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## **"More Mud, More Crocodiles" The Turn in the *Portrait's* Aesthetic Theory**

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The paper claims that we should look into *A Portrait's* aesthetics as symbolic of Stephen's artistic development. Parallel to Stephen's growth from a turn-of-the-century artist (who escapes from reality into the world of art) into an artist who desires to forge in the smithy of his soul the yet uncreated conscience of his race, the style of *A Portrait* changes from an aestheticist into an avant-garde mode of representation. However, this change is not to be seen as Joyce's privileging of avant-garde over turn-of-the-century style neither in its ideological nor aesthetic implications. In the fifth chapter of the novel, Stephen, who believes himself to have become a self-realised artist, capable not only of facing, but also of influencing reality, is represented in an ironic mode. The discrepancy between his words and his deeds signals that Stephen has not developed as an artist. He is still a lonely individual, in conflict with his surrounding, his family and his friends. Therefore we must not read *A Portrait* only as the celebration of the artist's sacrifice for art's sake or as a statement about liberal tradition's separation of art from real life. Stephen's statement that he desires to create the conscience of his race or teach the Irish women to "breed a race less ignoble than their own" can also be seen as an early warning about the danger of an artist getting involved in political propaganda.

Much attention has been paid to Joyce's aesthetic theory in *A Portrait*, and *Stephen Hero*, but it has always been taken for granted that it is in fact Joyce himself, who, through Stephen, expresses his theoretical views. Consequently, his argumentation throughout *A Portrait* was seen as forming a closed and homogenous entity. However, as this paper intends to argue, the theoretic discussion in the novel reflects the development of Stephen as an artist. While portraying Stephen's own perception of his artistic development on the one hand, Joyce at the same time introduces such a narrative technique that enables him to detach the narrative consciousness from Stephen's and thus highlight his inconsistencies and contradictions. For that reason the theory developed in *A Portrait* is neither static nor rounded. Stephen's attempts at his artistic self-definition change throughout the novel. However, its conflicting statements are not incidental. They comprise



the major aesthetic controversy at the beginning of the century between the turn-of-the-century aestheticism and the avant-garde de-aesthetisation and de-hierarchisation of the existing aesthetic values.

Joyce's web, as Margot Norris would put it, has been unraveled by all available critical methods – new critical, structuralist, post-structuralist, post-colonial, even semi-colonial. In rendering itself to all of them, Joyce's text has proved its readability. Yet, not all of the readings have been canonized. For *A Portrait* the most influential one has been the interpretation of the novel as an artistic *Bildungsroman* (or *Künstlerroman*) showing the liberation of the artist from his petty environment, which culminates in his *non-serviam*. In the introduction to *Joyce's Web: The Social Unraveling of Modernism*<sup>1</sup> Margot Norris argues that Stephen's *non-serviam* was the basis for the canonization of Joyce as an ahistoricist and apolitical writer. This canonization has functioned as a defining feature of Joyce's place within modernism, or, at any rate, the mythology of a modernism. In its crudest version this "effect" is the equation of Joyce with the aestheticism of modernism, but an equation redolent with modernism's suppressed romantic plot of the heroic artist saving art's power to transcend its degradations in the modern world.<sup>2</sup> In her counter-argument to such an understanding of Joyce's art, Norris claims that Joyce historicizes his own modernist aestheticism by grounding it in the nineteenth century liberal tradition's separation of art from social life.

In this paper I would like to take this argument one step further by claiming that in *A Portrait* there is a frame of reference alternative to the nineteenth century liberal tradition within which the ending of *A Portrait* should be read. Taking into account that Joyce lived in Trieste (and, before that, for a short time in Pola) from 1904 till after the completion of *A Portrait*, it can be assumed that he was aware of two competing rhetorics, representing two faces of modernist aesthetics – D'Annunzio's turn-of-the-century aestheticism (in many ways similar to Yeats's) vs. the avant-garde aesthetic of Marinetti's futurism. The conflicting discourses in *A Portrait* – turn of the century aestheticism privileging art over life and the de-aesthetisation of futurism, aiming at the subversion of all existing social and moral values – merge in Stephen's high-powered yet constantly undercutting narrative of self-realization.

This merging becomes most obvious by the end of the fifth chapter of the novel, written in the form of a diary. Up to then, the method of undercutting is mainly achieved through juxtapositions, used in a way similar to Sergei Eisenstein's cinematic montage.<sup>3</sup> A typical scene is the one in which Stephen is repulsed by the pitiable adolescent nakedness of his fellow-students. To counteract this sensation, he draws forth the phrase "a day of dappled sea-borne clouds".<sup>4</sup> The semiosis of such a narrative strategy is the discourse of

<sup>1</sup> Margot Norris, *Joyce's Web: The Social Unraveling of Modernism*, Austin: U. of Texas, 1992.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>3</sup> In particular in *Battleship Potemkin*.

<sup>4</sup> James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Genoa: Cideb, 1995, p. 208. All further references are to this edition.



aestheticist escapism, unambiguously privileging art over bleak reality. However, Stephen's discourse is constantly undermined by the narrative strategy employed in *A Portrait*.<sup>5</sup> His pompous statements are undercut by an exaggerated tone, or are juxtaposed by some detail pointing to his inadequacy for the task undertaken. (He is not being wooed by women as Davin, nor can he keep Cranly's attention when discussing his aesthetic theory.) In this way Stephen's high-powered discourse, which may be called discourse A, is juxtaposed by observations or situations that undermine it, constituting discourse B. It is the tension between the two that produces the meaning C – the ironic detachment of the narrator, and thus also of the reader, from Stephen's narrative.

By this narrative method the artist, who mimes the discourse of the turn-of-the-century aestheticism, is unmasked as inadequate. But how are we to account for his inadequacy? Is it the result of a flaw in his character, the lack of talent, or is Stephen a representative of the turn-of-the-century artist who escapes from reality into art, and thus cannot affect "the conscience of his race"?

Assessing the obstacles to understanding today's situation in Northern Ireland, Seamus Deane sees Yeats's "hot" rhetoric, based on the ideology of incarnation of the national in the individual, no more dangerous than Joyce's "cold" rhetoric, which renders any attempt at national self-definition abortive.<sup>6</sup> If we are to read *A Portrait* in the light of this claim, and Deane's argumentation is strong and convincing, how are we to read it? Should we see it as Margot Norris proposes – as being rooted in the nineteenth century liberal tradition separating art from social life? Can we see *A Portrait* as rising above the web of signifying practices typical of its time or is it just another product of these practices? Can we claim that Joyce's "cold" rhetoric is at its coldest in *A Portrait* which so passionately and persuasively deconstructs the cultural prejudices and stereotypes of his nation? Finally, does such demystification render any attempt at nationalistic rhetoric dangerous, thus justifying the reading of Joyce's work as anti-nationalistic and apolitical?

The paralyzing lack of political will after Parnell's resignation and death is not a theme specific to Joyce. Yeats, writing on the occasion of O'Leary's funeral (in his poem "September 1913") speaks about "the Irish who fumble in a greasy till/ And add the halfpence to the pence/ And prayer to shivering prayer, until [they] have dried the marrow

<sup>5</sup> The most important contributions discussing this aspect of *A Portrait* are Wayne Booth's *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (1961) and Hugh Kenner's "The *Portrait* in Perspective" in *Dublin's Joyce* (1955).

<sup>6</sup> Seamus Deane stresses the fact that the rhetorics which were produced in the nineteenth or early twentieth century, mainly by Yeats's plays and poetry, obstruct a perception of the real problems in contemporary Northern Ireland, since the reinforced stereotypes of national identity are maintained by 'the spiritual heroics of a Yeats or a Pearse, prompting readers to believe in the incarnation of the nation in the individual'. However, '[to] reject it is to make a fetish of exile, alienation and dislocation in the manner of Joyce and Beckett. Between these hot and cold rhetorics there is little room for choice. Yet the polarization they identify is an inescapable and understandable feature of the social and political realities we inhabit.' See Seamus Deane, 'Heroic Styles: The Tradition of an Idea' in *Ireland's Field Days*, ed. Seamus Deane et al., Notre Dame: Indiana University of Notre Dame Press, 1986, p. 58.



from the bone". But for Yeats, it is just a present state of mind ("Romantic Ireland's dead and gone/ It's with O'Leary in the grave"). For Joyce, the state of paralysis is permanent. It permeates the very essence of Irish life.

Consequently, *A Portrait* should be read as a deconstruction of religious and national stereotypes suffocating the growth of the self. From one of the first scenes in the novel when Dante threatens him with eagles or the description of punishment inflicted in the boarding school, to the Christmas dinner scene or the demonstrations against Yeats's play, Joyce exposes the oppressive and limiting spirit of Stephen's surrounding. But, up to the fifth chapter (in spite of his daring defense of his own belief when facing the Dean of Studies or standing up for Byron) Stephen's attitude is escapist. His project of "exile, silence and cunning" is in fact the aestheticist escape into the realm of art. Every time he is threatened by reality he withdraws into the world of art by remembering some lines or by creating an alternative reality for himself. The first instance of such an escape appears at the very beginning of the novel. When Dante threatens him that eagles will come and pull out his eyes if he does not apologize, he counteracts her threat by turning it into the imitation of a nursery rhyme ("Pull out his eyes, / Apologise / Apologise, / Pull out his eyes"<sup>7</sup>). This aesthetic alchemy is a naive but obvious illustration of the turn-of-the-century notion that art can transcend fear and pain by transposing them into an aesthetic object. The same is the case when he shuts and opens the flaps of his ear in an attempt to control the surrounding sounds in the refectory or when, repelled by the pitiable nakedness of his fellow students he "draws forth a phrase from his treasure"<sup>8</sup> and thus counteracts reality.

Stephen's artistic development is rooted in the belief that he can transgress reality. The surer he becomes of himself and his vocation, the easier it will be for him to separate from his environment. In the ecstatic acknowledgement of his artistic vocation, he does not define himself only as a turn-of-the-century artist who believes in art's ability to overcome reality (which amounts to Margot Norris's assessment of Stephen's aesthetic program as being close to the nineteenth century notion of the separation between art and real life). He sees his art as an act of artistic alchemy – the creation of a soaring and beautiful being from petty and sluggish matter of the earth.

When finally, by the end of the fifth chapter, we are to see the artist at work, we expect to see a piece of high powered, visionary verse or prose. But what we encounter are his diary entries, in which he describes trivial events from his everyday experience. These short, sketchy entries might be described as epiphanies, since they depict some typical moments of Irish everyday life that highlight its shortcomings and prejudices. However, these epiphanies are in tune with avant-garde aesthetic, not with turn-of-the-century aestheticism. Recalling the event when the Irish paid their tribute to Gladstone (whose

<sup>7</sup> *A Portrait*, p. 5.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 208.



support of Home Rule was very moderate) Stephen calls them a nation of clodhoppers.<sup>9</sup> This image, as well as the phrase used earlier in his conversation with Davin, when he calls Ireland "the old sow that eats her farrow"<sup>10</sup> belongs to the avant-garde aesthetic of grotesque and shocking. Similar in its aesthetic is the comparison of the old man with red-rimmed horny eyes to Ireland. His provincialism becomes obvious upon his meeting with ethnologist Mulrennan. In the description of their meeting, Stephen depicts the problem of the Irish language: "Mulrennan spoke Irish. The old man spoke Irish. Then Mulrennan and the old man spoke English".<sup>11</sup> Maybe the mythmaker and the object of his myth could not understand each other because Irish was not standardized. Maybe the old man thought it proper to speak English with a gentleman. But Irish, which was the token language of the Irish nationalists (as we learn from the very emotional conversation Stephen previously had with Davin) had proved futile once again. Moreover, the old man is so confined by his own provinciality that Dublin is for him "the latter end of the world" where "terrible queer creatures" live.<sup>12</sup> The dramatic part of this episode is the final scene in which Stephen's frustration with his ambivalent, love-hate attitude toward Ireland is fantasized as the enactment of the struggle with the old man, in which either the old man (a subversive symbol of a patriarchal figure, comprising in itself the authority of the father, the church, and the homeland) or Stephen, must yield. The impact of this episode is even greater when this symbolic representation of Ireland is compared to a previous episode in which, reflecting Davin's point of view, Ireland is represented as a radiant, fertile peasant woman. These two symbols of Ireland epitomize two modes of representation. In traditional patriotic texts, homeland is represented as a beautiful woman. In the manner of avant-garde re-evaluation, homeland is represented by a grotesque male figure, as an ironic representation of the sacred patriarchal, patriotic and religious authority.

However, the most notable change in *A Portrait's* style is the change in the usage of literary references. In the fifth chapter of the novel, upon meeting Davin, Stephen comments "more mud, more crocodiles".<sup>13</sup> This comment is different in strategy from the previously described usage of the quote "a day of dappled sea-borne clouds" because now Stephen does not use a literary quotation as a shield from reality, he uses it as an analogy to reality. The quotation is from *Antony and Cleopatra*, when Lepidus says to Anthony: "Your Serpent of Egypt is bred now of your mud by the operation of the Sun: so is your Crocodile".<sup>14</sup> In Shakespeare's play the comment playfully links together the allusion to Cleopatra, as a serpent of Egypt, Antony's Eden. The crocodile, the symbol of his

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 325.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., pp. 261-2.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 329

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 329

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 309.

<sup>14</sup> W. Shakespeare, *The Tragedie of Antonie, and Cleopatra*, II.vii.27-8. London: Prentice Hall, Harvester Wheatsheaf, p. 70.



forthcoming defeat and death, is seen as being born from mud, suggesting something unclean, as conspiracy or duplicity and also alludes to Cleopatra. Stephen is reminded of these lines by Cranly's story about a crocodile and its point of view. The crocodile snatches a child but consents to return it to its mother if she tells him what she would do with it – eat it or not. Stephen finds this story epiphanic of Irish narrow-mindedness, able to see things only from its limited point of view. Thus, when he learns that Cranly is going to Emma's place, he expresses his disappointment at his friend's disloyalty by asking himself whether he will bring his crocodile with him. And after his conversation with Davin, realizing that their friendship has lost its earnestness, and has turned into small talk, he uses the phrase "more mud, more crocodiles" to point to its insincerity.

As these examples have shown, Stephen's diary entries are no longer informed by turn-of-the-century aestheticism. Their style, even their epiphanies, are in accord with avant-garde artistic experiments in Central Europe. The concept of aesthetic shock and the grotesque representation of reality are new stylistic devices introduced at the end of *A Portrait*. However, even more significant than this change is the turn in Stephen's artistic self-definition.

When he first realizes his artistic vocation, Stephen sees himself "forging anew in his workshop out of the sluggish matter of the earth a new soaring impalpable imperishable being".<sup>15</sup> This definition of artistic creation is different from Baudelaire's notion of the artist as someone who turns pain into rhythmized beauty insofar as Stephen stresses that art is rather the result of artistic skill than of artistic creativity and inspiration. But in its idea that something sluggish can be turned into something soaring and imperishable, it resembles Baudelaire's lartpouurlartistic concept of art being able to overcome the pettiness of everyday existence, and turn ugliness into beauty.

However, by the end of the fifth chapter, the relationship between the artist, art and reality is reversed. Stephen's artistic vocation is no longer that of a liberal artist separated from social life. By the end of the novel, he does not turn to art as the means of escape from life (as it was the case before when his understanding of the role of art resembles the ideology of nineteenth century liberalism separating art from life). Neither does he desire to save art in spite of deteriorating social conditions in which it exists (as, according to Margot Norris, Stephen's vocation has been interpreted by a myth of /a/ modernism.) What he desires is to use art in order to change the conditions of social life. Therefore, his definition of art is no longer based on the lartpouurlartist notion that through the act of artistic creation pettiness can be transposed into beauty. Now, he proposes to himself a different task: "How could he hit their conscience or how cast his shadow over the imaginations of their daughters, before their squires begat upon them, that they might breed a race less ignoble than their own".<sup>16</sup> Dorothea Barrett (in the notes to the Cideb

<sup>15</sup> *A Portrait*, p. 212.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 309.



edition) points to the intertextual relationship with the gospel according to St. Luke, suggesting that in his fantasy Stephen plays the part that the Holy Ghost played in the conception of Jesus.<sup>17</sup> In other words, he fantasizes about the effect his art could have on his race, making it less ignoble. In this fantasy, Stephen sees himself at least as an Irish Ibsen, letting in a breath of fresh air. But he is even more radical than Ibsen. Ibsen desired to initiate social change by turning his theatre into a court trial, by accusing his audience of being prejudiced. In other words, Ibsen was hoping for his theatre to have a political function. Stephen, however, wishes for more. In his last diary entry he expresses his desire to forge (like his spiritual father, the artificer Dedalus) in "the smithy of [his] soul the uncreated conscience of his race". The closest this notion of creating the conscience of one's race comes to is the concept of the ideologists of socialist realism that writers must be engineers of the soul. Such a desire is radically different from that of either a liberal or a modernist artist who uses art as the means of transcending reality. On the contrary, Stephen does not desire to escape from reality. He desires to change it. The task he undertakes is not only very ambitious, too ambitious for artist of his talent (as the irony permeating the narrative seems to suggest); it is politically dangerous.

In the novel, Stephen develops from the artist who desires to counteract reality, using art as a means of protection, to an artist who uses art to effect and transform the reality of social life. This process of his artistic self-realization does not seem gratifying. In Stephen's desire to forge the conscience of his race (and note the semantic similarity between forging and forgery), to become, in a different manner of speaking, the engineer of the soul of his race, we witness the anticlimax in his spiritual growth. In fact, not only as a person, but also as the symbol of an artist, Stephen degenerates throughout the novel.

During his Dublin as well as his Trieste years Joyce could have witnessed various discourses put into political practice – the aestheticizing and mythmaking rhetoric of Yeats being the subject of the riots but also the inspiration of the national awakening, eventually leading to the Easter Rising in 1916. He must have also been familiar with the aesthetic programs of both D'Annunzio and Marinetti. Though their full political implications would become obvious only later, Joyce must have already seen their eminent dangerousness, as well as the dangerousness of the Russian ideology that artists should be "engineers of the soul". The ideological implication of *A Portrait* is thus clearly spelled out. It is anti-nationalistic and anti-mythmaking.

Consequently, I read *A Portrait* as an early warning of the danger of ascribing a political role to artistic production. For that I applaud Joyce, even if the result of such an attitude, which renders any attempt at rhetorical manipulation with national feelings as dangerous, is the ideology that "makes a fetish of exile, alienation and dislocation" consequently paralysing, as Deane has claimed, any possibility of a rational discourse about national issues to the same extent as does "hot" national rhetorics.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 309 n. 1.

<sup>18</sup> See note 6.





“JOŠ MULJA, JOŠ KROKODILA” – ZAOKRET U ESTETICI  
PORTRETA UMJETNIKA U MLADOSTI

Veći dio estetskih rasprava koje nalazimo u Joyceovom *Portretu*, nalazi se i u ranijoj verziji romana *Junak Stephen* te u njegovim “bilježnicama”. Iz toga se razloga uvriježilo misliti o Joyceovoj estetskoj teoriji u *Portretu* kao o samosvojnoj cjelini unutar djela koja izražava uvjerenja samog autora. Ovaj članak, međutim, želi pokazati da su estetske rasprave i pogledi koji se iznose u djelu u funkciji karakterizacije samoga lika. Sukladno žanru *Bildungsromana* ti se stavovi kroz roman mijenjaju. Kako Stephen od esteticiste koji iz svijeta zbilje bježi u svijet umjetnosti izrasta u umjetnika koji želi u kovnici svoje duše iskovati još neiskovanu svijest svoga naroda, mijenjat će se i način reprezentacije zbilje. On od esteticističkoga prelazi u avangardni. Ta promjena ne znači, međutim, da Joyce jedan od ta dva stila vidi kao superioran. Potkraj petog poglavlja, kada se Stephen odvojio od svoje sredine i spoznao svoju književnu vokaciju, ton romana postaje ironičan. Nesrazmjer između Stephenovih riječi i postupaka prokazuje ga kao umjetnika nedoraslog zadatku koji je poduzeo. Iz toga razloga *Portret* ne treba čitati kao panegirik umjetniku koji se žrtvuje radi umjetnosti. No on nije ni ni samo inačica filozofema u ključu anglofone devetnaestostoljetne liberalne tradicije prema kojoj je umjetnost odvojiva od zbilje. Stephenove izjave da želi stvoriti svijest svoje rase ili da želi podučiti Irkinje da uzgoje rasu manje neplemenitu od njihove, pokazuju da Stephen želi utjecati na zbilju, biti svojevrsnim “inženjerom duše”. Joyce je rastao u vrijeme neprijeporne sprege irske umjetnosti i politike, a roman je dovršavao u Puli i Trstu pred prvi svjetski rat, kada se u zraku mogao osjetiti novi duh estetike futurizma, a već i možda prvi nagovještaji kasnijih političkih angažmana D’Annunzija i Marinettija. Stoga Joyceov roman možemo čitati i kao rano, vidovito upozorenje na opasnost od sprege između umjetnosti i politike.