

The burnt and the
cooked: binaries and
continua in a portrait
of the artist as a ...



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The Christmas dinner scene's divisive political and moral debate in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* underlines an essential obstacle to the artistic mind of Stephen Dedalus. Ireland imposes a set of oppressive binaries ~~is~~ namely in the form of religion and nationalism ~~is~~ from which he can escape only through the ambiguity of language and his developing theory of the aesthetic. His progression to systems of continua over binaries also functions as implicit instruction from Joyce on how to read the novel. In a piece of art so consumed with its own internal order, the author acknowledges the textual value of a structural analysis, but only for the ideological content of the work. To ingest the "tragic emotion" of the novel, the reader needs to split the emotional binary of pity and terror and hold a "face looking two ways" (176). In other words, the reader may not process the emotion of the novel in a diagrammatic form, as he may, for example, when linking the ends and beginnings of chapters or the motif of the word "ivory." From this continuum follow Stephen's ideas on stasis and radiance by which, presumably, we should behold *Portrait* as a work of beauty. However, Joyce complicates his Janus-like theory with Stephen's proclamation that the simplest form of art is "the lyrical form, the form wherein the artist presents his image in immediate relation to himself" (184). The next form, the epical, is merely the artist's "image in mediate relation to himself and others" (184). *Portrait* is, at its most basic level, the authorial framing of a younger self's world ~~is~~ both self-interrogation and mediated surveillance of the self with others ~~is~~ and thus an ostensible aesthetic failure. The concluding project for Joyce, then, is the elevation of his literary adolescence beyond lyrical and epical autobiography and into the dramatic, in which the "personality of the artist ~~is~~ finally refines itself out of existence" (185). He can accomplish this

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only by applying the novel's concept of rhythm to the biographical conflation of Joyce and Stephen ~~the~~ the initial solipsistic and monochromatic deterrent to an imaginative dramatic aesthetic ~~is~~ as viewed through the kaleidoscopic lens of exile. When a taunting schoolmate asks Stephen whether or not he kisses his mother goodnight, Stephen first answers yes and, when his peers mock him, recants and is again met with derision. There is no way out for him, and the early lesson of impossible logic imprints itself on him: "What was the right answer to the question? He had given two and still Wells laughed" (10). To escape the laughter or, in other words, to claim his own voice and not heed those of others, Stephen must find a third way, a triangulation which opens up a multiplicity of non-exclusive answers. Language is a powerful signifier in Irish culture, as evidenced by both the content and form of the Christmas dinner. Dante opens the discussion with "identity" logic, arguing that a priest must be a singular entity who relates a Manichean morality: "A priest would not be a priest if he did not tell his flock what is right and what is wrong" (25). Joyce repeatedly emphasizes the table's attention to the power of the word in the various rebuttals. Uncle Charles pleads "Not another word now" and Dante returns with "Nice language for any catholic to use!" (25) Further attempts to conciliate "Nobody is saying a word against them" are met by Dante's return to the oral interaction: "The bishops and priests of Ireland have spoken and they must be obeyed" (25). Dante, who appeals to Mrs. Dedalus with "You hear?" reaffirms the importance of language as a vessel for memory and morality: "O, he'll remember all this when he grows up, said Dante hotly the language he heard against God and religion and priests in his own home" (27). Evidently, Stephen does, but even at an early age he has discovered a defense against

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accepting the binary morality of priests. Joyce establishes Stephen's first as a poetic mind, able to find beauty in ordinary usage of language. The "author" of the start of the novel's second episode is ambiguous, as the language is attuned to its own poetics (and thus, perhaps, Stephen's own voice) but also to the overarching narrative: "The wide playgrounds were swarming with boys. All were shouting and the prefects urged them on with strong cries. The evening air was pale and chilly and after every charge and thud of the foot-ballers the greasy leather orb flew like a heavy bird through the grey light. He kept on the fringe of his line, out of sight of his prefect, out of the reach of the rude feet, feigning to run now and then." (4) Structurally, many of the touches here are Joyce's work. Stephen's terror at the end of the first episode is remedied through claustrophobic refuge under the table, and here the agoraphobia of the "wide playgrounds" juxtaposes his continuing fear. Just as Joyce is clearly in charge of contrasting closed with open and domestic with recreational, he also rhymes the word "cries" with Stephen's poem from the end of the first episode ("Pull out his eyes / Apologise" [4]). But the internal tension of the words here shows a developing awareness of and expertise with linguistic play, and should be read as Stephen's. Instead of the simple "abba" rhyme scheme of the "apologise" poem, the language here fractures itself in a more sophisticated fashion. The "f"/"b" sound of "foot-ballers" is reversed by the sequential pairing of "orb" and "flew," but not before "greasy leather," sandwiched between them, finds its alliterative match at the end of the sentence with "grey light." The play is kept up with "f" and "r" sounds of the next sentence, beginning with "fringe" and finding more reversal with "rude feet" and "feigning to run." Stephen sets up phonic chiasma whose crossed

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lines befuddle the binary; the Manichean world of black-and-white blurs as Stephen extends his tonal range into new harmonious and discordant octaves. When motifs develop across the novel and not just a passage, however, we must concede them to Joyce¹'s structural control. Stephen¹'s later prediction that "There would be cloudy grey light over the playground" (20) and his eventual aesthetic triumph of "A day of dappled seaborne clouds" reconfigure his growing sensitivity to his interior "periodic prose" under Joyce¹'s own attention to periodicity, to the rhythmic pattern of the novel (143). The pun has always been a weapon of play, a double-edged sword that cuts into the ignorance of a monochrome world. Joyce wants his reader to combine appreciation of both narratological and linguistic structures. When Stephen notes that "belt was also to give a fellow a belt," that the word functions as both a device of self-aid and as a violent action to others, we must remember this as Stephen experiments with other binaries (5). The printed names of "cold and hot" on the faucets in the school lavatory strike him as "queer" (7). That water, the most miscible of substances, should be defined only under two temperatures contradicts Stephen¹'s own recognition of the scale of degrees: "He felt cold and then a little hot" (7). At this point in the narrative, this information is just that, factual examples whose intellectual content outweighs any emotional connection we may feel to "hot" and "cold." By Stephen¹'s late adolescence, he explores the same hot/cold binary within a far more intimate framework. When the dean of studies at his university asks Stephen if fire is beautiful, the student¹'s response bespeaks why he is, indeed, a student and not a priest: "In so far as it satisfies the animal craving for warmth fire is a good. In hell, however, it is an evil" (159). The confining religious view of fire

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receives a job here, and the reader feels something in Stephen's response beyond a simple philosophical shift. The next paragraph again adds the intellectual fuel of Joyce's structural command to Stephen's passionate voice: "Like Ignatius [the dean] was lame but in his eyes burned no spark of Ignatius' enthusiasm. Even the legendary craft of the company, a craft subtler and more secret than its fabled books of secret subtle wisdom, had not fired his soul with the energy of apostleship" (160). The repetition of fire imagery "burned no spark" and "fired his soul" still uses the style indirecte as a means of extending the analytic and emotional reach of the words. The reader is able to "face two ways." As the prose is a fusion of Joyce and Stephen, the novel maintains a vocal rhythm that coincides with Stephen's theory of aesthetic appreciation of an object: "you apprehend it as balanced part against part within its limits; you feel the rhythm of its structure. In other words, the synthesis of immediate perception is followed by the analysis of apprehension" (183). By turns immediate perception and analytic apprehension, *Portrait*, and its component episodes, are also "selfbounded and selfcontained upon the immeasurable background of space or time which is not it" (183). Yet, as we see from the progression of fire imagery, much is lost in the appreciation of the singular as opposed to the total. *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, then, with its titular call to the reader to recognize its inherent artistic self-production, is a component part of two larger works: *Ulysses* and Joyce's own life. Although Joyce may not have known he would later write *Ulysses*, he probably did know that he would keep Stephen Dedalus as a recurring character in some later work, as he often spread his characters across several narratives (especially in *Dubliners*). In this sense of playing off *Ulysses* (especially the first three

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episodes featuring Stephen), Portrait achieves Stephen's first definition of rhythm as the "relation of part to part in any esthetic whole" (177). Portrait's episodic structure on its own satisfies Stephen's second definition as the relation "of an esthetic whole to its part" (177). Viewing the entirety of Ulysses as the ocean and Portrait as the stream, Portrait finalizes Stephen's definition of rhythm: the relation "of any part to the esthetic whole of which it is a part" (177). The autobiography of Portrait rises beyond the lyrical because it assumes the polyphony of Ulysses, and the lambent radiance of the shorter novel's "fading coal" retains heat from the fireplace of the epic. This may seem like specious reasoning; by this rationale, anything written now (such as this paper) has the potential to be a greater achievement by virtue of its placement within a future opus. A safer place to look for a reservoir is within Joyce's life after he left Dublin. The word polyphony has become a literary catch phrase that derives from its etymological roots of "many voices." Gary Morson explains in *Narrative Freedom*: "As Bakhtin coined the term, a polyphonic novel is one in which a special relation obtains between author and hero. That relation allows the hero to be truly free, capable of surprising not only other characters but also the author." The problem of a conventional autobiography in presenting polyphony is that the author and central character are the same person, or altered versions from temporal distance, and the conversation remains monotonous (single-toned, not necessarily "boring"). Joyce nears solving this describing Stephen through an ironic filter. Two prime examples of this come in Stephen's anticipation of an epiphany. In Chapter Two, Stephen fantasizes about meeting the "unsubstantial image" of Mercedes and, "alone, surrounded by darkness and silence," being "transfigured" (54). The abrupt end of the <https://assignbuster.com/the-burnt-and-the-cooked-binaries-and-continua-in-a-portrait-of-the-artist-as-a-young-man/>

episode leads to a scene of the Dedalus family's eviction ~~is~~ Joyce's realistic version of physical "transfiguration," actual dislocation of the figure. An even more self-parodying irony occurs in Chapter Four, when Stephen sees a bird shortly after deciding to free himself from religion: "What did it mean? Was it a quaint device opening a page of some medieval book of prophecies and symbols, a hawklike man flying sunward above the sea, a prophecy of the end he had been born to serve and had been following through the mists of childhood and boyhood, a symbol of the artist forging anew in his workshop out of the slugging matter of the earth a new soaring impalpable imperishable being?" (145) Joyce's vivisection of his own literary techniques and of the reader's ability to "read" the text highlights an essential difference between Joyce's irony and typical autobiographical irony. Joyce is not simply an older, wiser version of Stephen. Exile has changed him; although the final image from Stephen's diary is that of "the smithy of my soul," the artist still must "forge the uncreated conscience" of his race (219). He must make something out of nothing, and not just alter the preexisting. Exile is Stephen's only option of escaping the chorus around him, and Joyce makes the reader understand that exile is a way, ultimately, of silencing the pernicious effects of those voices on the expatriate. Exile has given Joyce the ability to understand his former self such that his irony is a result of having shed his sagging accouterments of personality. Joyce is no longer Stephen Dedalus; the ironic distance is the span of knowing a character so intimately, but still being able to reject the dual movements of desire and loathing and beholding the character with objective stasis. James Joyce is Stephen Dedalus's as yet "uncreated conscience," and the final continuum ~~is~~ that of an author who can slide toward or away from his subject <https://assignbuster.com/the-burnt-and-the-cooked-binaries-and-continua-in-a-portrait-of-the-artist-as-a-young-man/>

with ease ~~it~~ moves Portrait out of the genre of autobiography and into that of tragic drama. Works Cited: Joyce, James. A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man. USA: Barnes & Noble Books, 1999. Morson, Gary Saul. Narrative and Freedom: The Shadows of Time. New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1994. 91.