

“FROM BABY TACKOO TO SUNNY JIM”:
JOYCE’S *A PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST AS A YOUNG MAN*
AS FICTIONAL BIOGRAPHY

NICOLETA STANCA
Ovidius University, Constanța

Abstract:

The reader must not identify Stephen Dedalus in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* with James Joyce in every respect. For instance, Stephen is represented at Clongowes as a timid boy, conscious of his smallness and weakness. Conversely, young Joyce was keen on hurdling and cricket, won cups in sports competitions and earned the nickname “Sunny Jim” due to his cheerful disposition. This paper will trace autobiographical elements in the novel with the purpose to prove that they are meant not as mere recordings of particular autobiographical experiences but as instances of universality. Hence, the choice of the novel title, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*.

Interestingly, the beginning of the twentieth century in fiction, with its focus on subjectivity and the individual’s inner life, also saw the rise of the interest in autobiographical writings. In the preface to Joyce’s biography by his brother Stanislaus Joyce, the latter refers to T.S. Eliot, who distinguishes between two categories of writers: those who turned their life experiences into such objective works that the relationship between themselves as persons and their writings cannot be detected (Shakespeare) and those whom we appreciate more the more we know about their lives (Goethe) (Grigorescu, 12-13). Joyce belonged, according to Eliot, to the second category; yet, his autobiographical character Stephen Dedalus could only be considered a mask, a composite of the writer’s memories of his childhood and adolescence in Ireland and his readings.

A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man has been interpreted as an instance of autobiographical fiction. The writing is a record of the hero’s struggle, but it is not the writer’s direct self-justification, this effect being achieved mainly through irony (i.e. the rhetorically extravagant villanelle composed by Stephen for Emma or his pathos in declaring his artistic faith to

Cranly). However, Stephen cannot be identified with Joyce in every respect, though there are many characters patterned on real people in Joyce's life, many streets and place names preserved as such and many events based on Joyce's real life experiences. In other words, Stephen is not a direct self portrait. Joyce's typical method was, according to Blamires (57), to take one aspect of the character and exaggerate it in picturing his alter ego. For instance, Joyce's dislike of violence is turned into young Stephen's smallness and weakness in *A Portrait*. The boy seemed to have felt good at Clongowes, yet, the picture in the novel is different and his loneliness and homesickness are exaggerated. Moreover, Joyce was a good athlete but his dislike of brutal sports is turned into frailty and clumsiness in *A Portrait*.

Another reason why the novel should not be taken as pure autobiography is Joyce's intention of universalizing his protagonist's experiences. Thus, we may explain the use of the indefinite article for the noun "portrait" and not for the noun "artist" in the title of the novel.

Studying the growth and development of Stephen Dedalus he was not exclusively concerned with getting to the heart of the young James Joyce or an imaginary equivalent, but in getting to the heart of the young artist as such. (Blamires, 57)

Though Joyce warned people not to take Stephen for himself, he signed the first version of *A Portrait* with the pseudonym Stephen Dedalus.

James Joyce's father, John Stanislaus Joyce, was a mixture between Mr. Micawber and Don Quixote and he was obsessed with his aristocratic origins, an obsession which was to be inherited by James. Stephen, as a matter of fact, proposes to take his friends to the office of arms to show them his family tree: "-Come with me to the office of arms and I will show you the tree of my family, said Stephen." (Joyce, 230). James was very fond of his father, who inspired many of his characters ("I was very fond of him always, being a sinner myself, and even liked his faults. Hundreds of pages and scores of characters in my books come from him" qtd. in Pindar, 1). John Joyce was a collector of rates in Dublin, where he knew many of his fellow citizens and he had the gift of mimicking Dubliners. He nicknamed his eldest son Baby Tuckoo and he would tell him the story of a cow that came down the road.

Once upon a time and a very good time it was there was a moocow coming down the road and this moocow that was coming down the along the road met a nicens little boy named baby tuckoo ...
His father told him that story: ... (Joyce, 7)

John is the model for Simon Dedalus in *A Portrait*:

A medical student, an oarsman, a tenor, an amateur actor, a shouting politician, a small landlord, a small investor, a drinker, a good fellow, a storyteller, somebody's secretary, something in a distillery, a tax-gatherer, a bankrupt and at present a praiser of his own past. (Joyce, 247)

Joyce seemed to have inherited his father's eloquence and wit, his quaint accent and phrasing. Joyce was also a good listener and had an extraordinary memory. He remembered songs, the Bible, the Roman Catholic liturgy, long lists of prose and poetry. He received a good education at Clongowes and worked his memory. He liked encyclopedias, catalogues, inventories, long lists and plans. By the time he finished university, he was a walking library. His notebooks later in his life were full of bits and questions reminiscent of the catechisms he had learnt at school.

As a child, Joyce was of such a cheerful disposition that he was nicknamed “Sunny Jim” and in September 1888, the six-year old boy went to Clongowes Wood College, the Jesuite School in Co. Kildare. At his confirmation he took the name “Aloysius” from the patron saint of youth, who dies young taking care of plague victims. Aloysius was not afraid of plague but as Stephen remembers in *A Portrait*, “the saint would not suffer his mother to kiss him as he feared the contact of her sex” (Joyce, 275). Stephen seemed to have suffered from the same anxiety and his colleagues at school teased him about it (“-Tell us, Dedalus, do you kiss your mother before you go to bed?” Joyce, 15).

The unfair punishment at Clongowes, when father James Daly – Father Dolan in *A Portrait* – thought James/ Stephen had broken his glasses on purpose to avoid lessons, led the seven-year old to complain to the rector. Father John Conmee accepted his account of the event and Joyce was avenged, although “the school's Punishment Book also reveals he was given the pandybat (a leather strap reinforced with whalebone) for forgetting to bring a book to class, for wearing his boots in the living quarters and for ‘vulgar language’” (Pindar, 6).

Other characters peopling the child's universe and who were patterned on real people in the novel were John Casey, Dante and the Vances with their daughter, Eileen. John Casey was John Kelly of Tralee, an ex-political prisoner and friend of the Joyce family; he had been imprisoned for being a member of an illegal organization which aimed to reform agriculture in Ireland. Dante was a fervent Catholic who was brought into the house as James's governess. She warned the child not to play with the neighbours' daughter, Eileen, as they were Protestants and he will burn in Hell.

-O, Stephen will apologize.

Dante said:

-O, if not, the eagles will come and pull out his eyes. (Joyce, 8)

There was a deep contrast between Dante's dark teachings and the cheerful atmosphere in the house of the Joyces at the time.

James and Stephen's childhood hero was Parnell. As a child, Stephen remembers the priests at Clongowes crying on the slide when Parnell died and when he is in the infirmary he imagines being dead and buried like Parnell. Another memory is the heated discussion at home over Parnell's betrayal during the first Christmas dinner when the child on holiday is allowed to have dinner with the adults. Dante left the table furious at the blasphemous opinions of John Joyce and his Parnellite Friends, Mr. Casey and uncle Charles. According to Dante, "he'll remember all this when he grows up, the language he heard against God and the religion and priests in his own home" (Joyce, 38). And he did remember the Church had deserted his hero and he agreed with his father that "the priests' pawn broke Parnell's heart and hounded him into his grave" (Joyce, 38) and that the Irish were "a priestridden Godforsaken race!" (Joyce, 42).

Charles Stewart Parnell had led the Irish Parliamentary Party into a coalition with Gladstone's Liberal Party in exchange for the Prime Minister's guarantee that he was committed to Home Rule for Ireland. The result was the first Home Rule Bill (1886) and, though defeated, it increased Parnell's reputation. He had also united the various factions of Irish nationalists and was perceived as the uncrowned king of Ireland. When, in 1890, Parnell was cited as correspondent in a divorce case by the husband of Kitty O'Shea, his mistress, most of his party and the Church deserted him. The divorce was pronounced and he married Kitty but his party split and he was forced to resign. Fourteen weeks after his marriage, he died and the day of his death, October 6th 1891, is commemorated as "Ivy Day" by his supporters. Parnellites, among whom Joyce's father, instilled in the child a view of the man as a tragic hero, who had been treacherously betrayed by his second-in-command, Tim Healy, part of his party members and the Church. Parnell's fall was an early initiation into the complex world of his politics and it turned young Stephen/ James against the Irish themselves, motivating him in leaving Ireland.

No honourable and sincere man, said Stephen, has given up to you his life and his youth and his affections from the days of Tone to those of Parnell, but you sold him to the enemy or failed him in need or reviled him and left him for another. And you invite me to be one of you. I'd see you damned first. (Joyce, 231)

In 1891, John Joyce's position as a collector of rates was abolished; he was forced to retire and the financial situation of the family was worse. The boy had to be withdrawn from Clongowes. In 1893, the Joyces moved to a bare cheerless house at 14 Fitzgibbon St. off Mountjoy Square, Dublin.

The sudden flight from the comfort and revery of Blackrock, the passage through the gloomy foggy city, the thought of the bare cheerless house in which they were now to live made his heart heavy: and again an intuition or knowledge of the future came to him. (Joyce, 74)

His father tried to explain the situation: “he became slowly aware that his father had enemies and that he was being listed for the fight, that some duty was being laid upon his shoulders” (Joyce, 74).

The fascinating element of this period was his discovery of Dublin and it is very interesting for the kind of artist he was going to become how he walked the Dublin streets, pencil and notebook in hand:

Dublin was a new and complex sensation. [...] In the beginning he contended himself with circling timidly round the neighbouring square or, at most, going half way down one of the side streets: but when he had made a skeleton map of the city in his mind he followed badly one of its central lines until he reached the customhouse. (Joyce, 74)

Following Stephen through the city, we can remake a Dublin map along the City Quay:

He passed unchallenged among the docks and lay bobbing on the surface of the water in the thick yellow scum, at the crowds of quay porters and the rumbling carts and the ill-dressed bearded policemen. The vastness and strangeness of the life suggested to him by the bales of merchandise stocked along the walls or swung aloft out of the holds of steamers wakened again in him the unrest which sent him wandering in the evening from garden in search of Mercedes. (Joyce, 75)

Discussing the aesthetic theories with his friend Lynch, the two boys reached Merrion Square and then continued walking to the National Library:

The rain fell faster. When they passed through the passage beside the Royal Irish Academy they found many students sheltering under the arcade of the library. Cranly, leaning against a pillar, was picking his teeth with a sharpened match, listening to some companions. Some girls stood near the entrance door. Lynch whispered to Stephen:
-Your beloved is here. (Joyce, 254)

On his way to school, Stephen passes St. Stephen's Green:

But the trees in Stephen's Green were fragrant of rain and the rain sodden earth gave forth its mortal odour, a faint incense rising upward through the mould from many hearts. The soul of the gallant venal city which his elders had told him of had shrunk with time to a faint mortal odour rising from the earth and he knew that in a moment when he entered the somber college he would be conscious of a corruption other than that of Buck Egan and Burnchapel Whaley. (Joyce, 209)

In his diary, Stephen recalls meeting Emma in Grafton Street:

April 15. Met her today pointblank in Grafton Street. The crowd brought us together. We both stopped. She asked me why I never came, said she had heard all sorts of stories about me. This was only to gain time. Asked me was I writing poems? About whom? I asked her. This confused her more and I felt sorry and mean. (Joyce, 237)

As a brilliant student, Stephen/ James received prize money out of writing papers and he spoiled his family for a while. Later, due to Father Conmee, who had become the prefect of studies at Belvedere College, a Jesuit boys' day school in the north-east Dublin, James could attend school here free of charge. He did well in his studies and in spite of the family mounting debts, the boy bought all the books he needed. As mentioned before, he was noted for his skill at composition and won essay competitions in 1894, 1895 and 1897. He used all the money for presents and books but the illusion lasted only a few weeks. The story of Stephen's rebellion against his colleagues, when he defends Byron against Tennyson seems to be true. Richard Ellman considers it in his biography as the beginning of Joyce's literary sufferings (Grigorescu, 35).

Joyce seems to have been sexually precocious and at fourteen his restless desire sent him out in the city at night. The episode is captured in *A Portrait*:

He wandered up and down the dark slimy streets peering in the gloom of lanes and doorways, listening eagerly for any sound. He moaned to himself like some baffled prowling beast. He wanted to sin with another of his kind, to force another being to sin with him and to exult with him in sin (Joyce, 113)

So he started his after-school visits to the brothels area, known as Monto, because it was near Montgomery Street (Pindar, 12). His sexual experiences brought about a revival of his religious devotion, as recounted at length in chapter III of *A Portrait*. However, it did not last and it is likely that Joyce was more interested in the religious metaphors he could adapt to his writings than conforming to the Catholic teachings.

At sixteen, after having considered priesthood for a while, he realized art is his true calling. Chapter IV of *A Portrait* features two significant moments in this respect: one is Stephen’s vision of Daedalus (“the fabulous artificer ... a hawklike man flying sunward over the sea”, “the call of life to his soul” not “the inhuman voice that had called him at the altar” Joyce, 192); the other is the revelation of life and art when seeing the beautiful girl bathing in the waters off Sandymount Strand, on Dublin Bay. He was at university when Joyce began writing what he called “epiphanies”. The idea seemed to have come to him one day when he heard a conversation between a man and a woman in Eccles Street on the steps on one “of those brick houses which seems the very incarnation of Irish paralysis”. Ironically, the conversation was extremely trivial but it was exactly the essence of what he intended to capture.

By an epiphany he meant a sudden spiritual manifestation, whether in the vulgarity of speech or of gesture or in a memorable phase of the mind itself. He believed that it was for the man of letters to record these epiphanies with extreme care, seeing that they themselves are the most delicate and evanescent moments. (Joyce qtd in Pindar, 24)

Joyce applied for admission to University College in 1898. There he continued his readings of Aristotle, Aquinas, Flaubert, Byron, Baudelaire, Yeats and Newman. He also went on forging his aesthetic system, mostly based on Aquinas and exposed through long discussions with Lynch in *A Portrait*. This is the period of the famous pronouncement in the novel: “the artist, like the God of creation, remains within or behind or beyond or above his handiwork, invisible, refined, out of existence, indifferent, paring his fingernails” (Joyce, 245). Thus, according to Joyce, the artist vanishes, leaving a perfect, self-contained work of art.

As far as the Celtic Revival was concerned, Joyce’s attitude is well illustrated through an episode in *A Portrait*. Yeats’s play *The Countess Kathleen* (1892), the first to be performed at the Irish Literary Theatre, was rejected by the Church and the students at University College as anti-Irish. One of Joyce’s colleagues, Francis Skeffington wrote a letter of denunciation which was supposed to be signed by the other students. Though keeping himself at a distance from what he considered the fanciful ideas of the Revival, James/Stephen refused to sign because, for him, Yeats was one of those writers who tried to open Irishness to wider European culture by preserving at the same time its specific nature. This is what young Joyce will attempt to achieve by leaving Ireland.

In *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Stephen gives his famous mission statement before his flight to the Continent; ironical undertones are to be remarked:

Mother is putting my new secondhand clothes in order. She prays now, she says, that I may learn in my own life and away from home and friends what the heart is and what it feels. Amen. So be it. Welcome, O life! I go to encounter for the millionth time the reality of experience and to forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscious of my race. (Joyce, 288)

Similarly, Joyce was casting himself in the role of a spurned genius. “I want to achieve myself – little or great as I may be – for I know that there is no heresy or no philosophy which is so abhorrent to my church as a human being, and accordingly I am going to Paris” (qtd in Pindar, 28).

This essay has tried to show the interweaving elements of Joyce’s biography with the events in his fictional character’s existence in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. The conclusion reached points out that Joyce is a subversive writer in the sense that though his work is not fantasy, being very much rooted in the real life of the Dublin of his time, Stephen is not exactly James Joyce, as we are made aware of this, especially through irony, exaggeration and a certain detachment. Stephen is the artist-to-be patterned on James’s existence. Joyce’s semi-biography should be read as a creative product, a metaphor of the self, concerned with issues of self-definition and self-deception and the truth of self-narrating. The doubling of self-observation allows for ironical effects, especially as far as the protagonist is concerned, within a process which is an act of creation and not a mere transcription of the past in spite of the accuracy of the place details.

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