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Per Aspera Ad Astra

It is always easier to read a mask than a face. There is no deception in a mask; the semiotic code is always clear, free from confusion. A face, on the other hand, tells you nothing about the mind under the surface. It is a thing to be analyzed, guessed at, a cipher capable of the most incredible complexity. James Joyce's A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man wears a number of masks, each of which must be removed in order to finally glimpse the true face of the author. The work presents as a nearly archetypal example of a Bildungsroman novel, wherein a young protagonist discovers meaning and his place in the world, and eventually acquires a philosophy of life and the "art of living" (Harmon 40). Beginning with the language and syntax of a three-year-old "nicens little boy named baby tuckoo" (Joyce 1), the author uses a journey motif to take us through the young life of Stephen Dedalus (Robbins 261). There are reasons enough to read the book even if only to look at how this talented young man comes to terms with his gifts. Still, this is the first mask to be peeled away, if one wants to come to a deeper understanding of this masterwork. While not strictly the "autobiographical novel" Joyce claimed, the young Stephen participates in many of the exact same events as Joyce at that age, and most of the characters in the book represent in literal or allegorical fashion individuals or themes from the artist's own life. This is particularly important to students of the interaction of literature and history, because the Irish Revival was in its ascendancy at the point when Joyce began his literary career (Eide 377). Joyce is therefore both protagonist as well as the persona (Latin for "mask") which narrates the tale. Underneath this, however, is yet another story, one which lays out the path that a generalized artist must take in order

to sever the constraints which tie him to the world of the ordinary. In this sense, Portrait may very well become the most pristine example of a Kuntsler-roman novel ever penned in the English language. It becomes clear that Joyce believes artistic greatness must first pass through the fires of alienation, scorn, and self-doubt, and he uses many of the key scenes in the work to illustrate how this isolation acts as a catalyst for greatness, which can turn a victim of his circumstances into a hero triumphant over them. A brief analysis of an array of these scenes will be helpful in bringing to light the difficult path Joyce believed was absolutely vital in the development of the self as a truly free, truly independent, artist.

Before one can start to look at how the young Dedalus/Joyce begins this process, it might be productive to come to terms with what we mean by the "self" in the first place. The psychological and sociological literature is teeming with definitions - some of them alarmingly contradictory for such a central concept. George Herbert Mead developed the most widely accepted theory of the self, in which self and mind are dialectically related to each other, but also dependent upon the other's existence (Ritzer 58). A self develops when a human being "becomes aware of herself as a person...when she can mentally step outside of herself, and see herself as she sees other people" (Lovaglia 56). In order to be able to think about oneself as an object, one must have a mind; one cannot have a mind without being able to have a conversation with oneself, which requires a subject, a self (Ritzer 58). Self-awareness, then, is a reflexive thought process, where the "I" part of your mind reflects upon the "me;" these terms sound synonymous but here highly important to Mead, as well as being useful in our understanding of Portrait. The "I" is the response of the self to others, "the incalculable, unpredictable, and creative aspect" (Ritzer 61). When we think of ourselves using the "I," we are thinking of ourselves as subjects. The "I" is the "source of novelty in the world" and the seat of our values (62). It is because of the "I" that we develop

our unique personalities, and it is the "I" which the young Stephen so painfully attempts to grow in Portrait.

Reacting against the "I" is the "me," the individual's adoption and perception of what Mead called the "generalized other." By this Mead meant the attitudes of the people within one's surroundings (58), in this case the retrograde and antisocial norms of pre-Revival Ireland. Mead believed that we develop a unified picture of ourselves only after we adopt the attitudes and proscriptions of the people around us concerning who we ought to be (Lovaglia 57). One of the ways in which this happens is through a mechanism developed by Charles Cooley called the looking-glass self. In this theory, we use other people as a sort of mirror "to assess who we are and how we are doing" (Ritzer 134). If we find acceptance and confirmation in the other, if people evaluate us as we hope, we continue to act as we have been. If the reverse occurs, we may feel the need to reassess ourselves and make changes. This process occurs constantly and automatically, and through it we organize a unified picture of who the generalized other wants us to be (134). Most human beings are very conscious of what society wants us to do, but Stephen was a particularly observant and sensitive young man, so these pressures acted upon him quite strongly throughout most of the first four chapters of the book. It can be said, therefore, that conformists are dominated by the "me," while those who fight against the status quo might be thought of as allowing the "I" freer rein. The internal tension which is so present in the young artist is exactly this: an unavoidable desire to cast off the stagnating forces of family, country, and religion, and "to forge in the smithy of [his] soul the uncreated conscience of [his] race" (Joyce 185). In other words, the young Dedalus was trying to escape the same confining maze as his namesake, and to take to the skies in full creative and independent flight, the triumph of the "I" over the "me."

It would be impossible to highlight in a paper of this scope every relevant

passage in Portrait which contributes to Stephen/Joyce finally achieving this flight. Still, one need not travel very far into the book before coming face to face with the fact that even as a child the protagonist was adrift from his family and peers in fundamental ways. One of the very first social interactions recorded in Stephen's memory involves him telling his nurse and mother that one day he would marry Eileen, a protestant neighbor's daughter. He is swiftly reprimanded, even to the extent that he is told that eagles would "pull out his eyes" (2) if he did not apologize; this causes the young artist to create a rhyme about apologizing and eagles tearing away his vision. Within the first one hundred words of the book, we are already witnesses to the conflict between Stephen's internal desires and the socialization pressures of his context. This example is basically the entire book in microcosm, creating a sense of disconnect between the boy and his world. This disconnect continues upon his arrival at Clongowes Wood College (which Joyce also attended), where Stephen feels his "body small and weak amid the throng of players" (2), and that "all the boys seemed to him very strange" (5). Shortly after his arrival, a bully named Wells shoves him into an open cesspool. Though he does not understand this act (nor the question and subsequent taunting about whether or not he kissed his mother), he clearly perceives the act as unjust. While attempting to understand his rejection by his peers (i.e., to use the mechanism of the looking-glass self), he pens his understanding of his person in the flyleaf of his geography book: "Stephen Dedalus/Class of Elements/Clongowes Wood College/Sallins/County Kildare/Ireland/Europe/The World/The Universe" (7-8). In her essay "Coming down along the road," Dorothy Robbins believes this passage springs from a mind "fascinated not only by the content of his expanded world (politics, sex, religion, social class), but by its form - the very sights and sounds of the words that will be his greatest tools." Perhaps, but the fact that Stephen pens this entry immediately after having been roundly rejected

by his peers is indicative that it was alienation - not mere exposure to an expanded world - that causes the young boy to begin to peer into the nature of who he is. After contracting a fever from his dip into the cesspool, Stephen is sent to the infirmary, where he consoles himself by imagining the beauty of his own funeral. In the midst of these thoughts we recognize the first of many battles Stephen would have with his religion and religious identity, when he is incapable of truly understanding the prayers he recites. Though he is comforted by one of the few friendly Jesuits in the nation while recuperating, his time in the infirmary is marked by the realization that he is an outsider.

Upon returning home from Clongowes for Christmas break, Stephen is allowed to dine at the adults' table for the first time. This should be a moment of triumphant inclusion, a point in time where the adult world of the other welcomes him into the fold. Instead, it is marked by a traumatic argument between his father Simon, John Casey, and Stephen's governess Mrs Dante Riordan regarding the church's role in politics and the death of the Irish Nationalist leader Charles Stewart Parnell. This dinner ends with Simon and Casey weeping over Parnell's death and the state of Ireland, and Riordan screaming "God and religion before everything...God and religion before the world!" (25) and "we won! We crushed him [Parnell] to death!" (26). These two positions represent the Scylla and Charybdis that the young Dedalus/Joyce would ultimately attempt to sail between both in his development of self and in his later politics. It is clear that this early exposure to the toxic effects of ideological purity were very formative in the process of making Stephen feel like he had no place in his homeland (Toolan 396).

Upon returning to Clongowes, Stephen attempts to understand why his fellows "seemed to him smaller and farther away" (Joyce 27). About that time Stephen is pushed down on a footpath and breaks his glasses. Unable to do his schoolwork, he is "pandied" by a sadistic priest for being a "lazy idle

little loafer" (34). Thus humiliated, Stephen summons the courage to leave his fellows behind and venture into the "low dark narrow corridor" (36) that leads to the castle where the rector's office is located, and where he can lobby a complaint against Father Dolan over his unjust punishment. In this act, we see the young Dedalus mimicking the Greek Daedulus as he escaped from Minos' labyrinth. More importantly, this is an allegory of the path he must take later, when he leaves his nation and his peers behind in order to reach a plateau of pure artistic expression.

Due to Simon Dedalus' debts, the family is forced to move to Dublin where Stephen is enrolled in Belvedere College. Though he outshines his fellow students, his sense of isolation deepens; of his peers "he gave them ear only for a time but he was happy only when he was far from them" (58). It is during this era that Stephen finally ceases his attempts at belonging. In fact, he even begins to take pleasure in rejecting the generalized other, as evidenced by the "vague general malignant joy" (55) he feels when singled out for having made a heretical point in one of his essays. At the age of fourteen, Stephen is approaching some very turbulent waters, and instead of finding comfort or solace in the arms of family, he is forced to realize that in all but the biological sense "he's not his father's son" (66). While on a trip to Cork to auction some family property, Stephen is embarrassed by his father's behavior, and realizes that he has nothing in common with him. His "mind seemed older than theirs: it shone coldly on their strifes...no life or youth stirred in him as it had stirred in them. He had known neither the pleasure of companionship with others nor the vigour of rude male health nor filial piety. Nothing stirred within his soul but a cold and cruel and loveless lust" (67). Old before his time, this chapter concludes with the miserable young man falling into the arms of a prostitute, and surrendering to the only sort of connection available to him. As painful as this section is to read, it is a necessary step in the shedding of his old self; without it, the older Dedalus would never be able

to dispose with "the constant voices of his father and his masters, urging him to be a gentleman above all things and to be a good catholic above all things" (58).

Stephen's introduction to the world of sex ignites his appetite for food, which in turn magnifies his appreciation for all sensation. It is a revival of sorts, bringing him back to life after a time in the extreme cold. Still, upon hearing a particularly loathesome series of lectures on hell and sin, the boy for a time descends nearly into madness, ultimately attempting to find forgiveness and solace in the church - an attempt to control the "I" and merge it forcibly with the "me." In addition, he reins in his appetites, desiring a life of resolute piety. Still, old feelings and doubts begin to assail him (he's going through puberty, after all). In the midst of this period of flux, Stephen is presented with two events which ultimately define him as a person and as an artist. First, even though internally he is riven by doubts, his external piety is so remarkable that the director of Bevedere approaches him about entering the Jesuit order. Ivan Canadas, in his essay on the myth of Icarus, notes that this meeting is "a subtle parody of the traditional religious narrative of the spiritual journey towards salvation," in that his speech is almost completely materialistic and inherently corrupt. The word "power" is used nine times in three sentences, for instance. Due to the events detailed thus far in this study, Stephen is at the dawn of true self-awareness, and he realizes that he would inevitably fall should he take up the priest's offer. In the midst of this, Stephen comes home to learn that his family is being forced to move yet again, and he leaves his home in frustration to walk by the seashore.

It is here that Stephen finally comes to term with his isolation, as well as experiences an epiphany about his future. At the shore, several of his peers are swimming and they call out to him: "Here comes The Dedalus" (120)

and "Stepheros Dedalos! Bous Stephanoumeros! Bous Stephaneforos!" (121). In the past, his very un-Irish name was a source of confusion and separation for him, but in this moment he comes to own it, and he vows to become like his namesake and soar above the cultural and religious restrictions of his boyhood: "His soul had arisen from the grave of his boyhood, spurning her graveclothes. Yes! Yes! Yes! He would create proudly out of the freedom and power of his soul, as the great artificer whose name he bore, a living thing, new and soaring and beautiful, impalpable, imperishable" (122).

Next to the shore, he witnesses a young woman bathing in the surf. The description of the woman is infused with references to birds: she had the likeness "of a strange and beautiful seabird;" her legs were "delicate as a crane's;" the white fringes of her "drawers were like feathering of soft white down;" her bosom "was as a bird's, soft and slight...as the breast of some dark-plumaged dove" (123). In this moment where the Icarus in him crashes into the surf and the Daedalus flies above, he sees this woman's beauty not as a source of physical lust, but as if she were an object of art. He cries out "Heavenly God" in an "outburst of profane joy" (123). In this moment of epiphany, the "I" finally overcomes the conforming gravity of the "me," and his shame and anxiety melt away. He falls asleep to the sound of the waves and awakens as Stephen Dedalus the man, the artist.

The final chapter shows Stephen at the university, where he is developing his philosophy of aesthetics. All of the old extremes of family, religion, and nationalism are displayed in this chapter in the form of various students or passersby. Though he is capable of having deep conversations with his peers, he is no longer ashamed by his distance from them and he resists their attempts to such him back into the fold. His independence has now come to both define him and give him strength. The book concludes with Stephen (as Joyce) leaving Ireland for the Continent, severing all of the ties which held his talent

back. Looking at the ships which will carry him to a new life, they seem to whisper to him: "the black arms of tall ships stand against the moon, their tale of distant nations. They are held out to say: We are alone - come. And the voices say with them: We are your kinsmen" (185). Joyce concludes the book with one last journal entry, before Stephen departs for his future: "Old father, old artificer, stand me now and ever in good stead" (185). Finally, after all of his trevails, Stephen Dedalus has escaped from his maze.

This final section of the book has almost Nietzschean overtones. Joyce seems to be saying that the true artist is a man beholden to no one but his own sense of beauty, his own internal morality. The hero-artist's only true brothers are those who have also learned to stand apart from mediocrity, because it is only through alienation that one can be forced through the process of self-discovery. This is the mind of Joyce, unmasked at last. It is a truism of human nature that we often do not know what we believe about something until we are forced to write about it. It may be that Portrait is not only a story of a young man coming into contact with his true self, but also the vehicle through which the older Joyce himself came to understand how his history had created him. The story ends as it began, with a journey, and though he couldn't know it at the time of his writing of Portrait, Joyce would live to fulfill his character's heartfelt desire to "forge in the smithy of [his] soul the uncreated conscience of [his] race" (185).

A Excellent
 work. Clearly
 you understood that
 the constructed self is
 that of a man, of an
 artist - who is finding his
 own creative power - and of
 himself. Each

has a power struggle.
The young man with authority,
The young artist with the world in
his hand and related with the
young he lives and related with the
oppressor of the Catholic church & with
himself / himself from
himself must face the
himself colonized. Excellent work.

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