

**Through a Cracked Looking-glass:
The Search for the “Self of Selves” in James Joyce’s
*Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man***

Literature does not exist in a vacuum. An appreciation of any work of art of literature will be greatly enhanced by an understanding of the culture which produced it and of the ideas which informed it. Thus a modern novel such as *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, while rewarding in its own right for its artistic innovations and narrative force, and for its universal “Bildungsroman” elements, yields greater rewards when one knows something about the Ireland of the late nineteenth/early twentieth century out of which it sprang and of the contemporary currents in not only Western literature but also in the intellectual thought of the time.

In writing *A Portrait*, Joyce was reflecting ideas engendered by, among other things, new developments in the social sciences, particularly anthropology and psychology. In his essay, “Genius, Degeneration and the Panopticon,” R. B. Kershner discusses Stephen’s situation as “a young, artistically inclined intellectual at a time of the greatest prestige of positivistic science” (375). He cites a “number of formations in the nineteenth-century popular mind,” such as concerns about racial and familial degeneration arising out of an imperfect understanding of Lamarckian and Darwinian theory. In like manner, Joyce’s stream-of-consciousness technique in *A Portrait* echoes contemporary advances in psychology. In this respect, William James’s work on the consciousness of the self in *The Principles of Psychology* (1890) provides an interesting framework within which to explore Stephen Dedalus’s journey toward self-knowledge.

With a greater understanding of mental processes, many writers were increasingly experimenting with ways to convey the inner thoughts of their characters and to address the questions of identity. In Ireland, however, leading figures in the Irish Literary Revival such as William Butler Yeats looked to Ireland’s rural poor for subject matter. Joyce, even while emerging as an important young member of the movement, held reservations about its direction. He felt that the peasantry was overly romanticized by Yeats and others. “‘The cracked looking-glass of a servant’ was how Joyce’s Stephen Dedalus characterized such an art.” In *The Oxford Illustrated History of Ireland* Roy Foster suggests that this is an apt image not only for Yeats’s “doomed rehabilitation” of the unlettered peasantry but for “Joyce’s own escape into modernism,” for “what a cracked looking-glass shows is not a single but a multiple self” (316).

It is the search for the self that defines much of modern literature and James Joyce was among those who most brilliantly pioneered the stream of consciousness style of conveying the story to the reader through the thoughts, perceptions and feelings of his character Stephen Dedalus. Employing a point of view of selective omniscience, Joyce achieves his intent to, as Norman Friedman puts it in *Form and Meaning in Fiction*, “capture a mind in the moment of discovery and decision (159). Along the way, Joyce forces the reader to confront not only questions of what constitutes an identity, but also moral problems involving authority, class, sex, language, religion and politics as they are filtered through the lens of personal experience.

Stephen’s coming to terms with his multiple selves and his quest to identify *the Self* constitutes the plot of *Portrait*. The reader is introduced to various manifestations of Stephen as he moves from a childhood dominated by family and church to an

adolescence tormented by lust and guilt to early manhood and a jettisoning of the “nets” flung on his soul. In the varying stages of Stephen’s development we can discern an understanding of the four categories of self which James outlines in *The Principles of Psychology*: the material self, the social self, the spiritual self and the ego. James’s description of the hierarchical scale of these selves fits Stephen Dedalus’s conception of himself “with the body at the bottom, the spiritual self at the top, and the extracorporeal materials selves and the various social selves between” (313). And ultimately, James could be speaking for Stephen Dedalus when he asks in *Principles*, “Now, what is this self of all the other selves?” (297).

For all his inwardness, Stephen is very much a physical being moving through a dense material world. In his brilliant and concise catalogue of the one-hundred literary greats of all time, *Genius*, Harold Bloom characterizes Joyce as “an astonishing master of what most would consider trivia,” and it is precisely this attention to detail that renders Joyce’s descriptions of Stephen’s physical world – his material self- at once revoltingly and lusciously vivid. Any sensation able to be perceived by the senses is described in precise, unflinching language. We see Stephen “clearing the thick scum from his mouth with his tongue and licking it from his lips” (104). We experience his pain and horror as the pandybat descends on his small hand and feel “the hot, burning, stinging, tingling blow like the loud crack of a broken stick” (55). And when Stephen is transported through his lewd excess, we can hear the cry that “broke from him like a wail of despair from a hell of sufferers and died in a wail of furious entreaty, a cry for an iniquitous abandonment, a cry which was but the echo of an obscene scrawl which he had read on the oozing wall of a urinal” (95). His is a material soul of collywobbles, tundishes, battered alarmclocks, yellow drippings on toast, turfcoloured bathwater, obscure classicists, thick fog, fragrant rain, mortal odours rising from the earth and lustful, nocturnal wanderings. The physical is palpable in *A Portrait*, but it serves not as vicarious titillation of the senses but as an avenue to self-discovery. This is the moral leap that Friedman asks us to make, to place Stephen’s lust in context before we judge him on the abstract values of either his time or ours. Though Stephen feels he has committed a “first violent sin,” he finds that his body and soul were not “maimed by the excess. Instead the wave had carried him on its bosom out of himself and back again when it receded: and no part of his body or soul had been maimed but a dark peace had been established between them. The chaos in which his ardour extinguished itself was a cold indifferent knowledge of himself” (97).

Stephen’s material self, of course, extends beyond the physical bounds of his own body and like Joyce’s later masterpiece, *Ulysses*, the universe that is Dublin is described in such detail and accuracy that Joyce intended one to be able to rebuild it entirely from his description should it utterly disappear from the face of the earth (Foster 323). It is through this universe that the second category of self moves - the social self.

James wrote that “A man has as many social selves as there are individuals who recognize him” (294). The social self is made manifest through one’s “image in the eyes of one’s own set,” and involves fame and honor, or dishonor and shame. Thus we see Stephen as a schoolboy who “felt his body small and weak amid the throng of players and his eyes were weak and watery” (20). He is the indulged son who lets his mother wash him and for whom the family sacrifices, and the model young intellectual whose “fellowstudents’ rude humour ran like a gust through the cloister” of his mind (168). He

is Irish and Catholic and a Dubliner but yet something more and the emotion that James describes in observing his own feelings could be applied to Stephen: "Yet still the emotion that beckons me on is indubitably the pursuit of an ideal social self" (315). Ultimately Stephen throws off these designations finally recognizing that what we might call today his "socially constructed self" is ephemeral and valid only in the context of his life at a given place and time. "Names," he muses when visiting his father's old school. And in trying to remember his childhood, who he once was, he recognizes the ephemeral nature of existence: "He had not died but he had faded out like a film in the sun. He had been lost or had wandered out of existence for he no longer existed. How strange to think of him passing out of existence in such a way, not by death but by fading out in the sun or by being lost and forgotten somewhere in the universe!" (89).

This kind of sensitivity to different aspects of reality apart from the visible and palpable emerges early in Stephen and it is clearly the third of James's categories of self that we can best apply to him – the spiritual. For James the concept of self as soul meant either a transcendental or an empirical interpretation. "Some would say," he wrote, "that it is a simple active substance, the soul, of which they are thus conscious; others that it is nothing but a fiction, the imaginary being denoted by the pronoun I..." (298). Stephen falls squarely in the first camp and as the first bloom of innocence fades with a dim awareness of his father's troubles, he begins to express his inner feelings and desires, be they in terms of the beautiful or the repellent, in terms of "soul." "He wanted to meet in the real world the unsubstantial image which his soul so constantly beheld (66). "His soul was fattening and congealing into a thick grease" (104). Even his bestial urges are approached through this perception of the self as soul and he wonders "Was that then he or an inhuman thing moved by a lower soul than his soul?" (126). By the time he escapes the priests at Belvedere and prepares to enter the university, his spiritual self is wrapped up with his burgeoning artistic sensibility and he hears "the call of life to his soul not the dull gross voice of the world of duties and despair..." He integrates the spiritual with the creative and conceives of this self in terms of a Resurrection; "His soul had arisen from the grave of boyhood, spurning her graveclothes...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" (150).

Though Stephen continues to conceive of the self in spiritual terms, and refer to it as his soul, ultimately he approaches the 'pure self' and "personal unity" that James refers to as the ego. Here, however, the framework of the self that has been supplied by James must make way for Nietzsche for Stephen's "Self of selves" seems more one of the will than one of an integration of the distant self with the present self, of continuity from "our remoter spiritual, material and social selves" to "the character of warmth" we feel in the present self" (333) that James describes. Far from feeling this kind of continuity, Stephen rejects the material and social selves that have tied him to the person he was but is no longer. Before leaving Dublin, he tells Cranley, "I was someone else then...I mean...that I was not myself as I am now, as I had to become" (207). And though James's concept of self that is "the place from which appear to emanate the fiats of the will" moves through Stephen, it is the Nietzschean Stephen that says, finally, "I will not serve that in which I no longer believe whether it call itself my home, my fatherland or my church: and I will try to express myself in some mode of life or art as freely as I can and as wholly as I can..." (213). When he envisions his dead kinsmen "shaking the wings of

their exultant and terrible youth” and calling to him, and when he proclaims his intent to “forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race” (218), he is Nietzsche’s heroic archetype. Like Nietzsche, “the ‘will to power’, which can also be understood as the urge for individual freedom and self-expression, is the life affirming force within reality” (Lombardo, 48). Equipped with the resolve born of the unifying power of his will, Stephen is at last able to speak in terms of “myself” as an integrated and healthy whole and while one imagines that he will continue to conceive of his artistic creativity as soul, one also feels that the mirror he holds before him now reflects a less splintered self.

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