelled on the English public school, that they worked to replace an Irish brogue with an English accent, and that their alumni went on into the professions and the imperial service (13-25). Read in that light, Stephen's refusal of the priesthood is not a purely religious act. It is a refusal of a whole apparatus in which faith, schooling, sport and imperial loyalty had been fused into one career. The nets he will later name were knotted together long before he learned to see them.

Farahmandian and Shao, reading Stephen through self-estrangement, help explain why religion holds such power over him; their emphasis on inward division accounts for the extremity of his responses to authority. The explanation goes only so far. His crisis is not private illness alone. It is the crisis of a young man educated in a country where church, morality and public respectability press heavily on desire and thought. Li and Dong's study of Mary Dedalus shows what the same pressure does to someone who complies with it instead of rebelling: a life organised around the need for approval, shading into dependency and self-defeat (490-504). Stephen's revolt and his mother's submission are two outcomes of one system.

The bird-girl scene stands as the counter-image to the retreat sermons. Where the sermons speak through terror, the girl in the water speaks through beauty. Where the priesthood offers a rule, the scene offers perception. Stephen's response is neither crude desire nor old piety. It is a moment in which body and spirit are briefly held together by form. He sees, and the seeing becomes permission to choose art (Joyce, ch. 4). The scene does not clear religion out of him. It exchanges one mode of transcendence for another. From here onward the sacred survives in the novel as aesthetics rather than as doctrine, which is a smaller claim than Stephen thinks and a more interesting one.

VI. LANGUAGE, STYLE, AND THE GROWTH OF CONSCIOUSNESS

If religion shapes Stephen's inward life, language shapes the medium in which that life becomes thinkable at all. Joyce's achievement in *Portrait* lies not only in what he says about Stephen but in how he lets a changing consciousness reshape the prose. The novel opens in nursery rhyme, childish repetition and raw sensation. It closes in diary entries, aesthetic argument and self-conscious formulation. That change is not decoration. It is where the meaning lives.

Leahy's account of the opening is worth dwelling on, because it corrects a common assumption. The novel begins, he argues, not at the beginning of Stephen's life but

at the beginning of his linguistic life, and Joyce registers the sound of speech through devices that belong specifically to print: italics, indentation, the sentence that breaks off (453-76). Joyce had experimented with non-standard spelling in *Stephen Hero* and abandoned it, so that speech, writing and handwriting become formally distinct categories in the finished book. Hou and Shen make a related point from a single word. The apparently harmless "nice" of the opening pages already carries the moral and social pressure under which Stephen will struggle (123-27). His earliest consciousness is not innocent space but a pressured beginning, and the pressure is audible in the vocabulary of a child who has not yet learned to notice it.

Ramírez adds a suggestive account of what Stephen does with sound once he discovers he cannot escape it. Reading the early chapters through Lacan, he points to the night at Dalkey when the noise of the train rises, stops as the carriages enter the tunnel, and begins again, and to the pleasure Stephen takes in hearing it cease and return (1-14; Joyce, ch. 1). The child who cannot shut his ears learns instead to attend to the rhythm of what enters them, and what begins as helplessness becomes something closer to technique. Joyce, on this reading, writes noise as readily as he writes meaning, and the habit starts in a boy lying awake listening to a train. It is worth setting this beside Leahy's argument about print: the novel is unusually preoccupied with sound for a book so conscious of being written.

Attridge's formal argument explains the larger method. Rather than describing Stephen's growth from outside, Joyce unmoors the prose from any single intentional source, so that the reader is carried through one compositional manner after another (24-34). Early pages imitate a child receiving the world as rhythm, smell, colour and incomplete sense. Later chapters bring heavier adjectives, romantic echoes, sermon-like repetition, scholastic reasoning and deliberate technical vocabulary. Style becomes biography. Sabbagh and Yazdanjoo's corpus work puts numbers to the intuition: the semantic fields that dominate the text move measurably across the five chapters, so the shift readers feel is present in the lexicon itself (53-76). Mukhitdinova's point still holds alongside this, that Joyce does not merely describe modern uncertainty but builds it into the movement of the sentences (224-26). The prose does not stand above Stephen explaining him. It grows, stumbles, swells and sharpens with him.

Raupp's work on Latin adds something that is easy to overlook. Latin in the novel is not school decoration or clerical display but a whole structure of learning, prestige,

ritual and inherited order (181-90). Stephen has to pass through it, think in it and partly resist it. The Latin of priests, masters and students is a reminder that language in *Portrait* is always a social force: it ranks people, disciplines them and marks who belongs. English is unstable in the same way. Stephen's famous complaint to the dean, that the language in which they are speaking is the dean's before it is his, names one of the deepest conflicts in the book (Joyce, ch. 5). He can think brilliantly in English and he cannot forget what English carries.

Haughton's recovery of the novel's first publishing context sharpens the stakes. *Portrait* was serialised in *The Egoist* at Dora Marsden's decision, and Marsden's writing on egoistic language offers a philosophy of the sovereign self that the novel appears to dramatise. Haughton's argument is that Joyce also undoes it, moving the book towards a conception of language as shared rather than owned (327-44). This is a useful check on Stephen's rhetoric. He speaks as though a voice could be won outright, in single combat with history. The novel knows better. Nobody owns a language; one can only work in it with more or less honesty.

That is why language and identity cannot be separated here. Bhatt notes that the diary ending marks Stephen's continuing search for a voice rather than the end of it (39-40), and Kim's reading of the political diary strengthens the point from the side of form: the embedded diary is a subversive genre, a private space in which a self can be composed against public pressure (31-55). The move into diary does feel like a release, because Stephen is no longer filtered through third-person narration. It is not, however, a language of mastery. It is hurried, exposed, provisional, closer to notes than to prose. What we are given is a self still being drafted.

Amerian et al. add the temporal dimension, showing how pauses and disruptions in the narrative follow states of mind rather than ordinary sequence (1033-35). Language in *Portrait* does not simply carry events forward. It stalls, circles, dwells and leaps, so that Stephen's growth feels like a series of mental thresholds rather than a road. Fima's Cubist reading describes the same architecture in spatial terms: fragments held in simultaneous view, with the perspective shifting while the subject stays in place. However one names it, the formal achievement is the same, and it belongs to this novel rather than to the one that followed.

There is a larger point in all this. Stephen's difficulty is not only that he lacks freedom. It is that every language available to him is already inhabited. English bears the empire. Latin bears the Church. Irish bears cultural longing and political feeling but is not a daily medium he can think

in. He cannot begin from clean speech, so he does the only thing open to him: he bends inherited language into a more personal cadence. Stephen's artistic selfhood is not the making of a new world out of nothing. It is the patient reworking of compromised words until they begin to sound like his own.

VII. WOMEN, DESIRE, AND THE LIMITS OF STEPHEN'S VISION

Any serious reading of Stephen's development has to face how troubled his relation to women is. This is where the novel is least flattering to him. Women are essential to his growth, and he rarely sees them as persons. They arrive in his mind as temptress, saint, mother, muse, nation or symbolic beauty. The habit gives him powerful images and exposes the limits of his emotional range.

The pattern shows first in his sexual experience. The scenes with prostitutes present the body as escape rather than encounter. Stephen goes to them out of loneliness, inward pressure and a wish to silence judgement, and the result is not release but deeper division. He gives himself to sensation and afterwards becomes more vulnerable to guilt, terror and self-disgust (Joyce, ch. 2). Sexual experience does not free him from religion. It drives him further into its shadow. Rickard's account of instinct is useful for seeing why. Early in the novel Stephen experiences his own desire as something brutish, an animal impulse to be mastered, which is precisely how Catholic psychology had taught him to experience it. The division is therefore not his invention. It was issued to him.

Emma occupies a different place in his imagination, and it is barely less abstract. She is less a companion than a distant figure onto whom desire, literary pose and adolescent longing are projected. Stephen writes towards her, dreams towards her and suffers on her account, but he hardly knows her. She becomes another screen for self-dramatisation. Monteiro's mythic reading helps explain the mechanism, since it shows how women in Stephen's journey tend to appear as symbolic thresholds rather than as equal presences (100). The pattern is real, and it should be judged rather than admired.

The bird-girl scene complicates the picture by turning feminine presence into artistic revelation. Stephen's sight of the girl in the water is among the most famous moments in the novel because it appears to offer a third way between lust and guilt. He does not approach her. He does not condemn her. He sees her beauty as form, poise and an invitation to art (Joyce, ch. 4). For once desire is held in balance. Even so the scene should not be romanticised. The girl remains more image than person in Stephen's consciousness. She wakes him, and she never speaks.

Rickard puts the objection in its sharpest form by attending to what Stephen actually notices. The girl is seen as a creature, her leg likened to a crane's, her thighs bared, her body unmistakably present, and within a sentence or two she has been turned into an angel. The abstraction happens in front of us. Stephen's aesthetic cannot hold a woman and a person in view at the same time, and the scene that is supposed to show him arriving at his vocation also shows him flinching from the thing he claims to be looking at.

Russ's study of feminine guidance is useful because it refuses the lazy view that women in the novel exist only to tempt or obstruct the male artist. He argues that they also redirect Stephen, drawing him away from gross desire towards a more reflective mode of seeing (12). There is truth in this; his mother, Emma, the prostitutes and the bird-girl each mark a stage. Russ's case is strongest, though, when it is joined to a harder one. Koo puts that harder case directly, arguing that Stephen's aesthetics fail precisely because they can treat women only as idealised abstractions, and that his mother suffers most from this, since the theory requires her to be a symbol before she can be a person (9-29). On Koo's reading the failure is structural. It is not a blemish on an otherwise sound aesthetic; it is built into the aesthetic itself.

Two further studies press the point. Ko examines how women's refusals in Joyce's early fiction register a resistance that the male narrator distorts even as he reports it, which raises an uncomfortable question about whose vision the novel's narration serves (9-38). Li and Dong restore Mary Dedalus as a subject in her own right, a woman whose compliance has its own psychology of approval-seeking and self-defeat rather than a mere obstacle to her son's freedom (490-504). Set beside Stephen's refusal to make his Easter duty, these readings change the balance of sympathy. His mother is not simply the voice of the Church in the house. She is someone the system has already cost a great deal, asking for one thing from the son it is about to cost her.

Haughton's argument about egoism belongs here as well. If the novel dramatises a philosophy of the sovereign self and then quietly undermines it, moving towards language and feeling as shared rather than owned, then Stephen's treatment of the women around him is one of the places where the undermining happens (327-44). He grows in artistic self-awareness and he does not grow correspondingly in generosity. He becomes better at reading symbols than at returning affection.

The novel knows this, and does not hide the cost of Stephen's self-fashioning. His mother's appeal, Cranly's concern and the traces of Emma in his imagination all remind us that artistic detachment can also be emotional

failure. The women of *Portrait* do more than reveal Stephen's vocation. They expose how unfinished his selfhood still is. He can make beauty out of them more easily than he can live beside them, and Joyce lets us notice.

VIII. NATION, EXILE, AND THE DAEDALIAN DREAM

Stephen's conflict with Ireland is often simplified into a young man turning his back on home, religion and country for the sake of art. The reading misses Joyce's subtlety. Stephen's rebellion comes out of deep involvement, not indifference. Ireland is not a background he leaves; it is the pressure in which his mind was formed. When he calls nationality, language and religion nets flung at the soul, he is not speaking from outside history. He is speaking as someone painfully caught in it (Joyce, ch. 5).

Conde-Parrilla's work makes it possible to say something more precise than that the novel is political. Joyce's historical allusions, she argues, function as metonymic signs that open onto a second portrait behind the first, the portrait of Ireland as a British colony, and they cluster in the first and fifth chapters, at the two ends of Stephen's formation (13-25). They are also easy to walk past, often carrying no capital letter: the union, catholic emancipation, the fenian movement, the liberator. The effect is that the colonial history of the country is not announced in the novel but embedded in its vocabulary, exactly as it is embedded in the speech of the people Stephen grows up among. He does not have to be taught the politics of Ireland. He absorbs it in the form of ordinary words.

The nationalist quarrel at the Christmas table prepares the conflict early, and the university conversations with Davin make it explicit. Stephen cannot accept the forms of Irish identity offered to him, because each demands obedience before criticism. He is not anti-Irish. He is sick of ready-made slogans, of clerical control, and of any politics that asks him to trade inward freedom for belonging. Ó Cuileagáin's work on the peasantry is valuable here, tracing how Joyce's handling of rural Ireland changes between *Stephen Hero* and *Portrait*, through Davin's stories, the man in the mountain cabin and the final diary entries (104-38). The Revival had made the peasantry the emblem of authentic Irishness. Joyce keeps the figure and withholds the reverence, which is a political act rather than a squeamish one. Callanan's political biography supports the broader case, presenting Joyce as an original and dissenting Irish nationalist formed by the Parnell split rather than a writer who had stepped out of politics altogether.

Bhatt puts the personal side of this well, arguing that Stephen seeks his own meaning through intellectual analysis instead of accepting the values handed to him (39-42). The novel is not about adolescent contrariness. Stephen senses that the available Irish identities have grown stiff and narrow. He refuses to serve home, fatherland or church because each now asks for a loyalty that would cripple the self he is trying to build (Joyce, ch. 5). The refusal is proud. It is not empty.

Language intensifies the national struggle. Monteiro is strong on the colonial wound behind Stephen's linguistic unease: English is the medium of high culture and of practical life, and it arrives carrying conquest and dispossession (118). That is why the complaint to the dean lands so hard. Stephen is not being fussy about words. He is describing what it feels like to make art in a language that is intimate and foreign at the same time. Choi's account of Jesuit schooling shows how little daylight there was between the institutions involved, since the schools that gave Stephen that English also prepared boys for imperial service (83-103). The nets were a single mesh.

Mazlounian's use of Foucault's heterotopia offers the most precise recent way of describing what Stephen does about it. Rather than reading his withdrawals as mere escapism, she identifies counter-spaces in the novel that lie outside the reach of the dominant order, and argues that these are where he can recognise other possible forms of selfhood (451-57). The beach, the library steps, the long solitary walks and finally the diary all work this way. They are not nowhere. They are elsewhere, and elsewhere is where he can think. Exile, on this account, is not the sudden decision of the final pages. It is the enlargement of a habit Stephen has been practising since Clongowes. Jamili and Arshadi make a complementary point about distance, observing that getting away from a place can clarify the memory of it and allow a person to see its structure rather than merely feel its pressure (44-50). This is close to what Stephen expects of Europe. Whether the novel grants it to him is another matter.

The Daedalus myth gives the habit a shape. Sharma argues that Stephen's journey still reads meaningfully through the figure of the mythical artificer who escapes confinement by invention (91-98), and Cappelluti sets the same figure inside the larger centripetal and centrifugal pulls of the Ulysses myth across Joyce's work (157-83). The myth is not pasted on from outside. It is built into Stephen's name, his imagination and his final appetite for flight. The labyrinth is Dublin: family obligation, religious fear, political pressure and borrowed language wound together. To become an artist Stephen must do more than run from the labyrinth. He has to invent his way out of it.

Monteiro's reading of Stephen as artist-hero helps here too, especially the claim that the hero's task is not private release but a wider remaking through art (77-78). This is what lies behind the enormous final promise to forge the uncreated conscience of his race (Joyce, ch. 5). The line is proud, almost inflated, and it is not noise. It shows that Stephen still imagines his exile in relation to Ireland. He leaves in order to speak more freely, not in order to forget. Exile is separation and service at once. Van Mierlo's framework catches the same double movement, reading Joyce as fashioning an identity against the Revivalist mainstream while remaining bound to its ends (77-99). Stephen's refusals are negotiations, not amputations.

Joyce still declines to make exile a solution. Stephen's formula of silence, exile and cunning sounds hard and decisive, and it is also defensive. Silence protects him from false public speech. Exile puts distance between him and emotional coercion. Cunning promises survival among traps. None of the three is warm, and none is stable. They belong to a life of vigilance rather than of ease, which is part of why the ending moves us. Stephen chooses freedom, and the freedom he chooses is severe.

The diary pages make the severity visible. They feel lighter than the chapters before them and they also show how much is unfinished. Stephen writes in bursts, notes, invocations and weather-like flashes. He is going abroad and he is still speaking from uncertainty. Kim's argument that the embedded diary is a politically charged form rather than a private indulgence fits exactly here (31-55): the diary is the only space in the novel where Stephen's voice is not mediated by an institution, which is both its freedom and its exposure. The final appeal to the old father, the old artificer, to stand him now and ever in good stead is not the language of a man who has mastered anything (Joyce, ch. 5). It is the language of someone asking for help.

Joyce's restraint at this point is what makes the ending last. He does not punish Stephen for leaving, and he does not reward him with certainty. Exile may be necessary and it stays risky. The myth of flight always carries Icarus as well as Daedalus. Stephen may slip the nets; he may also carry them inside him, which is the harder possibility and the one the novel leaves open. *Portrait* ends on exactly that tension, and treats artistic freedom as necessary without ever making it cheap.

IX. CONCLUSION

Stephen Dedalus's journey in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* is best understood not as a smooth rise from boyhood to mastery but as a hard movement from alienation towards a self that is still unfinished when the

book closes. Joyce shows the young artist being made under pressure: by family decline, Catholic guilt, political bitterness, linguistic dispossession, sexual confusion and the need to invent a life outside the roles on offer. None of these pressures can be separated cleanly from the others. They meet inside Stephen, and the collision is what gives his consciousness its peculiar sharpness.

This is why the novel still matters. It understands that becoming oneself is not a peaceful process. Stephen's alienation is painful and Joyce never pretends otherwise; it makes him lonely, proud, emotionally awkward and frequently unfair. The novel also shows that some distance from family, church and nation is the condition of his being able to think at all. He sees because he does not fully belong, and he pays for the seeing.

Recent criticism has made the complexity easier to describe. Genetic scholarship has shown how deliberately the novel was built, down to the late relocation of the Christmas quarrel that now anchors its politics. Work on religion has replaced the old story of simple loss of faith with an account of negotiation, and has shown how closely Catholic schooling was tied to imperial service. Studies of the novel's historical allusions have made the colonial portrait behind the personal one legible in individual words. Studies of language and form have demonstrated, impressionistically and now quantitatively, that Stephen's development is carried by the texture of the prose rather than narrated above it. Gender criticism has given the women of the novel their own interiority and has made Stephen's aesthetic look less like an achievement than a limitation. Work on instinct and the body has shown that his decisive refusals are made in the flesh before they are made in argument. Spatial and national readings have shown that his withdrawals are not evasions but the search for ground on which another self might stand. What these approaches share is the recognition that Stephen's self is not discovered ready-made. It is composed, slowly and against resistance.

The ending should be read with that in mind. Stephen's diary announces no final peace. It announces willingness: willingness to meet experience again, to test a life, to work on inherited language, and to try to make art out of a broken world. That is less heroic and far more human than the old picture of the triumphant artist. Joyce leaves us with a young man who has chosen his path and has proved nothing yet.

The deepest claim of the novel is simple enough to state. Stephen does not become an artist by escaping alienation. He becomes one by turning it into method. Family conflict, church discipline, national pressure and inward unrest do not disappear when he boards the boat;

they become the raw material of his thought, his style and his self-making. The nets are not cut. They are worn inward, and they take the shape of a voice. The green rose the child could not imagine is the emblem of the whole book: an impossible thing that might exist somewhere, which is as much as any colonised imagination is given to work with, and quite enough to make an artist out of. That is why *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* remains one of the great modern novels of identity. It knows that a self is not found in comfort. It is forged, painfully and imperfectly, in struggle.

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