Aesthetic Epiphany and Transcendence in Joyce's A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man

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1. Transcendence and the Dialectic of Dogmatism and Skepticism

At the core of the search for order in history, according to Voegelin, is openness to reality in its fullest and most eminent sense. This openness is an orientation to transcendence, whose very mystery defies any proper naming, but whose most approximate and traditional naming, as Aquinas in his masterful explication makes clear, is called "God."[1] This self-transcending openness to transcendence Voegelin identifies as "experience." It is indeed the experience of the Question.[2] The experience requires by is own internal necessity symbolization, which can vary historically from compactness to differentiation.

In the Hellenic case of the differentiation of the experience the focus was on the Question and, with it, the intrinsic association of the experience with reason.[3] But this "reason" of the "classic experience" could take off by itself as an instrument, misconstrue or challenge the symbols of transcendence, and, in the extreme, deny the existence of transcendent reality in favor of various varieties of world immanentism—thus fatally attacking the experience itself. Here we have the negation of experience in Voegelin's sense.

Thus the lovers of wisdom can, under specific historical circumstances and conditions, defend the integrity of the experience by attacking the negations in the form of what Voegelin

[1] Thomas Aquinas, *The Summa Theologia*, Pars Prima, Question 13, "The Names of God."
[2] Eric Voegelin, *Order and History*, vol. 4, *The Ecumenic Age*, ed. Michael Franz, vol. 17 of *Collected Works of Eric Voegelin* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2000), pp. 399-400.
[3] Eric Voegelin, *Published Essays, 1966-1985*, vol. 12 of *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, ed. Ellis Sandoz (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), chap. 10.

calls "dogmas."[4] Dogmas, then, are historically contingent negations of the negation. They can serve to promote the institutionalization of meaning and act as guardians of a tradition originating in experience. But there lurks an ever-present historical danger: the dogmas tied to symbols can be cut off from the engendering experience and take on a life of their own. Even a thinker as sensitive as Cicero can fail to grasp the complexity of the originating experience and can treat the symbols, in Voegelin's curt formulation, as "hieroglyphics."[5] We have here "dogmas," in the pejorative sense of the term. This dogmatism can only invite the intellectual critique of skepticism.

We have here massive historical ambivalence. Dogmas can be associated with some limited insights into the core experience. Skepticism can be a legitimate critique of the meaninglessness of the dogmas, which have eaten the substance out of the symbols. And there can be a negation of the negation of the negation—with a host of complications and existential fundamental options. There can be a return to the original negation (in a seemingly endless battle with the dogmas). Or there can be a genuine call for the recapture of the experience itself. Or, more fatally, there can be a radical attempt to substitute for and replace the dogmas with counter-dogmas rooted in counter-experiences—to coopt transcendence itself by closing the openness to mystery and by immanentizing transcendence. Here is the ultimate negation: the "fool" who in his heart knows there is no God.

So there is dialectic of dogmatism and skepticism endemic to intellectual culture, a fragility to the whole enterprise that can fracture in various tense and tortured ways.[6] The

[4] Eric Voegelin, *Order and History*, vol. 3, *Plato and Aristotle*, ed. Dante Germino, vol. 16 of *Collected Works of Eric Voegelin* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2000), pp. 316-22.
[5] Eric Voegelin, *History of Political Ideas*, vol. 1 *Hellenism, Rome, and Early Christianity*, ed. Athanasios Moulakis, vol. 19 of *Collected Works of Eric Voegelin* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1997), pp. 131-32, 134, 136-37.
[6] Voegelin *Published Essays, 1966-1985*, pp. 64-80.

historical situation can become increasingly complicated, bellicose, broken, exhausted—crying out, in desperation, for some return to the engendering experience itself.

We have presented, at a very abstract and general level, something like a grand-scale ideal-type in history. It can present an overarching theme of intellectual patterns in Western culture, which ultimately through a series of transformations can set the stage for the search for transcendence in literature at the turn of the twentieth century, and specifically in Joyce's *A Portrait of an Artist as Young Man*.

At the dawn of modernity the Church was the custodian of the heritage of medieval Western culture and the custodian of dogmas of transcendence. The dogmas were intellectually tied to the medieval conception of intelligible order that embraced the notions of the hierarchical cosmos, the three estates, and the *sacrum imperium* (with the complex relations of Empire and Papacy). Certainly by the end of the seventeenth century the dogmas of the Church did not seem to do justice to the new historical realities of the nation-state (with the Peace of Westphalia), global exploration, a plurality of churches, and the modern scientific view of the cosmos. As modern science replaced the older cosmology (actually dating back to the Babylonians), could it not also replace *tout court* all other traditional fields and methods? The new science, then, was the key to a specifically new, modern intellectual culture, superseding not only medieval culture but perhaps also all previous intellectual culture as the progenitor, and then carrier, of the mature human realization of progress. The Enlightenment precisely had the task of creating this new modern intellectual culture as it simultaneously was skeptical of the dogmas of tradition and was tempted to transform its emerging claims into counter-dogmas of materialism and determinism. And there was the further temptation, Voegelin strongly argues, to coopt transcendence by redirecting its mysterious salvific dimension into the world immanent movement of progress.

This would only pave the way for more radical—and deadly—versions of the immantization of the eschaton in Marxism and National Socialism—the essence of modernity, Voegelin insists.[7]

To complicate matters, modern culture would bifurcate itself as the Enlightenment tradition would create its own dialectical twin. The Enlightenment would spawn its tradition in the dogmatic form of positivism, espousing the claims of reason in its narrow scientistic methodologically rigid procedures. This would evoke a skeptical reaction against reason so narrowly conceived. In an attempt to recapture through image, feeling, and symbol the mystery of reality, Romanticism rebelled against the drab methods of science, the oppressive nature of the world machine, and the "Satanic mills" of the human landscape of positivism. The artist replaced the scientist as the herald of culture. The intuition of the poet would give access to reality suffused with mystery. By contrast, the dull reasoning of the scientist forged by artificial categories the dreary world-machine, whose reality was merely phenomenal and whose value was merely instrumental, for the sake of survival. Romanticism in the early nineteenth century could in some versions embrace vestiges of old medieval spiritual forms and at least recapture some of the core experience of transcendence—but recapture it only partially at best by virtue of its banishing of reason (tending to accept the Enlightenment's restricted view of reason).

But by the turn of the twentieth century the fragmentation of modern culture seemed to have reached a boiling point—a "heap of broken images." Neo-Romanticism, unlike its predecessor, tended to focus on images, feelings, and symbols immanent to the self, if not to the psyche. Thus in rebellion against the world of positivism, against the increasingly bourgeois commercial society (allied with science and technology), and against remnants of traditional

[7] Eric Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics* in *Modernity without Restraint: The Political Religions; The New Science of Politics, and Science Politics, and Gnosticism,* ed. Manfred Henningsen, vol. 5 of *Collected Works of Eric Voegelin* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2000), chaps. 4, 6.

religion—all of which constituted in strange discordant unity the "bourgeois-Christian" world of the nineteenth century—the artist could either sink below this world in the life of the Bohemian or rise above it into the completely artificial world of Decadence, where art itself would be for "art's sake" (and not for the sake of a genuine relation to transcendence).[8]

We have presented, of course, a series of broad generalizations, which might require volumes of qualifications. But we would argue that they point legitimately to the essential intellectual and spiritual question at the time *A Portrait of an Artist as Young Man* was written: namely, in the intricate and tangling webs woven by the dialectic of dogmatism and skepticism where can we find any genuine attempt to escape from the webs and come to rediscover, however tentatively and inchoately, the experience of transcendence?

There is a particularly instructive reason to consider a turn of the twentieth-century work of literature on the artist that rises to the level of "great literature." For, as Voegelin forcefully argues, "great literature" combines great artistic value with existential substance—that is, its content would be a penetrating exploration, with skilled reflective distance, of the dynamics and structure of human existence as experienced in the consciousness of the author.[9] The "exploration" is the key term here. In the world of turn of the twentieth-century literature it was arguably the artist who was the prime subject of investigation and representation, both for the Bohemians, and for the Decadents, and for those who would go beyond those bounds with varying degrees of penetration and exactness—certainly Proust and Beckett, and, we would maintain, Joyce.

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[8] For the classic work on the problem of the "bourgeois-Christian world" for nineteenth-century European thinkers, see Karl Löwith*, From Hegel to Nietzsche: The Revolution in Nineteenth-Century Thought*, trans. David E. Green (Garden City, New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1967).

[9] Eric Voegelin, *The Drama of Humanity and Other Miscellaneous Essays 1939-1985*, vol. 33 of the *Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, ed. William Petropulos and Gilbert Weiss ((Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2004), p. 383.

Joyce's *A Portrait of an Artist as Young Man*, while not his most famous and mature effort, still stands as a great work of literature. So we can treat it *sui generis*. No doubt an erudite analysis of autobiographical references, of the historical background, and of cultural allusions could be a fruitful enterprise. But we can for our limited hermeneutical purposes of investigating the exploration of experience focus on the text itself in a meditative, philosophical way. We seek to gain insight into the question of transcendence as it emerges in the narrative.

2. The First Episode

In the opening section of the novel, we already are introduced to Joyce's modus operandi. There is a short section on a very young child's view of the world. He hears a story of a "moocow" told by his father through "a glass" with a "hairy face." His mother has a "nicer smell" than his father. She cleans his bed, which he wets as it goes from "warm" to "cold." The horizon expands to relatives, one of whom, Dante, mentions a political figure, Parnell, and so we now have a glimpse of the world beyond the house. And indeed we next have a reference to neighbors, the Vances and their daughter, Eileen.[10] Immediately we turn to a later period in the boy's life, and we learn his name, Stephen Daedalus. So already we suspect that the novel is about the perspective of Stephen Daedalus, and less about the outside world, whether persons, or places, or politics. All "extrinsic factors" are indeed important but only insofar as they are related to Stephen Daedalus. We soon find he grows older and older during the narrative. There will be some development of his consciousness and of him. We, the readers, naturally wonder, Where is this leading? The story, therefore, is about the subject, Stephen Daedalus, and he is portrayed as a conscious self.

[10] James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man: Texts Criticism, and Notes*, ed. Chester G. Anderson, The Viking Critical Library (New York: Penguin, 1964), pp. 7-8. Hereafter the text will be cited by internal notes.

Although the narrative is roughly in chronological order, it is not proceeding in traditional narrative fashion. We get episodes, glimpses, of the perception and action of the main self-character, often with sudden changes in setting, frequently with memories of the past woven in, with vague allusions to persons apparently of some value in the life of Stephen (the romantic love interest, Emma, for example). This is not full-blown classic stream of consciousness, but, it is clear, the novel explores the interiority of Stephen as its main theme. So, again ,we readers want to know, Who is this self? Well, we first learn his name, and we ponder its significance. Stephen is the first Christian martyr. In what sense will this Stephen be a martyr. The first Stephen would not serve the Jewish religious authorities but would serve Christ. Whom will this Stephen not serve? Whom will he serve? Daedalus is the mythological fine craftsman. But his task is fraught with danger. He crafts the maze of the Minotaur with its labyrinthine problems for the Athenians. And he sends his own progeny, Icarus, on a perilous, and fatal, mission. There is a sense, then, that Stephen Daedalus' self-conscious journey will have perils.

The boy Stephen goes to the Jesuit school of Conglowes. Three things stand out in this episode: the focus of Stephen's attention in the interior life, the extrinsic relation to the social world, and the first assertion of Stephen as Stephen.

What are the most salient features are the sense experiences of Stephen, particularly cold and dark. The descriptions come swiftly and as an onslaught on the reader. They are overwhelming. He was out in the "cold" (10). It would be "nice to lie on the hearthrug before the fire" (10). "He shivered as if he had cold slimy water next to his skin" (10). The lavatory, associated with water, "made him feel cold and then hot" (11). The "air in the corridor chilled him too" (11). When some other boys laugh at Stephen, his "whole body was hot and confused" (14). When he is pushed into a ditch by another boy, "the cold slime of the ditch covered his

whole body" (14). In bed Stephen "shivered," but eventually he warms from the "cold shivering sheet" (17). In the chapel he experiences the "cold night air" (17-18). The sea, too, is cold, "but it was cooler at night" (17). Getting into his bed again, he faces the dark and "under the cold white sheets, shaking and trembling" (19). Basically, "all the dark was cold and strange," and it evokes "a long shiver of fear" (19).

Our first extensive experience with Stephen, then, is of his emotions. They are paramount, more important, it seems, than the associated classmates, places, interactions, and routines. They are also, for the most part cold and dark, indicating a kind of distance, even alienation from his surroundings, whether physical or human. Does Stephen need a psychiatric social worker, or is he on some challenging road towards artistic sensibility and distance? The title of the novel, of course, suggests the path. The distance applies to the other boys, who all "seemed to him very strange" (13). At that time Stephen wants to return to home and his mother. Yet when he returns home, he is startled and shocked at a conversion by relatives and a family friend over Parnell and the church. There is a heated debate over the justice of the condemnation of Parnell, the Irish patriotic leader, by the Catholic Church hierarchy for the sin of adultery. Both Parnell and the Church are lambasted. Stephen's relative Dante is indeed concerned that he would grow up scandalized by "the language he heard against God and religion and priests in his own home" (33). The language includes that of his own father who repeats that Ireland is a "priestridden Godforsaken race!" (37) Stephen is mainly an observer of this vitriol. What he actually witnesses are political dogmas hurled against religious dogmas. His reaction to the battle of dogmas is that of a "terrorstricken face" (39).

Stephen will soon have to fight his own battle, which brings us to the climax of the first episode, and certainly a development of great import and narrative foreshadowing. He is

relieved of his obligations for Latin class by the apparently kindly Father Arnall (who will later deliver one of the most vivid sermons on hell in the literature). Stephen has the excuse of having his glasses broken. Unfortunately for him the infamous dean of discipline Father Dolan comes to class—and threatens to come again as often as necessary. Here is true terror. He accuses Stephen, unjustly, of lying about the glasses, proceeds to make him kneel, and then flogs him. Again, as before, we have a vivid description of Stephen's emotions, but the theme of coldness disappears. In terror and in pain Stephen's body shakes "with a palsy of fright" (51). In shame and rage he lets out a "scalding cry" and has "scalding tears" fall from his eyes onto his "flaming cheeks" (51). Interestingly, for once Stephen has a real relation to his classmates, who offer him sympathy and act as friends. They urge him to go to the rector and plead his just case. He finally decides to do so and muster up enough courage to walk to the rector's residence. As he does so, he passes by portraits of the most famous Jesuits, saints, missionaries, martyrs—all great men in their devotion, above all else, as the Jesuit motto goes, *Ad Majorem Dei Gloriam* (55-56). Stephen finds the rector diplomatic, sympathetic, and prudent. He suggests Father Dolan simply made a mistake and that Stephen could be excused from assignments until he receives a new pair of glasses. Stephen has a brief triumph, and his classmates give him a "hurrow" (58). He is a temporary hero. He is "happy and free" (59). His emotions have been liberated, too. The air is "soft and grey and mild"; there is the pleasant smell of the evening, and of the fields, and of the woods; the "soft grey silence" of the "quiet air" is punctuated by the sound of cricket bats and of the drops of water "falling softly" from a fountain (59). In the process he sees the best of the Jesuits, their courage and intelligence. We wonder, as he has passed the portraits of the famous Jesuits, what is his unfolding portrait now? He has appealed to the higher authority of the rector. Will that be his final appeal to authority? Will he reconcile to that authority and to

his peers? But he has also defied the authority of the dean of discipline. Would Stephen the Martyr go another way? Would the nascent artist go the way of the Bohemian?

3. The Bohemian Turn: To Hell and Back

The great triumph with the rector and the applause of his classmates soon recedes into the background as the second episode of the novel unfolds. Stephen will find himself in a confusing world when, for financial reasons not altogether clear, his father will withdraw him from Clongowes. But perhaps more disturbing is the unrest that begins to come to the fore in Stephen's psyche. During a seemingly pleasant summer in the country he sees a "whitewashed home, in the garden of which grew many rosebushes," and he vividly imagines this to be house of "another Mercedes" like unto the character, Mercedes, in the *Count of Monte Cristo* (62-63). Why is this not a mere incidental phantasy of a boy but indeed a revelation? We quickly learn that the alienation from peers has become more substantial. He is "different from others" (65). He does "not want to play"—at least with them in the outer world (95). Even when he advances to the Jesuit school of Belvedere and is a student leader who could engage with quick witticism in preppy verbal exchanges with his comrades, he finds himself at odds with "this spirit of quarrelsome comradeship" (83). Instead, he "mistrusted the turbulence and doubted the sincerity of such comradeship" (83). His turbulence would be inward. So, too, he could experience no emotional bonds with his father as they journey to Cork, where his father recounts his youthful exploits and meet old friends. Stephen feels his mind is "older" than theirs and by "an abyss of fortune or of temperament" he is "sundered from them" (95). There is something about his mind that brings about this alienation. We learn only haltingly and briefly of family members beyond those in the very beginning of the novel. Suddenly we find he has a sister and a brother, and only well into the novel do we discover that he later has a large number of siblings as befitting a

good Irish Catholic family. But of his mother, brother, and sister he has a "bridge of restless shame" divide them from him, such that his relation to them is rather that of a "mystical kinship of fosterage, fosterchild, and fosterbrother" (98). Even the place where he lives, Dublin, is a "dull phenomenon" that "casts down" his soul (78). The authorities of that place, and that country, and even perhaps that civilization, are the "constant voices of his father and of his masters, urging him to be a gentleman above all things and urging him to be a good catholic above all things" (83). These voices are "hollowsounding in his ears" (83). And the voices of his father and his school comrades are a "din" coming from the "company of phantasmal comrades" (84). But what, then, is the importance of "Mercedes"?

Stephen has a soul, and he has a mind. He is active within. And the activity within in relation to the commonplace or the conventional or the banal or the vapid without—the world of authority or indeed dogmas—is a confused but poignant search for meaning. The search begins as a confused yet powerful sense of "unrest," first awakened in him in the "search for Mercedes from garden to garden" (66). Mercedes is a "fictional" character. So wither and whence the search? The unrest can convey a "vague dissatisfaction" (66). It can issue "from him like a wave of sound" (71). It is a "restless moodiness" (77). We begin to get a glimpse of the direction of the unrest: towards the "vastness and strangeness of life" (66). How does he encounter this plenitude of life? Clearly this is a search for something other than pedestrian existence. He meets a girl on a tram; he is on the upper step; she is on the lower step. He wants to kiss her but instead becomes a "tranquil watcher" (69). He encounters this "Mercedes" in verse with an "undefined sorrow" and allusions to the details of the event. Earlier he had wanted to "meet in the real world the unsubstantial image which his soul so constantly beheld" (65).

What did the "unsubstantial image" of Mercedes actually represent? What is more real: what his soul beheld or the so-called "real world"? "He did not know where to seek it or how" (65).

We see here a generic unrest and disquiet and uncertainty, a dissatisfaction for what passes as the meaningful world, and we discern the possibility of Stephen the artist. But instead he takes another path. He is hit by the "tumult of suddenrisen vapours of wounded pride and fallen hope and baffled desire" (86). After two years' "spell of reverie" he emerges "with unrest and bitter thoughts," whether his experiences "disheartened" him or "allured" him (78). He would seek to end the unrest by things that now allure him as they might dishearten his social conscience. We first gain a hint of his equivocal position at Belvedere: on the one hand, the proud, sensitive, and suspicious student leader; on the other hand, the free boy "battling against the squalor of his life and against the riot of his mind" (91). His "bodily weakness" and "futile enthusiasms" make him "loathe himself for his own mad and filthy orgies" (91). We wonder how literally we are to take his charge of mad and filthy orgies. We soon find out. He has a "monstrous way of life" that puts him "beyond the limits of reality" (92). In fact, he is not beyond the "real world" of his society and culture but sinking beneath it. "Nothing moved him or spoke to him from the real world unless he heard in it an echo of the infuriated cries within him" (92). And what now stirs his soul? Nothing "but a cold and cruel and loveless lust" (96). He is in the state of "mortal sin," and his "life has grown to be a tissue of subterfuge and falsehood" (98). He traverses the dark streets of Dublin to meet women of the evening. The "sordid details of his orgies," of which we later learn, extend from his room to the streets, involving harlots, pornography, and impurity (115-116). The second episode of the novel ends with Stephen "surrendering" to a harlot "body and mind" (101). Contrast this surrender with his triumph with the rector at the end of the first episode.

The search and its unrest are deflected from the anxiety of existence into *divertissements*. Stephen the potential artist is now Stephen the Bohemian. The danger now lurks that in defiance of dogmas he might negate experience (in Voegelin's sense).

Stephen's unrest, however, cannot let him stay in the Bohemian state. Although he might express disapprobation of his deeds in the dogmatic language of moral theology, his self-knowledge of the disintegrating state of his soul is acute and penetrating. Reigning in his soul is a "cold lucid indifference," a "cold darkness filled with chaos" (103). He knows his soul "lusted for its own destruction" (103-104). From the "evil sin of lust" other deadly sins multiply": pride, covetousness, calumny, envy, gluttony, anger, and sloth (104, 106). Still he hesitates to repent as the "falsehood of his position did not pain him" (104-105). What turns him around from his Bohemian ways is the utter terror and fear that completely assaults his psyche and possesses him as he hears one of the most infamous descriptions of hell outside Dante, the sermons on hell, ironically, by the kindly Jesuit Latin teacher, Father Arnall, at a retreat. The sermons, delivered in a rhetorical manner perhaps in the prosaic style of Cardinal Newman, over two days for effect, vividly and in painstaking detail portray the tortuous suffering of the damned, first, in a purely physical mode, in which every conceivable bodily affliction is visited on the damned, including those reaching into their greatest vulnerabilities and paranoia, and, second, and more lurid, in a purely psychological and mental mode, preying on remorse and jealousy and hate to force the damned to engage in heinous completion and combat with each other in a demented battle of corrupt spirits. No summary can do justice to the rhetorical power of the sermons! And indeed Stephen repents. He goes to confession—to a Capuchin not a Jesuit (142). The pleasure of the Bohemian is overcome by the fear of hell. The possible negation of existence is negated by the dogma—in its most stark brutal form. There is no appeal here to the *mysterium iniquitatis,* to the

symbolic nature of the dogmas, to the engendering experiences. No, Stephen has his base carnal appetites suppressed by base sensate spiritual fears. We are operating here on the level of pleasure and pain, back to the shadows and echoes of Plato's cave—and not necessarily out of the cave.

Stephen at the end of the third episode, in his new pious penitent existence, exults humbly in the new "life of grace and virtue and happiness" (146). In complete contrast to the confidence Stephen has achieved at the end of the first episode, he now seems at peace, as he submits that "it would be beautiful to die if God so willed" and "it was beautiful to live if God so willed" (145). Stephen becomes extremely devout and obedient. His mind leads him to embrace dogmatic theology: to believe in the existence of God as taught by the theologians; to see life itself as a divine gift; and to interpret the world as suffused with divine meaning, indeed as a "theorem of divine power and love and universality" (149-150). He continues in this spiritual way for a time even as he is aware of the "sensation of spiritual dryness" and the "frequency and violence of temptations" (151, 153). But has he lost the search? He has an answer, but has he lost the question?

The issue comes to a head when the Jesuit director asks if Stephen might be one of the few called to the religious life; he sees Stephen's piety and intelligence; and no doubt he sees him as a candidate for the order (157). As Stephen considers the bold suggestion, he at first recoils out of spiritual humility and quietness and shyness. If he has any clerical vocation, it would be for minor orders, avoiding the vague pomp of the celebrant (160). Eschewing any negative stereotypes of the cunning of the Jesuits, he deeply admires their intelligence and athleticism, both physical and spiritual (155-56). And yet they seem in a certain sense shallow and passionless. Stephen begins to abhor the image of himself in the novitiate with "a grave and

ordered and passionless life" (160). Somehow his imagination brings him back to Conglowes, before his Bohemian and pious interludes. Suddenly in him "unrest began to irradiate" with a "feverish quickening" (160-161). Not surprisingly, he is confused. And then "some instinct …subtle and hostile … armed him" against "acquiescence" to the vocation (161). Would he find a new kind of "minor orders," or perhaps "major orders," in which he could be a "celebrant"? As at Conglowes he would not acquiesce to Father Dolan, now he would not acquiesce. And the unrest begins again. So does the search. And where can it lead if neither Stephen the Bohemian nor Stephen Daedalus, S.J., if neither the negation nor the negation of the negation?

4. Artistic Epiphany: Decadence or Transcendence?

Stephen enters Trinity College, which has Jesuit presence in the administration and the faculty. Over countless dramatic encounters through the rest of the novel we find unmistakably the directions Stephen does not want to take. On the most extrinsic level, he does not seek a professional career path, such as law, or medicine, or science, as do many of his classmates. And what of his affinity for language and literature? Earlier in his school days he has argued with school chums Heron, Nash, and Boland about who is the greatest prose writer and who is the greatest poet; Stephen said, respectively, Newman and Byron, the romantic rebel (80). They, of course, are English authors—but Stephen cannot feel comfortable simply adopting English as it is for English writers. In a conversation with the Jesuit dean of studies, an English convert, Stephen sees the dean's speech as "so familiar and so foreign" (189). His "soul frets in the shadow" of the dean's language; its use by Stephen in speech or in writing causes "unrest to the spirit"; it is "an acquired speech" (189). So a conventional use of English is foreign to his inner spirt and gives rise to "unrest." If English is in a sense foreign, then perhaps the linguistic tradition of Ireland can be more genuine. But here, too, Stephen cannot go. At least he cannot

simply embrace Irish myths because from them "no individual mind has drawn out a line of beauty" (181). Stephen is in search of some true "native," not foreign, speech from which he can draw "lines of beauty." He cannot supinely assume "the attitude of a dull-witted loyal serf" (181).

If he is to be liberated from serfdom, where will his unrest take him? It will take him away from the great religious custodian of Ireland, the Roman catholic church, his relation to which he says is also that of a "dull-witted loyal serf" (181). In one of the sermons on hell Father Arnall had pronounced the theological dictum that the sin of pride proclaims "*non serviam: I will not Serve*" (117). Near the end of the novel Stephen tells his friend Cranly he will not consider his mother's wishes, at least for her sake and love of her, that he honor his Easter duties. Why not? Stephen answers emphatically, "I will not serve" (239). The full meaning and profound scope of his response only becomes clearer later: "I will not serve that in which I no longer believe whether it call itself my home, my fatherland or my church" (146-147). He does not believe in dogmas. If he cannot believe in the Catholic church, he cannot believe in the even less believable Protestant church and become a Protestant, for "what kind of liberation would that be to forsake an absurdity which is logical and coherent and to embrace one which is illogical and incoherent?" (244) He does not want to lose "self-respect" (244). This "self-respect" is neither juvenile rebellion nor supercilious posture nor timid indecisiveness. He is serious that he can neither believe nor disbelieve (239). He accepts neither dogmatism nor skepticism. He admits that he has lost the "faith," and he humbly submits that he "tried to love God" and "failed" (240, 243). He tried to "love God" by obedience to the rituals and dogmas. He will not, however, blaspheme the Eucharist (243). He will not substitute for religion secular political ideologies let alone what might pass for political religions. Refusing to sign a political

petition on campus, he can take flak from a classmate as an "antisocial being" for not being a fervent advocate for "liberty and equality for all sexes" (177, 197). So Stephen rejects—sincerely—the dogmatic authorities of language, polity, and religion. And in this he is hardly a unique figure in European culture at that time. The decisive question is where, then, will his unrest take him?

Stephen begins to realize he is "destined to learn his own wisdom apart from others" 162). This is not necessary his own feelings, opinions, and beliefs but his own "wisdom." To learn his wisdom, his soul must be born and grow. But it is "a slow and dark birth" (203). Even once born it must battle the "nets flung at it," the nets of "nationality, language, and religion," which can "hold it back from flight" (203). His soul must "soar in an air beyond the world and the body" (169). This is an "ecstasy of flight" (169). Indeed *ek-statis* is to stand away from. The craft of Daedalus is to engage in this ecstasy of flight. This is his "call" (169). It is the call of the artist. And in his art his "spirit could express itself in unfettered freedom" (246). This spirt of the artist is a love of the "rhythmic rise and fall of words" rather than of the associations of legend and color" (166). There is a "confused music within him" that is a voice calling "from beyond the world," a voice calling Stephanos the Daedalus (167). He experiences these insights while with classmates at the beach. But then he moves on—by himself—alone into an inlet. There he sees a girl, perhaps yet another "Mercedes," who by magic has "changed into the likeness of a strange and beautiful seabird" (171). Her bosom is "slight and soft as the breast of some darkplumaged dove"—a dove, frequently, as white, the symbol of the Holy Spirit, and now, as transposed, a symbol of new experiential meaning (171).[11] Suddenly he experiences an overwhelming, and life-turning, vision, as he is trembling, singing, and crying, his cheeks aflame

[11] The imagery has inspired the title of Eugene's Webb's book, *The Dark Dove: The Sacred and the Secular in Modern Literature*: Seattle, University of Washington Press, 1975), pp. 111-123.

and his body aglow (172). His soul—heretofore alienated, degenerate, or obedient—is now "swooning into some new world, fantastic, dim, uncertain" (172). He feels the calm indifference of the heavens above and an appreciation of the nurturing earth (172). To the "call," his calling, his soul leaps: "To live, to err, to fall, to triumph, to recreate life out of life!" (172). To recreate: this is the calling of the artist. This is his "instant of ecstasy" (172). This is his aesthetic epiphany.

Is the artist, then, simply one who rises above the world to recreate an artificial world by the artifice of craftsmanship? Is Stephen now a Decadent? Does he create artificial meaning, whose aesthetic value is the degree of artificiality, in the face of the meaninglessness of the so-called world? Does artificiality replace dogma? Or does the artist reopen the search, explore the experience of openness, and raise the Question of existence, however tentatively and cautiously, lest the nets of dogmas ensnare the process?

The dramatic description of the artist conversion leading up to and in the "instance of ecstasy" belies any tendency towards the artificial. "Soar," "ecstasy," "call," "love," "swoon"—all these terms bespeak seriousness and a kind of self-transcendence and a service for art that cannot be captured by any notion of "art for art's sake." Stephen serves art, but art itself serves. There is a mystery in the devotion of Stephen to art. Stephen addresses the mystery when he describes the stanzas of a poem of his as "incense ascending from the altar of the world" (218). More incredibly, he describes the act of the artistic imagination as transubstantiation, where in "the Virgin womb of the imagination the word was made flesh" (217). Miraculously, the imagination of the artist is transformed into something beyond it. Stephen goes on to present many stanzas of the poem, whose words include "the flame of smoke," "one eucharistic hymn," and "the chalice flowing" (223). Stephen has now ascended from the minor orders, of which he

once dreamed, to major orders, and he serves the artistic event as a celebrant, perhaps inspired by the experience of the dove-girl as spirit. He is both celebrant and craftsman. The craftsman frees him from bondage to dogmas; the celebrant serves the exigencies of the flow of the experience. Thus even in an opaque manner Stephen navigates through the dialectic of dogmatism and skepticism.

Further evidence that the artist is not indulging in merely subjective, fastidious self-fabrications but reaches out to express the human longing for meaning and value is the "striving" of Stephen, acting as the Daedalus smithy, "to forge out an aesthetic philosophy" 180). In his aesthetic philosophy Stephen differentiates the artistic imagination from "kinesthetic emotions" (204-205). The latter express pity and fear, desire, and loathing. By indulging in the desires of the flesh as a Bohemian and by recoiling from these sins by fear of hell Stephen was indulging in the kinesthetic emotions. "Improper arts" follow the kinesthetic way of pornography or didacticism (205). By contrast, the artistic imagination goes beyond motion and seeks stasis, as Plato grasped (205, 208). Stephen agrees with Plato and Aristotle that the mind beholds truth and the imagination beholds beauty. And, says Stephen, when Plato says "beauty is the splendor of truth," this means that truth and beauty are "akin" (208). What is this kinship of truth and beauty? Stephen invokes Aquinas's celebrated differentiation of the qualities of universal beauty: *integritas*, *consonantia*, and *claritas* (212). The first two qualities might be easiest to grasp. *Integritas* is the wholeness of the aesthetic object, its oneness, as one thing abstracted from the spatial or the temporal background. *Consonantia* is the harmony of the aesthetic object, its thingness, as one thing, a whole unified in its parts. But when we turn to *claritas*, Stephen says, we notice Aquinas's use of term is "inexact." So we are duly warned that Stephen might modify Aquinas's meaning. And indeed Stephen shorns the term from any connection to divine

purpose. Still, he is resolute in employing the term. It is the radiance of the aesthetic image itself , "the luminous silent stasis of esthetic pleasure, a spiritual state" (213). But the key to *claritas*, says Stephen, is what the scholastics called the "*quidditas*, the *whatness* of a thing" (213). To be sure, Stephen is not a Thomist who might argue that beauty is a transcendental and is coincident with being, the true, and the good—all referring to eminent reality, God. That approach, for Stephen, would be to lapse into dogmatism. Nonetheless, the emphasis on *quidditas* points to a sense that reality is intelligible and that the imaginative grasp of that intelligibility is not a merely subjective act.

Stephen the artist flies beyond with his imagination because there is an intelligibility beyond that beckons him. That there is no precise philosophical explication of this is not surprising. To do so would require that Stephen the young artist surmount all of the philosophical quagmires and inadequacies and conflicts of his age. It is enough that he seeks to touch, however inchoately and gingerly, experience in Voegelin's sense—as he resolutely strives to extricate himself from the dialectic of dogmatism and skepticism, most of all by avoiding the pitfalls of either pole of the dialectic. And so he can say at the end of the novel: "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" (252-253). And whatever scholars and commentators might say of Joyce himself and of his later, more mature, works, the text of *A Portrait of an Artist as Young Man* can stand on its own. Perhaps we can claim that the portrait of this encounter of the "reality of experience" does have qualities of *integritas*, *consonantia*, and *claritas* and thus rises to the rank of a great work of literature, as Voegelin conceives of it.