

The Issue of Irony and a Personal (Mis)Reading of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*

I first read James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* when I was twenty as part of a religion course focusing on the modern novel. I totally identified with Stephen Dedalus and was somewhat chagrined two years later to hear that critics considered Joyce's presentation of Stephen to be "ironic." I had not re-read the book for 37 years and had never bothered to read criticism of it. I was content to let it be one of the great "ironies" of my own life that I had been so influenced by an apparent misunderstanding of what was in my opinion the greatest novel I had ever read. It was not without some trepidation that I approached the task of re-reading it and confronting head-on the question of whether or how I had missed the point. Once again the book would force me to ask "What am I to make of myself?" But this time rather than meaning "What shall I do with my life?" it would mean "How am I to judge the choices I made and the ideas that motivated me?"

It did not help to have Seamus Deane's scholarly introduction in my new copy of the book say

Finally, it is such a cliché of commentary on this novel that Stephen's position is ironized by Joyce that it must be considered. After all, it is the case that the Stephen we finally see is, in many respects, an outrageous prig who has indeed made a 'great mistake'. He forsakes everyone, he goes off armed with a half-baked aesthetic theory that, after mountainous labour, has only produced a little mouse of a poem;; he dedicates himself solemnly and humourlessly to an absurdly overstated ambition. He is remarkable only in the pride he takes in his almost preternatural capacity not to feel as others do, and he is ruthless in the execution of a project that can never, by its nature, get off the ground. (xlii)

I discovered that I still find Stephen completely sympathetic; and, while I believe I understand most of what I have read about the irony of the book, I am still inclined to say that comments such as Deane's reveal as much about the critic as they do about the work. What is at stake here for me, though, runs much deeper than a difference of opinion about the appeal of a character or about Joyce's intentions. It is my hope that by examining my reactions to the book and to commentary on it I can get at some of these issues.

I should perhaps elaborate on the context of my first reading. Even though I may have been close to the epicenter of "New Criticism" at Yale in the early 60's, I did not study Joyce as part of a literature course. I was studying philosophy in an attempt to find a replacement for the adolescent religion which I was shedding and was very much under the influence of a recent introduction to existentialism. Stephen Dedalus's attempt to escape the nets of

nationality, language, and religion (220) resonated with my understanding of the concept of authentic existence that I had encountered in Martin Heidegger. I took completely seriously the idea that an artist had a "vocation;" and, in fact, returned to *A Portrait* the following year, using it as the basis for a paper on the Artist as Priest for a course in the philosophy of art. I also took another course in the philosophy of art taught by one of the best professors I ever had which used as its starting point the same definition of beauty that Stephen adopts: Aquinas's formulation "Pulcra sunt quae visa placent." (Beauty is that which pleases when seen.) (225) <sup>1</sup>

Needless to say I was a "serious" student. I was also a little naive in some areas and was desperately trying to correct a lack of cultural sophistication. It was probably not until several years later as I looked at a painting in an art museum that it dawned on me that the phrase "A Portrait of the Artist" was a common title given to self-portraits by painters. In my typically abstract way I had tended to think of "the Artist" as a universal or generic term.

Literary criticism has come a long way since the early Sixties. I did manage to absorb some understanding of the approach of New Criticism, but I completely missed the bus with regard to Postmodernism. In my attempt to reassess my initial reading of *A Portrait* I have sampled critics writing as recently as 1996, and it appears to me that some of the issues involved in the question of irony may provide a doorway into postmodern thought. I found not only some of the definitive discussions of irony in *A Portrait*, but also criticism of this criticism. And I was encouraged to see the diversity of opinion in the swings of the pendulum as we marched forward from Wyndham Lewis's 1928 assessment of Stephen as a "frigid prig":

It would be difficult, I think, to find a more lifeless, irritating principal figure than the deplorable hero of the *Portrait of the Artist* and *Ulysses*. (Ryf 156 )

The issue is 1) how the reader responds to Stephen Dedalus as a human being, and 2) what the relevance of this response is to the overall meaning or impact of the book. Many critics who find much to dislike in Stephen still admire the book because they believe the book is intended to expose Stephen as dislikeable. There is considerable discussion about how Joyce viewed Stephen and often evidence is subpoenaed from Joyce's other works or his critical writings or his correspondence and conversations. I am not inclined to look beyond the novel itself or at least I have not attempted to include such considerations in this discussion.

"Prig" is not a word in my normal working vocabulary. I knew it was a put down, but I looked it up to make sure I was not going into battle against a straw man. A Miriam-Webster online dictionary defines it as "a person who offends or irritates by observance of proprieties (as of speech or manners) in a pointed manner or to an obnoxious degree. Other definitions I found were "a person who obeys the rules of correct behaviour and considers

himself or herself to be better than other people" (Cambridge International Dictionary of English) and "a person who demonstrates an exaggerated conformity or propriety, especially in an irritatingly arrogant or smug manner" (American Heritage Dictionary). While I understand how a reader can be put off by Stephen's sense of himself and interpret it as arrogance or a sense of moral superiority, I do not understand the choice of a word which has connotations of excessive conformity or propriety. If Stephen is repugnant, I would think it is more likely to be because he is trying so desperately not to conform. An older Webster's dictionary defined it as "a person who affects great preciseness or propriety in matters of learning or morals, to the annoyance of others; smug, pedantic person." The charge of pedantry I can understand and will address.

That anyone should find Stephen "lifeless" simple baffles me. It is, I suppose, a testimony to the diversity of the human personality and an indication of how important a reader's attitudes are in the experience of reading a book. I, of course, found Stephen to be very much alive from the first paragraph to the last; and I can only guess that Wyndham Lewis's assessment stems from some idea of how Stephen relates to other people and how Lewis imagines he would have responded had he met Stephen at school. It is unclear to me whether "deplorable" is a term of moral judgment directed towards Stephen or a term of literary criticism regarding Joyce's choice of a central character for a novel. It is clear, however, that he does not like Stephen at all and believes that Joyce meant him to be conventionally heroic. This leads him to conclude that the novel is a failure as a work of literature and gives impetus to Robert Ryl's defense of the novel on the grounds that Joyce's treatment of Stephen is ironic. (156-170)

F. Parvin Sharpless summarized the situation succinctly:

Irony, it has been recently observed, has replaced the symbol as the primary quarry of the close reader. One of the most elusive and slippery instances of this prey is the question of the consistency, scope, intensity, and tone of the irony directed toward Stephen Dedalus in Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. The determination of appropriate terms for judgments of Stephen's various stages of growth is a vexing one, affording a wide range of possibilities. To draw the extremes, Stephen may be seen as a courageous artist-hero, casting off the forms and conventions of society as inappropriate to his gifts and destiny, freeing himself to soar away from Ireland to a fulfillment of his mission as a fabulous Dedalian artificer; or, Stephen may be seen as a callow and affected poseur, a "farcical pedagogue," a morbidly sensitive pseudo-artist, whose literary theory is weak Thomism, and whose literary practice a faded aestheticism. (96)

Although I am relieved to see him acknowledge that other readers take Stephen at face value, it is clear that, at least for him, the issue of irony is important because the reader needs guidance in forming a judgment about Stephen. Presumably taking Stephen at face value is

naive and achieving the necessary degree of objectivity to view him properly is apparently difficult because of how Stephen is presented. He cites the difficulty even Hugh Kenner has in maintaining his objectivity, and I feel compelled to cite this last bit of diatribe before I begin trying to describe my own reactions:

Kenner himself is exasperated by the Stephen of chapter V over whom he exercises a quite severe judgment, calling him an unregenerate aesthete, "humourless" and "priggish," "who cannot remember what day of the week it is, [who] sentimentalizes like Charles Lamb over the 'human pages' of a secondhand Latin book, conducts the inhumanly pedantic dialogue with Cranly on mother-love, writes Frenchified verses in bed in an erotic swoon, and is epiphanized at full length, like Shem the Penman beneath the bedclothes, shrinking from the 'common noises' of daylight." (96-7)

Before I cite all the charges against which I feel inclined to defend Stephen, I should say that none of these critics is taking the simple moralistic stance that Stephen is dislikeable because he has rejected the religion of his parents. I am sure there are those who find the book blasphemous, but I would not even know where to begin a debate with them. I have a great deal of respect for Roman Catholic Christianity, but I believe that a narrowly dogmatic allegiance to any set of religious beliefs is a form of self-defense. It may enable some people to cope, but it limits one's ability to experience the full complexity and mystery of life. I still struggle to separate the wheat from the chaff of my own adolescent religious beliefs, and I still identify with Stephen's struggle to free himself from the nets of religion.

Wayne Booth does cite one interpretation of *A Portrait* which seems to be written from a narrowly Catholic point of view. He uses it as an example of one extreme in the spectrum of interpretations, but I do not sense that he takes it seriously:

Is his rejection of the priesthood a triumph, a tragedy, or merely a comedy of errors? Most readers, even those who follow the new trend of reading Stephen ironically, seem to have read it as a triumph: the artist has rid himself of one of the chains that bound him. To Caroline Gordon, this is a serious misreading. "I suspect that Joyce's *Portrait* has been misread by a whole generation." She sees the rejection as "the picture of a soul that is being damned for time and eternity caught in the act of foreseeing and foreknowing its damnation," and she cites in evidence the fall of Icarus and Stephen's own statement to Cranly that he is not afraid to make a mistake, "even a great mistake, a lifelong mistake and perhaps for eternity, too." (88)

Much of the negative reaction to Stephen can be subsumed under the charge of immaturity. It will be necessary to consider these various judgments more specifically, but it is worth considering first the general idea that he is immature. All of the discussions are concerned with what Stephen is like as a university student in the final chapter. No one

(except perhaps my own mother at the height of her powers) would pass judgment on a seven-year-old boy for being "immature." Many interpreters of the book emphasize "as a Young Man" in the title or, as Seamus Deane prefers, see Stephen at the end of the book as "a (very) young man." (xlii) There is an element of condescension or "distance" in Deane's remark that I would contend is not justified by the text.

When young Stephen lies in bed in the Clongowes infirmary and fantasizes about his own death and funeral (22) or when as a teenager he attempts to purify himself through mortification of the flesh in every possible way (162f), the reader surely smiles and perhaps, as I did, laughs out loud. But the smile is a smile of recognition, and the humor is affectionate. I do not see the depiction as out and out mockery. The same could be said of any excesses of enthusiasm he displays as a university student. It can be viewed at the very least as "age appropriate," and I do not see that this requires any sophisticated concept of irony or aesthetic distance. Stephen is young and passionate, and I for one pity the reader who cannot like that in him. I even suspect that critics who feel the need to distance themselves from Stephen's enthusiasms are protecting themselves from the chaos of their own emotions and from the imagined scorn of worldly colleagues who know better than to give in to their passionate nature. So far as I can tell it may be they who are making the "great mistake."

My problem of course is that I do not laugh at Stephen in chapter V. If I am not smiling during the last chapter, though, it is not because I find Stephen unsympathetic. It is because I am completely swept up in his passion, and this is part of the reason I find the book so extraordinary. I have no desire to distance myself from something that makes me feel alive in ways that I rarely experience. I do not feel that Stephen is disappearing behind the opaqueness of the shorthand style of the diary. I feel as though I have accompanied him into a region within his psyche from which he can only send telegrams to the normal everyday world. Dare I speculate that a reader who does not have access to such a region within himself will naturally react very differently as he reads the last pages of the book?

It may be the problem is not that Stephen is passionate but what he is passionate about. If he were passionately attached to a young lady or even passionately devoted to social justice, I suspect more readers would find him sympathetic. Presumably then he would not seem "frigid," "lifeless," or possessing an "almost preternatural capacity not to feel as others do." If there is anywhere I may smile at Stephen in the last chapter, it is when he wrestles with his attraction to the girl Lynch calls Stephen's "beloved." (234) Clearly he has issues about the opposite sex which need to be resolved, and it does not help that his mind sees a connection between these issues and the issues involved in liberating his soul from the nets thrown by Ireland and the Church. But I find the struggle real and sympathetic, and I am more than willing to follow his mind into an exploration of the sexual nature of politics and

religion or the religious and political nature of sex. The fact that he is ambivalent about his attraction to the lady and even jealous of her relationship with a priest (234,238-240) makes him all the more human in my eyes. I am not inclined to classify Stephen's fears and confusion as misogynistic, and I regard Suzette Henke's feminist reading of the book as a bit forced or at least as limited by personal concerns as mine:

Through *Portrait*, Stephen manifests a psychological horror of woman as a figure of immanence, a symbol of unsettling sexual difference, and a perpetual reminder of bodily abjection. At the conclusion of chapter five, he prepares to flee from all the women who have served as catalysts in his own adolescent development. His journey into exile will release him from what he perceives as a cloying matriarchal authority. He must blot from his ears "his mother's sobs and reproaches" and strike from his eyes the insistent "image of his mother's face."

Alone and proud, isolated and free, Stephen proclaims joyful allegiance to the masculine fraternity of Daedalus, his priest and patron: "Welcome, O life! I go to encounter for the millionth time the reality of experience and to forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race."

The hyperbolic resonance of Stephen's invocation leads us to suspect that his fate will prove Icarian rather than Daedalian. Insofar as women are concerned, he goes to encounter the reality of experience not for the millionth time but for the first. Much of the irony in *Portrait* results from Joyce's satirical rendering of Stephen's logocentric paradigm. The sociopathic hero, pompous and aloof, passionately gathers phrases for his word hoard without infusing his "capful of light odes" (*Ulysses* 14:1119) with the generative spark of human sympathy.(93-4)

The conclusion of Joyce's text seems to imply that the artist's notorious misogyny will prove to be still another dimension (and limitation) of his youthful priggishness. The pervasive irony that tinges the hero's scrupulous devotions and gives his aesthetic theory that "true scholastic stink" surely informs his relations with women—from his mother and Dante Riordan to Emma and the unnamed bird-girl he transfigures on the beach. In a tone of gentle mockery, Joyce makes clear to his audience that Stephen's fear of women and his contempt for sensuous life are among the many inhibitions that stifle his creativity. Before he can become a true priest of the eternal imagination, Stephen must first divest himself of "the spiritual-heroic refrigerating apparatus" that characterizes the egocentric aesthete. Narcissism and misogyny are adolescent traits he has to outgrow on the path to artistic maturity. Not until the epic *Ulysses* will a new model begin to emerge, one that recognizes the need for the intellectual artist to make peace with the mother/lover of his dreams and to incorporate into his masterful work those mysterious breaks, flows, gaps, and ruptures associated with the repressed and sublimated flow of male-female desire (94)

Some of what she says makes sense, but it seems skewed to me. To speak of a "horror of woman" does not seem apt to me in face of the extreme Madonna/Prostitute syndrome that haunts Stephen. I understand there is an inability to accept or relate to woman as an integrated totality, but to sum it up as a horror of "immanence" or of sexual difference seems

reductive to me. "Horror" seems completely irrelevant to Stephen's struggle to deal with his sensual nature. He is not contemptuous of sensuous life. He is capable of being overwhelmed by it. Yes, he is afraid of being seduced and smothered, but this is only because his sensuous nature is so highly developed. He is surely aware of the need to make peace with the mother/lover of his dreams. This is part of what I sense in his rapt gaze at the girl by the ocean. (185-186) In addition to the perception of beauty in general, there is a reconciliation of Madonna worship with sexual attraction to sensual mortal femininity. Henke apparently likes the sexuality of *Ulysses* better than that of *A Portrait*, but Molly as I recall her seems a natural progression from the vision of the girl on the beach.

Stephen is passionate about ideas. Readers may be put off by this either because they have long since given up believing that ideas really matter or because they believe he is passionate about the wrong ideas. I do not feel compelled in this context to defend my belief that ideas matter, so I shall attempt to address the impression that Stephen's ideas are "half-baked" or pedantic or Romantic (which in the mouths of these critics is a label of disdain). The obvious diagnosis here is that my own brain is still infested with half-baked Romanticism. This is the Big Issue which I shall put off until the last possible moment. First I would like to move to have the charges of pedantry dismissed.

Stephen is perceived as pedantic because his thinking is inspired by Aquinas and expresses itself in a Scholastic format. Critics latch on to Lynch's retort that one of Stephen's formulations has "the true scholastic stink" (232) as though everyone knows that Scholastic philosophical inquiry is nothing but a pile of steer manure. Scholasticism is considered pedantic mainly because it is associated with clichéd ideas about medieval thought. I admit that even Aristotle can be read as simply cataloguing the obvious, and medieval philosophers often seem to have inherited the worst of Aristotle and put it on the torture rack of Christian dogma. Nonetheless it is possible to break through the crust of dead metaphor and discover in Scholasticism a rich vein of insight. The year before *A Portrait* was published, Martin Heidegger completed his dissertation on "Duns Scotus's Doctrine of Categories and Meaning." (Safranski xii, 63). Heidegger derived much of his inspiration from Scholasticism and from Aristotle. A major portion of his *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology* is devoted to an exploration of Thomas Aquinas, Duns Scotus and Suarez. He may be unreadable, but it is not because he is pedantic. As I mentioned earlier one of the most exciting discussions of aesthetics in which I ever participated began with Aquinas's definition of beauty. We read Jacques Maritain's *Art and Scholasticism*, which was originally published in the 1920's; and then the professor interpreted Aquinas's definition in a variety of ways to illuminate the changes that had taken place in art and philosophy since the term aesthetics was first coined by Baumgarten.

Perhaps readers dislike Stephen's passion because they see him as primarily passionate about himself and consider him overly self-absorbed. This is a charge which I concede has more substance to it. It is akin to the judgment that Stephen is cold or inhuman based on an assessment of his relationships with his family and friends. Clearly Stephen is "self-absorbed," and his primary, or even sole, allegiance is to himself. Many readers agree with Henke's assessment of Stephen as narcissistic, "[e]motionally static and incapable of meaningful connection with other human beings. (94) I do not buy this, and I believe the exchanges with Lynch and Cranly present Stephen as "meaningfully" connected.

Stephen himself is acutely aware of his lack of experience in love. When Cranly asks him point blank, "Have you never loved anyone?" (261) Stephen first tries to deflect the question into a discussion of his sexual experience and then in a typical bit of ambiguous earnestness starts to talk about how he had tried to love God. Cranly wants to make him realize that he loves his Mother, but Stephen resists because he knows that mother-love is a double edged sword. I do not see this as a character flaw. I am perhaps overqualified to make this judgment since I myself did not have the foggiest notion what it meant to love someone until I was at least Stephen's age. Stephen is trying to be honest with himself and even with Cranly when he knows he is taking a risk in opening up to him. Stephen is a young man, and it is virtually impossible for me to imagine him going through the rest of his life without developing a very important relationship with a woman. When his mother says she prays that he may learn what the heart is and what it feels, Stephen writes "Amen. So be it." (275)

The book chronicles the emergence of Stephen's "self" and is a journey into its inner reaches as he struggles to disentangle his identity from the social forces which define him. The issue is whether this is an appropriate choice for a young man to make, even if it is not a choice that everyone can or should make. The idea that the human individual should strive to achieve autonomy has been debated since Socrates. My own reactions to Stephen are colored by my admiration for Soren Kierkegaard, whose neurotic cultivation of inwardness achieves a degree of "morbidity" that Stephen cannot begin to touch. In my experience the attempt to realize oneself as an autonomous individual or to take full responsibility for the creation of oneself inevitably involves a conflict with the world of normal, everyday life. This has been described in a great variety of ways by any number of writers, poets, philosophers and prophets. I think the depiction of one aspect of this process in *A Portrait* is about as vivid as it gets, and I think responding with admiration and sympathy is a completely valid reading of the book.

I realize that many contemporary thinkers believe that the project of self-liberation or self-creation is a self-defeating goal based on delusions or blind acceptance of inherited ideas.



I assume this is what inspires Seamus Deane's judgment of Stephen, and I have the impression that in this area the postmodern critics have the upper hand at least with respect to their predecessors who felt compelled to see irony in the book in order to rescue its literary reputation. If there is no such thing as "the self" or if it is really a social construct from which there is no escape, then my reading not just of the book but of my own experience is deluded. I have no rebuttal to this argument, but I am obviously going to spend time brooding about it. My instincts tell me that the truth of this insight is only available to individuals who have journeyed all the way up the river to find the Kurtz within, who have seen as Kierkegaard did that the final stage of existence is based on faith which is capable of sacrificing one's only son.

If I identify with Stephen I stand exposed to the criticism of the novel which insists that Stephen is depicted with irony or even mockery. Ryf considers the technique of deflation and the choice of Stephen Dedalus's name as the two principal means by which Joyce makes his presentation of Stephen ironic. (159) He cites the discussion of aesthetic theory with Lynch as one of the prime examples of the way in which Joyce deflates Stephen by putting him into a context that comments on him. My own reaction to this scene in the book is very different, and I resist the conclusion that I am being naïve.

I find the exchanges between Stephen and Lynch delightful, probably because I recognize myself in both the characters. (I find it extremely difficult to discuss serious topics in conversation, be they intellectual or personal and emotional. My upbringing trained me to inject wit or humor into any conversation rather than attempt to use the occasion for serious exchange. This is not to say that I don't value a serious exchange of ideas. Obviously I do, and I often yearn for the opportunity to discuss issues I care deeply about with people who understand them. Why else would I write this paper?)

Stephen seeks Lynch out; he literally pulls him aside so that he can discuss ideas with him. (221) He knows Lynch understands what he is talking about even though Lynch himself professes not to give a fig about anything other than how to make a living. And Lynch clearly does understand the ideas, not only in terms of their cultural context but also in terms of their inherent value. He can talk about the "true scholastic stink" of ideas because he knows Scholasticism and has some kind of appreciation for it. I sense a kind of enthusiasm in his response, just as when he says, "Bull's eye again!...Tell me now what *claritas* is and you win the cigar." (230) He is amused, but his amusement is based on an appreciation of the ideas. His distance is not the distance of an academic who considers Scholastic modes of thought to be outmoded pedantry. It is the distance of an everyday, practical man of the world who needs to focus on earning a living. He has the intellect required to grapple with these issues, but it has come unplugged. The issues are not vital to him. This does not make him more sympathetic than Stephen, although it is easier to enjoy the company of someone whose

intellect is used simply for amusement or entertainment. It simply makes him different, and it does not reflect poorly on Stephen that Lynch and the world he represents do not share Stephen's passion for aesthetic theory. Lynch is a good friend, both in the sense of amusing company and in the sense of a worthy opponent in the struggle for self-realization. This is why Stephen seeks him out. He may feel a need to cut himself off from his compatriots in order to protect embryonic flame of his soul from the cold gusts of the world, but he values friendship nonetheless. He simply values the life of his soul more.

I also do not think that the metaphorical equation of philosophy with cow dung which occurs in this scene serves to "ironize" the presentation of Stephen. It may be a comment on the nature of all inherited culture, and it is easy to see in it the larvae of postmodernism; but I do not believe that it mocks Stephen's passion. If anything Stephen's passion is the only way to access the truth of the metaphor. Lynch's assessment of aesthetic theory is not Joyce's, and I remain convinced that Joyce's aesthetic theory is much closer to Stephen's than many critics want it to be.

The exchange with Cranly about mother-love and filial devotion is less fun than the conversation with Lynch, but it parallels it fairly neatly. Cranly challenges Stephen from the conventional moral point of view. The point is not simply that Stephen is cruel to his mother, but that Stephen's commitment to his vocation and to the kind of integrity it requires of him put him in conflict with conventional society. Stephen resorts to extreme argument citing Pascal, Aloysius Gonzaga, and Jesus as examples of men who were cruel to their mother. There is a deliberate perversity in his argument because he is struggling to free himself from a bond with his own mother. The next to last image in the book is of his mother helping him prepare for his departure and wishing him well. It is obvious that her comment is bitter, but it is also possible to feel that Stephen sees through the bitterness and appreciates the human concern and wisdom behind it. That at any rate is how I would see the scene played if it were being filmed.

The discussion of whether Stephen is immature as an artist has focused primarily on an evaluation of the poem he writes. (242-3) Most critics do not like the poem. Deane calls it "a little mouse of a poem;" (xlii) Kenner "Frenchified verses [written] in bed in an erotic swoon; (Sharpless 97) and Henke "vaguely erotic verses generated by a wet dream and/or masturbatory excitement." (94) As Adams puts it Stephen's "actual artistic production, in the course of the book, is so scanty and dubious that some critics have thought him the butt of bitter ironic mockery." (157) Robert Scholes insists, however, that the poem "is a far richer poem than the ninetyish verses which it appears to resemble." (74) He provides a thorough analysis of the meaning of the poem and of its appropriateness in the novel and concludes that it is proof that Joyce intended the reader to feel that in the composition of the poem "Stephen

ceases to be an aesthete and becomes a poet." (81)

I myself was not inclined to judge the poem. I rarely respond to poetry with the intensity I experience with novels or drama, and I am more than willing to concede that I am not qualified to pass judgment on a poem. My own evaluation of Stephen's potential as an artist is based on the assumption that the book is in fact a portrait of James Joyce. Since Joyce wrote this novel which has moved me more than any other work of fiction I ever read, I conclude that Stephen has what it takes to become an artist, even if he has not yet fully realized his potential by the end of the book.

The issue of whether Joyce mocks Stephen's artistic immaturity recalls an image I conceived around the time I first heard that *A Portrait* was considered ironic. I was myself struggling with a desire to devote my life to something "creative" and with a paralyzing fear that I did not have what it took. I imagined a scene for a film which is a single continuous shot. It begins on a close-up of a man who is obviously intensely focused on something he is doing. The camera pulls back to reveal that he is painting, but we see him from behind his easel and never see what he is painting. The camera continues pulling back to reveal that his easel is set up in a park on what appears to be a Sunday afternoon, and finally we notice strollers in the park beyond him, stopping to look at what he is doing and laughing and joking quietly about it.

While I suspect that Joyce had some degree of ambivalence or some "perspective" on his own work, I can not believe he was attempting to mock Stephen in this way or that his "perspective" included the kind of self-loathing that has haunted me or even the joking self-deprecation with which I protect myself from judgment.

The issue of Stephen's name as an ironic comment on his character and a clue to how we are to interpret him is comparable to the issue of the use of the image of flight. Joyce obviously reveled in the ambiguities of all the elements in his book. One of the things that makes the book so remarkable is the way in which every image or word resonates with all the complexity and ambiguity of lived experience. Whether Stephen is Dedalus or Icarus destined to crash, whether his flight is an escape to freedom and creativity or a fearful retreat from all that is human can be debated endlessly just as any moment of one's existence could be analyzed forever without arriving at any certainty about the proper choice to make. To be alive is to risk death, sin and failure. Stephen is alive and willing to risk everything. I cannot help but admire him for it.

Wayne Booth addresses the problem of alternative interpretations of the meaning of Stephen's flight as an example of the difficulties posed by the use of irony. He cites first the more extreme case of Ulysses:

Except for occasional outbursts of bravado nobody has ever really claimed that Joyce is clear. In all the skeleton keys and classroom guides there is an open assumption that his later works, *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*, cannot be read; they can only be studied. Joyce himself was always explicating his works, and it is clear that he saw nothing wrong with the fact that they could not be thought of as standing entirely on their own feet. The reader's problems are handled, if they are to be handled at all, by rhetoric provided outside the work.

But the difficulties with distance that are pertinent here cannot be removed by simple study. Obscure allusions can be looked up, patterns of imagery and theme can be traced; gradually over the years a good deal of lore has accumulated, and about some of it by now there is even a certain amount of agreement. But about the more fundamental matters the skeleton keys and guides are of little help, because unfortunately they do not agree, they do not agree at all. It is fine to know that in *Ulysses* Stephen stands in some way for Telemachus and Bloom for his wandering father, Ulysses. But it would also be useful to know whether the work is comic or pathetic or tragic, or, if it is a combination, where the elements fall. Can two readers be said to have read the same book if one thinks it ends affirmatively and the other sees the ending as pessimistic? It is really no explanation to say that Joyce has succeeded in imitating life so well that like life itself his books seem totally ambiguous, totally open to whatever interpretation the reader wants to place on them. Even William Empson, that perceptive and somewhat overly ingenious prophet of ambiguity, finds himself unable to be completely permissive toward conflicting interpretations. In a long, curious essay arguing that the basic movement of *Ulysses* is toward a favorable ending, with the Blooms and Stephen united, he admits that there are difficulties, and that they spring from the kind of book it is: it "not only refuses to tell you the end of the story, it also refuses to tell you what the author thinks would have been a good end to the story." And yet almost in the same breath he can write as if he thought previous critics somehow at fault for not having come to *his* inferences about the book. "By the way, I have no patience with critics who say it is impossible ever to tell whether Joyce means a literary effect to be ironical or not; if they don't know this part isn't funny, they ought to." Well, but why should they be able to? Who is to mediate between Empson and those he attacks, or between Lawrance Thompson, in his interpretation of the book as comedy, and those critics with whom he is "decidedly at odds," Stuart Gilbert, Edmund Wilson, Harry Levin, David Daiches, and T. S. Eliot, each of whom assumes, he says, that "Joyce's artistic mode is essentially a non-comic mode, or that comedy in *Ulysses* is an effect rather than a cause"?

Can it possibly make no difference whether we laugh or do not laugh? Can we defend the book even as a realistic mixture, like life itself, unless we can state with some precision what the ingredients are that have been mixed together? (86-7)

I suspect postmodern critics would be delighted with the discovery that two readers have not read the same book, and I am obviously inclined to accept the cop-out that there is no definitive resolution of different readings of *A Portrait*. Booth focuses on three episodes in the book: Stephen's rejection of the priesthood, his discussion of aesthetics and the composition of the poem. While he wishes he could resolve the issue on the basis of a reading of the text alone, he is forced to resort to external documents. He points out that no one viewed *A Portrait* as ironic at all until after *Ulysses* was published and that it was really only

after *Stephen Hero* had been published that there was sufficient evidence to support an interpretation of the irony in *A Portrait*. (93) In a sophisticated discussion of the problems presented to the reader by the abandonment of traditional literary forms and the withdrawal of the writer's own explicit judgments from the text, Booth paints himself into the corner of having to conclude that the novel is flawed because the reader does not have an adequate basis for understanding the author's judgment of his central character.

But who is to blame them? Whatever intelligence Joyce postulates in his reader—let us assume the unlikely case of its being comparable to his own—will not be sufficient for precise inference of a pattern of judgments which is, after all, private to Joyce. And this will be true regardless of how much distance from his own hero we believe him to have achieved by the time he concluded his final version. We simply cannot avoid the conclusion that to some extent the book itself is at fault, regardless of its great virtues. Unless we make the absurd assumption that Joyce had in reality purged himself of all judgment by the time he completed his final draft, unless we see him as having really come to look upon all of Stephen's actions as equally wise or equally foolish, equally sensitive or equally meaningless, we must conclude that many of the refinements he intended in his finished *Portrait* are, for most of us, permanently lost. Even if we were now to do our homework like dutiful students, even if we were to study all of Joyce's work, even if we were to spend the lifetime that Joyce playfully said his novels demand, presumably we should never come to as rich, as refined, and as varied a conception of the quality of Stephen's last days in Ireland as Joyce had in mind. For some of us the air of detachment and objectivity may still be worth the price, but we must never pretend that a price was not paid. (95)

Booth has made clear that what is at stake for him here is the nature of art:

The creation and the enjoyment of art can never be a completely neutral activity. Though different works of art require different kinds of judgment for their enjoyment, the position taken in chapters three through five must stand: no work, not even the shortest lyric, can be written in complete moral, intellectual and aesthetic neutrality. We may judge falsely, we may judge unconsciously, but we cannot even bring the book to mind without judging its elements, seeing them as shaped into a given kind of thing. Even if we denied that the sequence of events has meaning in the sense of being truly sequential, that denial would itself be a judgment on the rightness of Stephen's actions and opinions at each stage: to decide that he is not growing is as much a judgment on his actions as to decide that he is becoming more and more mature. (90)

I am not sure I think the assumption that Joyce achieved a completely non-judgmental stance in polishing the final draft of his novel is an absurd one. Even if Joyce himself as a human being was incapable of being completely non-judgmental, I think it is conceivable that he could adopt this as a goal in his writing, that he could aspire to create a work which was itself non-judgmental. It appears that this is what he achieved. He was able to present

Stephen in so a vivid manner that readers like myself can be completely swept up by him while other readers will be put off by him or judge him to be eternally damned. I tend to think that the most productive starting point for discussing literature is not really the text itself but the readers' responses to the text. If one reader can articulate not only how he reacts but why he reacts that way based on his associations with the words, images, metaphors, scenes, rhetorical devices, etc. of the text, then another reader can contrast that reaction with his own. Ideally in the exchange both readers will have a heightened awareness of what things mean to himself and others. The text each reads is in fact a different text in a very real sense and discovering that is the point of studying literature.

So what have I gained by re-reading *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*? It has made me feel young again, even if only for a few hours at a time; and for that I am grateful. I also have a renewed appreciation for the complexity and beauty of the writing and for the way in which other people see not only Stephen Dedalus but art and life. I am getting glimpses of what is involved in "postmodern" thinking and how it may relate to ideas that I value. Articulating any of this will have to wait for another occasion. For now it is high time to declare victory and quit the field.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Much of the material presented in this course was later published as The Meaning of Modern Art: A Philosophical Interpretation by Karsten Harries. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968.

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