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## THE SIGNIFICANT MOMENT

### THE ROLE OF 'EPIPHANIES' AND THE ASPECT OF REBELLION AGAINST PATERNITY IN *A PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST AS A YOUNG MAN*

In order to understand what exactly Joyce meant by an 'epiphany', we have to examine the relationship between author and hero, and their attitude towards their surrounding world. His provisional title, *Stephen Hero* marks the book as an early point in his stages of artistic impersonality. (Here we have to mention Joyce's admiration for Ibsen who used a similar method in his plays.) Stephen's character is essentially the same in the surviving parts of the *Stephen Hero* manuscript and in *A Portrait*. The difference can be found in the relationship between the character and the author. As Joyce rewrote his book he seems to have transferred the scene of action from the social to the psychological sphere. As he recollected his "conflicts with orthodoxy" in the tranquillity of his exile, he came to the conclusion that the actual struggles had taken place within the mind of Stephen. The Stephen we finally meet is sharply differentiated from his environment; the richness of his inner experience is continually played off against the reality of his external surroundings. The desire to "fly by the nets" flung at his soul which hold it back from flight is also indicated by his name: Stephen Dedalus. The relations between Stephen and his sanctified namesake, who was stoned by the Jews after reporting his vision of Christ<sup>1</sup>, extend to parody as well as parallel: Stephen's visions are constantly judged by his more mature self, and

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<sup>1</sup> Acts 7:56.

due to his admiration for Byron he is badly beaten up by his fellow students. Simon Dedalus is only the physical father in the flesh, incapable of maintaining his family. The myth of Daedalus, the "hawklike man", the "fabulous artificer" (*Portrait*, 176) of the Cretan labyrinth, whom Stephen invokes in the last chapter symbolically refers to his flight from Ireland. Being a son of Dedalus, he also bears the characteristic features of Icarus (whose death was compassed by the invention of his father), an archetype of ill-fated rebellion against paternal authority. Stephen's awakening consciousness; his quest for self-knowledge and unity is resented by different kinds and levels of paternity. The whole novel can be read as a constant struggle against it. At the end of each chapter a significant "epiphany" illuminates the weakening, or sometimes the disruption of yet another bond. According to Irene H. Chayes

by an epiphany Joyce 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 men of letters to record these epiphanies with extreme care seeing that they themselves are the most delicate and evanescent of moments.<sup>2</sup>

The word itself stands for "illumination". In the Roman Catholic liturgy it is the festival (6 January) commemorating the manifestation of Christ to the Magi.

In the first chapter the paternal image is represented by his biological father, Simon Dedalus, whose hairy face, the sign of maturity is the conventional analogue of God the Father who looks at him "through a glass" (*Portrait*, 1, which recalls *I Corinthians* 13:12). Simon appears as a storyteller, in a sense a creator. The next significant event the infant Stephen recalls is that he is hiding under the table and has to apologise for a rather obscure sin, otherwise, as the short rhyme threatens him, eagles will pull out his eyes. The role of eyes in the novel is very important, since Joyce himself was half-blind, his hero is convinced that sin comes mainly through the eyes (*Portrait*, 157), wears thick glasses, which is the indirect cause of his first rebellion against the Jesuit fathers, and he deeply resents that an old woman was spat in the eyes (*Portrait*, 33). But why does he have to apologise? If we have a look at the last sentence before he hides under the table we realise that he was talking about marrying Eileen Vance, a girl next door. According to the *Book of Proverbs* 30:17 eagles will pull out the eyes of a son who scorns and

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<sup>2</sup> Irene H. Chayes: "Joyce's Epiphanies" in: "The Sewanee Review", July 1946 p. 155.

defies his parents. Stephen is threatened by a father for claiming his rights to marriage, to maturity, no matter how innocent that claim is. The possibility that Stephen might one day mature into fatherhood himself, causes the unconscious resentment of his father because it contains the element of decline for the older generation. The attempt to halt the process of maturity is supported by the Jesuit fathers. Stephen's first victory over the fathers, which coincides with one of the major epiphanies is his protesting at the rector because he was unjustly punished by Father Dolan (originally Father Daly, since this event contains some autobiographical elements as well). When Simon Dedalus tries to reduce the whole incident to the level of a joke, he attempts to rob Stephen of his pride in his victory - and thus make Stephen's isolation even more stressed. If we consider the motifs of Stephen's actions and decisions in *A Portrait* and also in *Ulysses*, it is obvious that his pride attracts him to priesthood (the director's description of the priest's unique power) and the same repels him (in a sense, it is a bondage: his entire life would depend on the order). His personal pride separates him from his friends (he wants to emphasise his difference from the others, which is one of the distinguishing characteristics of the artist) and his father. Intellectual pride makes him reject the Roman Catholic church and refuse to pray at his mother's deathbed (which haunts him throughout *Ulysses*).

In the second chapter the isolation from his father becomes more prominent. On the trip to Cork Simon tries to convince Stephen of his status as a child (*Portrait*, 92) several times and to warn and ward him from sexual development: "Now don't be putting ideas into his head. Leave him to his Maker." (*Portrait*, 95) "Maker" is generally used as a reference to God, the Creator, but in this context it contains a secondary reference to Simon. He considers himself the only one who has the right to influence Stephen. He indirectly warns "the little man" not to remind Stephen that there are girls in the world, that one day he may grow into maturity. The word "Foetus" (*Portrait*, 90) carved into a desk makes Stephen shrink from the company of his schoolmates and indirectly reminds him of his own immature state. Simon boasts that he can keep up with his son in everything (*Portrait*, 96) but his claim is definitely refuted 3 pages later when he asks his son to slow down (*Portrait*, 98). When Stephen grows tired of his father's voice, he closes his eyes, escaping into darkness. Gradually, Stephen is beginning to see that his father is unworthy of his status, unable to maintain and look after his family. His irresponsibility emphasises the growing doubts in Stephen who, inspired by his curiosity and desire for sexual experience, visits a brothel. His initiation into

sexual life, a significant epiphany, takes place at the end of the chapter. His meeting with the prostitute occurs amid much darkness and warmth, in sharp contrast with the pale and cold sensations that surround almost every reference to the fathers.

Carl Jung, in dealing with the masculine psychology, notes that when man breaks away from the parental images, which then remain somewhere outside the psyche, woman takes up the position of the most immediate environmental influence for the adult man. Her image is not split off as that of the parents but kept associated with that of the consciousness. She is more personal and teaches him to be. This is a source for the feminine quality of the soul. Jung goes on to show how the whole nature of man presupposes woman, physically and spiritually. "His system is turned in to woman from the start, ... an inherited collective image of woman exists in a man's unconscious, with the help of which he apprehends the nature of woman."<sup>3</sup>

In the third chapter the attacks of the fathers grow both stronger and subtler as they sense the presence of the maturing generation. The pricks of bad conscience due to his carnal sin coincide with the retreat in the college. The sermon on Hell fills him with paralysing terror for his soul. All the sensations he has learned to love since childhood: darkness in which he does not have to rely on his weak eyes, warmth, odours, that mysteriously, like a womb, enfold him in the arms of the prostitute as well as in his early memories about his mother, turn out to be the attributes of Hell. The only way offered by the preacher to avoid it is to repent and throw himself at the mercy of God, the ultimate father-figure. His affinity for warmth turns against him (reference to the flames in Hell), the "horrible darkness" arouses his fear. Even then he first escapes not to God but to the "refuge of sinners", the Virgin Mary, another aspect of idealised womanhood, like Mercedes, like Eileen with the ivory fingers. He does love her, desires to be her knight, yet strangely enough, finds no conflict between his devotion to her and his visits to whores. She is the goddess of life for him in religious form, whom he adores in the fourth chapter on the beach. He begs the Virgin after the repentance of his sexual sins to confirm him in his love for Emma. Before the sermon he feels only a "loveless awe of God" (*Portrait*, 106). His pride in his own sin, the contempt he feels towards his fellow students who remained in their filial

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<sup>3</sup> Carl G. Jung: "Confrontation with the Unconscious" in: *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, New York: Random House, 1961 pp. 228, 230.

state while he considers himself lost make his alienation from them even more complete. In Joyce's world the artist is always irreconcilably at odds with society.

The sermon is a temporarily successful attempt to horrify Stephen with the idea of maturity and sexual development. The preacher evidently ignores the fact that his audience are composed of 14-16 year-old or sometimes even older boys and the style of his speech is that of one addressing children. His words arouse a temporary desire to remain a child forever, God's child ("his soul became again... a child's soul"; *Portrait*, 111) Stephen embraces his role as a penitent child. He makes his confession to a bearded Capuchin priest - we encounter with another father-figure. He cannot confess to a clean-shaved Jesuit. He tries to force himself to love God but succeeds only in fearing him (*Portrait*, 148). His confession, also an important epiphany, marks his spiritual development as regaining the original, innocent state of his soul.

In the fourth chapter this state proves to be deceiving and short-lived. He schedules a tight artificial routine on himself. Due to its rigidity it soon leads to spiritual dryness and is doomed to fail to be permanent. It is Stephen's humble attempt to accept paternal authority and remain in an enforced spiritual childhood. Abandoning his search for himself, he tries to unite himself with the fathers, ironically, rejoices at the sight of "white" things, such as white pudding, pale flames of the candles among the white flowers (*Portrait*, 151). Yet darkness and fire persistently haunt him, especially during his meditation on the Holy Trinity: his thoughts are mostly dedicated to the Holy Spirit, whose presence is generally indicated by tongues of flame (*Portrait*, 154-5).

In his self-deceit pride stops him from being honest. Stephen thinks he is pious, loves God but he only loves his creature: woman. The thought of her warms him in the general coldness and whiteness of his environment. The sermon proves a false epiphany because it sets him off the search for his self and true vocation. Its effect reaches the culminating point when he is faced with the possibility of becoming a priest. After a short period of temptation the idea repels him due to the director's mistakes who talks about renouncing women and the enormous power a priest has over the soul of man. Stephen cannot accept celibacy; his previous experience binds him to women forever. The reference to clerical authority indirectly provokes his pride which so far has reinforced itself only in his difference from others. The sensations he likes: warmth, darkness, odours are getting stronger after he refuses the vocation of priesthood. Having successfully overcome the strongest temptation to servitude and dependence, the

highest and most powerful exultation takes place; the most significant epiphany in the novel. All the female figures whom he loved or loves are incorporated in the vision of the bird-like girl he sees on the beach: Eileen Vance, Mercedes, Emma C., the prostitute and the Virgin. In his dream a red rose appears which represents experience of all kind and growth into maturity for Stephen. Besides, it has a strong sexual overtone in the works of Joyce (for example in *Ulysses* Blazes Boylan buys red roses for Molly before their rendezvous). The role of birds becomes significant in the next chapter; he takes their flight as a sign prophesying his own departure. When Stephen ponders about his love for Emma C., he bitterly remembers that she was flirting with a priest; perhaps it can be taken as another reference to the fathers, who attempt to block his way to emotional and sexual maturity. The idea that she might have behaved in a different way, would have remained faithful to him if she had a heart as that of birds shows an aspect of Stephen's (and Joyce's) strong fascination for these animals (*Portrait*, 227).

In the last chapter Stephen's alienation from the fathers becomes symbolic as well as physical; he has to find his way of expressing himself. "As a Young Man" he is not yet an artist, only an aesthete, seeking his artistic vocation. Another representative of the fathers enters the novel: the dean of studies (his role is asserted in his appearance as well: he has pale eyes). He is different from the others; old, lame, ready to surrender paternity. He encourages Stephen instead of hindering him in his quest. Symbolically and in reality, he tries to light a fire, using Stephen's help. When the dean talks about art in lighting a fire, Stephen says he will try to learn it. Later he expresses his doubts about his ability of ever lighting a fire - of ever creating anything. The old priest looks at him and reassures him ("Are you an artist, are you not? ...The object of the artist is the creation of the beautiful." *Portrait*, 193-6).

At one dawn he makes his attempt of artistic creation: in the "rosy" light of inspiration writes a villanelle. As the morning light comes, the flow of inspiration ceases. The colour symbolism ("...the white flame had passed, deepening to a rose and ardent light; ...the dull white light...covering the roselight in his heart." *Portrait*, 228-9) works in another aspect compared to that of the previous chapters: this time red stands for inspiration, spiritual development, whereas white refers to forces antagonistic to artistic creation. The fifth chapter of the novel gives a collection of Stephen's moves in a twofold way: he makes his decision and preparation of leaving Ireland, his "fatherland", and starting his flight. He also experiments with different methods of creation: the discussions

with his friends, the villanelle, his diary are all attempts of clarifying his thoughts on his vocation. The separation from his mother also takes place in this chapter: he refuses to obey her wish and does not do his Easter duty. His pride and his reluctance to bend before any kind of authority or servitude are stronger than his attachment to his mother. He also breaks the bonds of friendship: Cranly, the one who stands perhaps the closest to him, is on the side of the fathers. Stephen suspects him of close intimacy with Emma, and feels betrayed. According to Stephen, Cranly is destined to support the fathers: he is "the child of exhausted loins" (*Portrait*, 261).

In this part the most powerful epiphany is the flight of birds, symbolising loneliness and departure for Stephen. As a general peculiarity, true for all the significant epiphanies in the novel, it is important to note that they all take place either in the evening or they are quickly followed by darkness and sometimes accompanied by fire, warmth, or odours. It is obvious that each of them are closely connected to the faculties Stephen likes otherwise they would not be epiphanies for him.

From the evidence of his correspondence it is retraceable that Joyce's actual relationship with his father was mostly warm and friendly, as a letter of January 17, 1932 shows: "...he was the silliest man I ever knew and yet cruelly shrewd. He thought and talked of me up to his last breath. I was very fond of him always." Thus the irreconcilable antagonism between father (in the symbolic sense of the word) and son appears only in his novels. Though the novel contains certain autobiographical elements, Joyce was definitely a better rounded and better adjusted person than his fictional surrogate. He, for instance, was a good swimmer and was called "Sunny Jim" for his good nature<sup>4</sup>, whereas Stephen is afraid of water and no one could call him sunny of temperament. The "autobiographical problem" for Joyce was not only a question of how life influences art; it was also a question of how art influences life. Therefore he removed from the composite figure any traits of his own character that conflicted with the stereotype, the image of a potential, archetypal artist, wearing a mask of an aesthete. He also removed himself from Dublin to be able to write about Dubliners and their environment from a distant, artistically objective point of view.

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4 Stanislaus Joyce: *Diary*, pp. 23, 135.

The artist searches for a mask, originally to conceal his natural self but ultimately to reveal his imaginative self, the body of his art. A person cannot get rid of himself in favour of an artificial personality without punishment. Stephen made an attempt (his phase of Christian devotion) and he failed. He realised that any form of limitation or servitude, even those which contain elements of power and authority in front of others would hinder or stop his artistic development.

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