

Stephen Dedalus and Nationalism without Nationalism

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While recent critics have often downplayed the significance of Joyce's attack on the Gaelic Revival in A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, the novel actually enacts nothing less than a systematic repudiation of nationalist tropes from the position of liberal cosmopolitanism. As a detailed comparison of Joyce's text with the turn of the century revivalists discourse shows, A Portrait undermines each of the key revivalist preoccupations (including both linguistic nationalism and ethnic essentialism), finally deconstructing the project of nation building in toto. This radical critique of nationalism suggests that, after twenty years in which Joyce studies have been dominated by attempts to displace the once dominant vision of Joyce as an apolitical and internationalist aesthete with a version of Joyce as, above all, a colonial Irish intellectual, it is time to once again take his commitment to aestheticism and cosmopolitanism seriously.

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The outcome of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* stands suspended between the rejection of nationalism and a firm, though perhaps idiosyncratic, commitment to nation-building. Such, at least, is the conclusion that follows from the seemingly contradictory pronouncements of its hero, Stephen Dedalus. "I will not serve," he famously tells Cranly, "that in which I no longer believe, whether it call itself my home, my fatherland, or my church" (Joyce, *Portrait* 268). And yet, Stephen's determination to reject the nets of "nationality, language, and religion" (220) appears to be thoroughly contradicted by the penultimate entry in his diary in which he promises to "forge the uncreated conscience of my race" (275–276). This double movement between rejection and affirmation, between the tenacious *non serviam* directed at the demands of nationality and religion and the equally resolute announcement of a nationalist mission continues to constitute one of the central critical problems of *A Portrait*.

Stephen's blunt distanciation from the Church and from Irish nationalism has generated significant critical resistance at least since Hugh Kenner declared that "it is high time, in short, to point out that Stephen's flight into adolescent 'freedom' is not meant to be the 'message' of the book" (42). And since the postcolonial turn in Joyce studies displaced the once-dominant vision of Joyce as an apolitical and internationalist aesthete with a version of Joyce as, above all, a colonial Irish intellectual, it has become common to resolve the apparent tension between Stephen's nationalist and cosmopolitan

impulses in favor of the former: the rejection of an aestheticist and cosmopolitan Joyce has naturally led to the rejection of an aestheticist and cosmopolitan Stephen.¹

On surface, the argument in favor of an Irish colonial Joyce and, more specifically, in favor of an Irish colonial reading of *A Portrait*, presents itself as a simple demand for appropriate contextualization. As Andrew Gibson writes, “*A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* is about the growth to early adulthood of a young Irish intellectual and fledgling artist in Dublin in an extremely specific period of Irish history, approximately 1882-1903, focusing principally on the years 1891-1903. This may seem rather obvious; but the point has sometimes been a little lost in enthusiasm for Joyce’s modernity or his modernism” (“Time Drops in Decay” 697).² Equally obvious points—that *A Portrait*, although saturated with Catholicism and Irish politics, is a novel written in Pola and Trieste, published in a London literary magazine with the help of an American poet, and written by an author whose intellectual context is decisively international and continental, with powerful links to figures like Gabriele D’Annunzio and Ibsen, not to mention the European epic tradition—leave Gibson unswayed. As he writes in a different venue,

certainly, he [Joyce] left Ireland for Continental Europe at the age of 22 and, thereafter, never lived in his country of origin again. He saw himself as an exile and increasingly prided himself on his cosmopolitanism. But in the early twentieth century, as in preceding centuries, to be an Irish exile and even a self-exiled Irishman in Europe was to be something much more specific than a European, let alone an internationalist. Joyce did not so much set out to become a modern European genius as he was turned into one.

(*James Joyce* 12)

And even if Joyce did turn away from Ireland and toward a wider European cultural context, he did so in response to a decisively Irish cultural situation: “Perhaps,” Gibson argues, “the cosmopolitan logic of Joyce’s work should be read in relation to an Irish logic. The global Joyce might even be an expression of

the Irish one, not a release from him” (*James Joyce* 17). Finally, writing about Joyce’s Catholicism, he concludes: “If the young Joyce was a modern intellectual, he none the less also remained a Catholic intellectual if not a believer. He was a Catholic intellectual because of his background, education and class, because of the culture to which he did not cease to belong, just by virtue of dissenting from it” (*James Joyce* 40).

Gibson is, of course, right to assert that dissent implies a particularly intense relationship with the cultural forms from which one seeks to break free.³ Yet we should not allow the inherent ambiguities of exile to fully obfuscate the distinction between unwilling belonging and conscious commitment: there is a difference between being born and bred Irish (or Catholic) and willingly espousing the cultural claims of Irish nationalism. Gibson’s reading conflates the two, practically co-opting every cosmopolitan impulse back into the prison-house of national culture. In Gibson’s hands, local contextualization—in itself a necessary and welcome move—too often becomes an excuse to dismiss both the powerful cosmopolitan impulses of Joyce’s work and its decisively international contexts. In the final instance, cosmopolitanism is turned into a symptom to be explained—and indeed explained away—by the original national context from which Joyce’s work emerged.

Other scholars have followed a very similar path in minimizing the implications of Joyce’s critique of dominant forms of nationalism, including the Revival movement which grew rapidly during the 1880s and 1890s. As Gregory Castle writes, “Joyce challenged the cultural assumptions of the Revival, especially its (...) tendency of idealizing the Irish peasantry and locating cultural authenticity in folklore, legend, and mythology (...) But it seems to me that we cannot understand the complexity of Joyce’s attitude toward Revivalism if we place him outside its influence and lose sight of the fact that Joyce and Yeats desired the same thing: the creation of an imaginary Irish nation and race” (173). The difficulty with these and other similar critical interventions is that they simultaneously acknowledge and neutralize Joyce’s rejection of the Revival, thus incorporating him back into Irish nationalism, perhaps as a capricious and somewhat eccentric nationalist, but a nationalist nonetheless.⁴

Contrary to what has been suggested so often in recent years, I argue that our desire to rescue the great Irish writer from being assimilated into English or international modernism has prevented us from seeing that his first novel enacts a systematic repudiation of nationalist tropes. In what follows, I will reassert the significance of *A Portrait's* attacks on the Gaelic Revival, and call for the novel's dual contextualization within both distinctly Irish cultural developments and the wider framework of European nationalisms around the turn of the century. The critique of nationalism in *A Portrait* has much wider implications than the current critical consensus would allow: with its attack on linguistic nationalism, ethnic essentialism, and collective obligations in general, Joyce's novel deconstructs not only the Revivalist fantasies of Ancient Ireland, but the project of nation building *in toto*. As Eric Hobsbawm observes commenting on the rise of nationalism in the late nineteenth century, "The basis of 'nationalism' of all kinds was the same: the readiness of people to identify themselves emotionally with 'their' nation and to be politically mobilized as Czechs, Germans, Italians or whatever, a readiness which could be politically exploited" (*The Age of Empire* 142; see also B. Anderson 7). Yet even as he promises to engineer an Irish national conscience, Stephen Dedalus proves incapable of an attachment of this kind, and consequently rejects the possibility of explicit political mobilization. What is at stake, then, is not only a rejection of one particular nationalist movement, but of the larger project central to the ideological constellation of the turn of the century Europe—that of ethnolinguistic nationalism.

The Language Question

The demands of the Revival that Stephen fails to espouse—to be "true to his country and help to raise up her language and tradition" (88)—are typical of what Hobsbawm calls the "transformation of nationalism" across Europe. While the sources of ethnolinguistic nationalism can be traced back at least to the primitivist impulses of the German Romantics, the rise of such nationalism as a pervasive collective movement and a decisive political force in the mass society is essentially a late-nineteenth-century phenomenon.⁵

Like its many continental counterparts, Irish nationalism had only gradually come to emphasize the identification of ethnicity and a national language. As Hobsbawm points out, “before the foundation of the Gaelic League (1893), which initially had no political aims, the Irish language was not an issue in the Irish national movement” (*Nations and Nationalism* 106). Yet in the 1890s and the 1900s, the possibility of resurrecting Gaelic as a national language had become the central preoccupation of the Irish public. A sustained effort was made not only to increase the number of Gaelic speakers, but also to bring Irish into official use as much as possible, to make it a part of the education system, and finally a compulsory subject at the National University. In 1897 the Gaelic League even organized a public competition offering £5 prizes for best essays on such topics as “The Influence of Language on Nationality,” and “How to Popularize the Irish Language” (“The Irish Language”).

Far from being a uniquely Irish development, Gaelic Revival’s focus on national language and folk culture corresponds closely to similar developments across Europe, from Scandinavia to the Balkans.⁶ In fact, the proponents of Irish were very much aware of these similarities, invoking the precedents of the “great revival in language, as in the case of Germany, Hungary and Bohemia” (“Keltic Notes”). A 1904 appeal for the establishment of the Gaelic Academy was reinforced by invoking the Hungarian experience, as one speaker reported that he has “recently been staying in Hungary, and has returned home full of enthusiasm for the manner in which the Hungarians rescued their language from the oblivion to which it was rapidly tending” (“Irish Language Notes”). Paradoxically, Irish nationalism, which is so often invoked as the indispensable local context of Joyce’s writings, follows quite consciously a pattern already developed across Europe.⁷

Like similar nationalist movements across the Continent, the Gaelic League, in seeking to “restore the Irish language to its proper position,” presupposed a causal connection between the fate of the national language and the historic fate of the nation:

the greatest misfortune that can befall a people is to be deprived of its language. Reason tells us that this instinctive clinging to the language is not a question of sentiment, but, in truth, of life and death. Language, then, is not a mere string of symbols as are figures to a

mathematician. It is a living power, influencing the intellect and controlling the thought of man. ("Lawyers on Gaelic")

In the final instance, language bears a privileged relation to national consciousness, and the loss of language inevitably results in national disintegration. A letter to the editor of *The Irish Times* sums up this view:

Dr. Hyde and his fellow Gaelic Leaguers would never have taken off their coats to fight the up-hill battle they are fighting, on account of mere manner of speech or deportment. They preach from the text, "What shall it profit a man if he gains the whole world and lose his own soul." They have learnt that native speech is the expression of the national soul. They have seen that with the discontinuance of the native speech Ireland's soul has become inert. Following close on the imitation of English speech comes imitation of English thought, until Irish initiative has almost ceased to be. (Duncan 9)

In *A Portrait*, Stephen Dedalus takes a very different view of the language question: "—My ancestors threw off their language and took another, Stephen said. They allowed a handful of foreigners to subject them. Do you fancy I am going to pay in my own life and person debts they made? What for?" (220) Significantly, Stephen takes this view despite acknowledging the foreignness of English. Shortly before renouncing Irish, he finds himself in a minor linguistic dispute with the dean of studies about the words "tundish" and "funnel" (203–204). Although the words are synonyms, Stephen doesn't know what "funnel" means, and the dean, an Englishman, doesn't know the word "tundish" that Stephen uses: "Is that called a tundish in Ireland? asked the dean. I never heard the word in my life" (204). To have his English corrected by an Englishman provokes a profound sense of linguistic insecurity in Stephen:

The language in which we are speaking is his before it is mine. How different are the words *home, Christ, ale, master*, on his lips and on mine! I cannot speak or write these

words without unrest of spirit. His language, so familiar and so foreign, will always be for me an acquired speech. I have not made or accepted its words. My voice holds them at bay. My soul frets in the shadow of his language. (205)

The suggestion here is that Irish are inevitably foreigners in the dominant language of their culture. It is a familiar argument. According to Thomas O'Donnell, a prominent MP from Parnell's Irish Parliamentary Party, "Irish was the language of our people until quite recently, and although most of us speak English now, our thoughts are Irish in form. The Irish mind has been built up by the Irish language, and the Irish mind can only express itself through a medium it has specially chosen for itself" (O'Donnell). The sense of English as a foreign and inadequate medium haunts both O'Donnell and Joyce's hero. But while for the former this inadequacy is an argument in favor of the Gaelic Revival (in fact, only a few months earlier O'Donnell made an attempt to address the House of Commons in Gaelic), for Stephen Dedalus, it is a frustrating thought that nonetheless fails to influence his rejection of Irish.

Whereas Douglas Hyde, the founder of *Conradh na Gaeilge*, preached "the necessity for de-anglicizing Ireland," arguing that the loss of language "is our greatest blow, and the sorest stroke that the rapid Anglicisation of Ireland has inflicted upon us" (136), for Stephen Dedalus, as for Joyce himself, the triumph of English is irreversible and beside the point. In a diary entry towards the end of *A Portrait*, Stephen reasserts himself in relation to English: the dean's objection to his use of the language was unfounded; he had used the right word. "I looked it up and find it English and good old blunt English too. Damn the dean of studies and his funnel! What did he come here for to teach us his own language or to learn it from us. Damn him one way or the other!" (*Portrait* 274) The division between "his" language and "us" persists, but so does the sense that "his" language can be mastered.

The importance of this gesture cannot be overestimated. In bracketing the question of national language and the threat of linguistic assimilation, Stephen Dedalus dismisses the single most important concern of modern ethnolinguistic nationalism. National language, as Hyde's and O'Donnell's arguments show, is the *conditio sine qua non* of the preservation of cultural identity. As Hyde insisted in 1909, "they

in the Gaelic movement have put their finger upon the secret spring which opened the jewel drawer of Irish thought and mind...the secret spring of the Irish language. Wherever they have revived the language they have revived all the rest with it, including the Irish industries” (“Dublin University Gaelic Society”). Language is the crucial element of the fantasy of reestablishing the uninterrupted transmission of national spirit, by “getting into touch with the nationality of the people as it was” (“Dublin University Gaelic Society”). Stephen Dedalus offers a comprehensive rejection of this fantasy.⁸

Changing the Subject

When Stephen rejects the Irish language, he implicitly rejects not only the claim that it is possible (or desirable) to restore the lost cultural continuity, but also the most significant tool of national self-expression. According to Hyde, “the Gaelic people can never produce its best before the world as long as it remains tied to the apron-strings of another race and another island...” (161). By espousing English, Stephen rejects this assumption and dissolves the bond between “the Irish mind” and the “medium it has specially chosen for itself” (O’Donnell). In fact, Stephen is prepared fully to reject the discourse of authenticity that assumes, on the one hand, the existence of an immutable national essence, and, on the other, that the intrusion of foreign elements will lead to a progressive shift away from the national spirit. Regarding Davin, Stephen says:

... the young peasant worshipped the sorrowful legend of Ireland. The gossip of his fellow-students which strove to render the flat life of the college significant at any cost loved to think of him as a young Fenian. His nurse had taught him Irish and shaped his rude imagination by the broken lights of Irish myth. He stood towards the myth upon which no individual mind had ever drawn out a line of beauty and to its unwieldy tales that divided against themselves as they moved down the cycles in the same attitude as towards the Roman Catholic religion, the attitude of a dull-witted loyal serf. Whatsoever of thought or of feeling came to him from England or by way of English culture his mind

stood armed against in obedience to a password; and of the world that lay beyond England he knew only the foreign legion of France in which he spoke of serving. (195–196)

Davin embodies all of the crucial characteristics of Douglas Hyde’s xenophobic program as Joyce perceived it: the uncritical embrace of national mythology, followed by an equally uncritical rejection of all things English, and utter ignorance of other cultural traditions. No doubt, Davin would have espoused Hyde’s appeal to stand “against this constant running to England for our books, literature, music, games, fashions, and ideas” (Hyde 161).

Not only does Stephen reject Davin’s attraction to the “Irish myth”—one of the final entries in Stephen’s diary contains a brutal parodic assault on Revivalist ethnographic escapades (274)—but he offers a clear cosmopolitan alternative to Devin’s programmatic parochialism, as he contemplates a long strain of European authors, including Hauptmann, Ibsen, Cavalcanti, and Ben Jonson. Moreover, the sequence of authors Stephen invokes in *A Portrait* closely follows the logic of Joyce’s attack on the Irish Literary Theatre in “The Day of the Rabblement.” In this 1901 text, Joyce dismissed the Theatre as “the property of the rabblement of the most belated race in Europe” (*Critical Writings* 70) precisely at the moment when the Theatre had (at least in Joyce’s estimation) dropped even the pretense of interest in anything beyond the folklore and the epic past. During that year, the company had produced two plays based on folktales, *Diarmuid and Grania* (by George Moore and Yeats) and *Casadh an tSúgáin* (Hyde), the latter being performed in Irish (Dunleavy and Dunleavy 214). Rejecting the Theatre’s orientation, Joyce writes:

The censorship is powerless in Dublin, and the directors could have produced *Ghosts* or *The Dominion of Darkness* if they chose. Nothing can be done until the forces that dictate public judgement are calmly confronted. But, of course, the directors are shy of presenting Ibsen, Tolstoy or Hauptmann, where even [Yeats’s] *Countess Cathleen* is

pronounced vicious and damnable. Even for a technical reason this project was necessary. A nation which never advanced so far as a miracle-play affords no literary model to the artist, and he must look abroad. (*Critical Writings* 70)

Stephen, like Joyce, will look abroad for literary models. Having rejected the essentialist assumptions behind contemporary nationalism, and having consequently rejected the notion of language as an expression of nationality, he can proceed to dismantle the claim that artistic vocation can be only secondary to a sense of national belonging.

Once again, the contrast with Davin is instructive. Davin sees himself as “an Irish nationalist, first and foremost” (*Portrait* 219), and he offers himself as an example to Stephen: “a man’s country comes first. Ireland first, Stevie. You can be a poet or a mystic later” (220). Yet, however we choose to understand this “later”—should Stephen simply forgo literature for the sake of participating in the nationalist movement, or should he subject his literary preoccupations to a national goal, thus creating an eminently Irish art?—Joyce’s protagonist clearly has no intention of following Davin’s advice. Instead, he chooses to renegotiate the relationship between nationality and artistic self-expression. Every time his Irishness is challenged—“Are you Irish at all?” “Why don’t you learn Irish?”—Stephen responds by simultaneously reasserting his Irish identity and expressing disdain for the political and cultural aspirations of contemporary nationalists. While at the beginning of their conversation he offers to show Davin his family tree, at the end he produces the definition of Ireland as “the old sow that eats her farrow” (220). Since Stephen’s understanding of Irishness is suspended between belonging and disgust, his pronouncement that he is a product of Ireland has an ambiguous ring to it: “—This race and this country and this life produced me, he said. I shall express myself as I am” (220). This creed seems to echo the doctrine of national art as expressive of a national identity. As the president of the Architectural Association of Ireland observed in 1901, “all great art must in its origin, its growth, its making, be instinct with the spirit of the country which had produced it, and, therefore, in the true meaning of the word, national” (“Architectural Association of Ireland”). Yet there is a subtle shift in emphasis in Stephen’s

argument: not “I shall express this race and this country,” but rather I will express myself as I have been made by my cultural situation, a situation that in Stephen’s own view is dysfunctional, oppressive, and self-destructive.

This deliberate blurring of the lines between self-expression and the expression of collective identity is a well-known rhetorical strategy often employed in the face of various demands for national purity. In one of the best known rebuttals of cultural nationalism, Jorge Luis Borges offers a more expansive version of the same argument: “we cannot confine ourselves to what is Argentine in order to be Argentine because either it is our inevitable destiny to be Argentine, in which case we will be Argentine whatever we do, or being Argentine is a mere affectation, a mask” (Borges 427). By turning national identity from an object of reverence into an assumed fact, both Joyce and Borges offer critiques of nationalism rather than theories of national art.⁹

Above all, Stephen Dedalus responds to the nationalist fantasies of his peers by changing the subject. In the face of Davin’s “Ireland first, Stevie,” he invokes Aristotle’s *Poetics*: “Aristotle,” he pronounces, “has not defined pity and terror. I have” (221). By reinterpreting the concept of catharsis—Aristotle has famously defined the effect of tragedy as the “purgation (catharsis) of pity and fear” (1449b)—Stephen offers an implicit rebuke to the nationalist imagination. To the particularist concern with national identity, with what counts as distinctly Irish, he opposes what he sees as the universal problem of the nature of aesthetic experience. In fact, this reference to *Poetics* is only the initial step in Stephen’s complex and idiosyncratic commitment to aesthetic formalism. Although he borrows the problem of catharsis from Aristotle, and although he borrows his vocabulary from Aquinas whom he repeatedly references as his intellectual guide, Joyce’s hero goes on to formulate an aesthetic theory rooted primarily in Kant and concerned with the question of the universal validity of aesthetic judgments.¹⁰ In other words, he uses the Aristotelian concern with pity and fear as responses to tragedy in order to articulate a more general question about the distinct emotional and intellectual response that defines aesthetic experience. As he sees them, both pity and fear are proper aesthetic emotions because they tend to “arrest the mind”:

You see I use the word ARREST. I mean that the tragic emotion is static. Or rather the dramatic emotion is. The feelings excited by improper art are kinetic, desire or loathing. Desire urges us to possess, to go to something; loathing urges us to abandon, to go from something. The arts which excite them, pornographical or didactic, are therefore improper arts. The esthetic emotion (I used the general term) is therefore static. The mind is arrested and raised above desire and loathing. (222)

The purportedly Aristotelian concern with the emotional response that defines the tragic experience here seamlessly transforms into a Kantian distinction between disinterested pleasure (“static” emotions in Stephen’s terminology) and the vulgar desire to possess an object (“kinetic” emotions). As Kant argues, “if the question is whether something is beautiful, one does not want to know whether there is anything that is or that could be at stake, for us or for someone else, in the existence of the thing, but rather how we judge it in mere contemplation (intuition or reflection)” (90). Like Kant, Stephen believes that proper aesthetic experience must be divorced from both sensual pleasure and moral satisfaction. In demanding that the mind raise “above desire and loathing” (222) he is rearticulating the Kantian imperative of disinterested contemplation.

It is hardly surprising, then, that Stephen takes up the equally Kantian problem of the universality of aesthetic experience: “The Greek, the Turk, the Chinese, the Copt, the Hottentot, said Stephen, all admire a different type of female beauty. That seems to be a maze out of which we cannot escape” (226). He does, however, offer a solution: “though the same object may not seem beautiful to all people, all people who admire a beautiful object find in it certain relations which satisfy and coincide with the stages themselves of all esthetic apprehension. These relations of the sensible, visible to you through one form and to me through another, must be therefore the necessary qualities of beauty” (227). The solution itself is one that is a shared property of eighteenth century aesthetics—Stephen sees beauty not as an objective property but as a relational predicate, assuming that there is a homology between a set of broadly defined formal characteristics and the intellectual processes through which objects are perceived.¹¹ Yet it is the

choice of the problem, rather than the solution that is particularly interesting. Not only does Stephen respond to nationalist tirades by offering an aesthetic theory, but one of his theory's chief concerns is to solve the problem of the universal validity of the category of beauty beyond the constraints of various national cultures. Aesthetic disinterestedness, with its investment in the principle of universality, thus emerges as a form of resistance to the demands of nationalism, and indeed, as a vital tool of Joycean politics. For Stephen Dedalus, aestheticism amounts to a dissenting political stance.¹²

What Remains

Now, it is perhaps still possible to argue for a nationalist version of Stephen Dedalus—he does, after all, end up promising the creation of a national conscience—although it is exceedingly difficult to discover the content of his alleged nationalist project.¹³ Even Yeats, whose nationalism was far less ambiguous than Joyce's, had misgivings about some elements of the Gaelic League's program. Responding to Hyde's call for a return to Irish language, Yeats rejected this demand as impractical and likely impossible: "Let us by all means prevent the decay of that tongue where we can, and preserve it always among us as a learned language to be a fountain of nationality in our midst, but do not let us base upon it our hopes of nationhood" (Yeats 256). Significantly, however, Yeats criticized the Gaelic League from the position of a fellow traveler who shared the same aspiration to de-Anglicize Ireland. Despite some doubts with regard to the language question, he did not dispute the underlying essentialist understanding of nationhood, nor did he doubt the necessity of relying on inherited Irish cultural forms in the project of nation-building: "the little foreign criticism of Irish literature which I have seen speaks of it as simple and primitive. They are right. There is a distinct school of Irish literature, which we must foster and protect, and its foundation is sunk in the legend lore of the people and in the National history" (273). A recuperable history lies at the heart of both Yeats's and Hyde's projects.

Stephen, like Joyce, rejects not only the Revivalist plunge into the national myth and Gaelic language, but denies the existence of any form of redeemable past. Most nationalists resolve their dissatisfaction with the present, or with the recent development of national history, by identifying the

moment in which the nation had lost its way, and by committing themselves to the reconstruction of a retrospective utopia. Hyde offers a classic example of this mode of reasoning. Lamenting the fall of Ireland, formerly “one of the most classically learned and cultured nations in Europe” he comments: “I shall endeavour to show that this failure of the Irish people in recent times has been largely brought about by the race diverging during this century from the right path, and ceasing to be Irish without becoming English. I shall attempt to show that with the bulk of the people this change took place quite recently, much more recently than most people imagine, and is, in fact, still going on” (Hyde 118). Yet when Stephen announces that his ancestors have given away their independence and their language (220), he finds no prelapsarian Ireland to return to. As Joyce puts it in “Ireland, Island of Saints and Sages,” his most extensive pronouncement on the questions of Irish history, “Ancient Ireland is dead just as ancient Egypt is dead. Its death chant has been sung, and on its gravestone has been placed the seal” (*Critical Writings* 173). In the same lecture, Joyce offers his most devastating critique of nationalism:

What race, or what language (if we except the few whom a playful will seems to have preserved in ice, like the people of Iceland) can boast of being pure today? And no race has less right to utter such a boast than the race now living in Ireland. Nationality (if it really is not a convenient fiction like so many others to which the scalpels of present-day scientists have given the coup de grâce) must find its reason for being rooted in something that surpasses and transcends and informs changing things like blood and the human word. (*Critical Writings* 165–166)¹⁴

There is, however, very little in which nationalism can be rooted once Joyce is done with it: without inherited language and folk culture, without the fiction of common ancestry, with no redeemable past or a historical mission, very little remains, except, perhaps, hybridity itself. With his willingness to “look abroad” when native cultural forms seem insufficient, Joyce is approaching what the Hungarian dissident György Konrád calls “the self-expanding national strategy.” Konrád writes: “the self-shrinking

national strategy takes what it considers non-national and delights in condemning it. The self-expanding national strategy takes anything from the outside world that can be fruitfully related to what was previously considered national and delights in integrating the two” (167).¹⁵ Konrád’s argument reads either as very liberal version of nationalism or as covert defense of cosmopolitanism, in which resistance to xenophobia and cultural parochialism is declared a “national strategy.” Joyce seems to walk the same fine line.

Finally, nationalism requires a commitment to service, which is precisely why it is so difficult to take Stephen Dedalus’s promise of nation building at face value. When Joyce ends “Ireland, Island of Saints and Sages,” by calling for the rise of Ireland—“It is well past time for Ireland to have done once and for all with failure. If she is truly capable of reviving, let her awake, or let her cover up her head and lie down decently in her grave forever” (*Critical Writings* 174)—he does so with the usual air of impatience. For Joyce, as for his hero, Ireland needs to explain herself to him: the Irish have allowed themselves to be conquered, and both the Norman invasion of Ireland in the twelfth century and the forming of the Union with Great Britain in 1800 were self-inflicted, as the Irish invited their own conquerors. “These two Facts,” he concludes, “must be thoroughly explained before the country in which they occurred has the most rudimentary right to persuade one of her sons to change his position from that of an unprejudiced observer to that of a convinced nationalist” (162-163).¹⁶

Both Joyce’s and Stephen’s *non serviam* violate the most important principle of modern nationalism. In Davin’s not very sophisticated formulation, “a man’s country comes first. Ireland first, Stevie” (220). Stephen, however, refuses to serve and participate, exempting himself from all demands of collective identity and from all communal obligations. In 1882, as the tide of nationalist sentiment was engrossing Europe, Ernst Renan wrote:

The nation, like the individual, is the outcome of long and strenuous past of sacrifice and devotion. Of all cults, the cult of ancestors is the most legitimate, since our ancestors have made us what we are. A heroic past of great men, of glory (I mean genuine glory):

this is the social capital on which a national idea is established. To have common glories in the past and common will in the present; to have done great things together, and to will that we do them again - these are the conditions essential to being a people.... (Renan 58)

Stephen, however, cannot participate, not even in the history of collective suffering. Whereas Renan argued that “in matters of national identity, mourning has more validity than triumph, since it imposes duties which demand a common effort” (Renan 58), to Joyce’s hero national suffering presents itself as a national failure which calls for explanation, not empathy, much less service or self-sacrifice.

When Stephen announces that he will create a national conscience, after declaring that he will not serve, such an announcement can only be taken as yet another form of the hero’s self-assertion in the face of an Ireland he rejects. It is only after he realizes he is incapable of negotiating a tolerable relationship with historic Ireland, that the aspiring artist will reinvent himself as a demiurgic creator of national conscience. With his critique of nationalism so extensive, his distanciation from all tenets of national identity so far-reaching, Stephen’s vacuous promise of “forging” an Irish identity is primarily an expression of disdain toward the extant Ireland. As he is preparing to go into self-imposed exile, it is a final gesture of severance and rejection. In order to be made tolerable, Ireland must be reinvented.¹⁷

Writing about the Victorians, Stefan Collini has argued that the Victorian moralist “does not speak from somewhere located, mysteriously, ‘outside’ society, nor should we assume that criticism requires the critic to be socially marginal, politically adversarial, or morally estranged” (Collini 3). This estrangement, this retreat from the demands of the collective body, this is the condition that both Joyce and Stephen set out to explore. “I cannot enter the social order,” Joyce famously wrote to Nora, “except as a vagabond” (*Letters II* 48). And while it would be unwise to simply conflate the various versions of *non serviam* articulated by the hero and his creator, we should at least acknowledge that *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* enacts the fantasy of radical liberation from the cultural and political demands of ethnolinguistic nationalism. The limitations of that fantasy are, of course, apparent both in the fate of Stephen Dedalus and in Joyce’s own ongoing literary commitment to Ireland. Nonetheless, a radical

renegotiation of the relationship with one's inherited culture, the imposition of physical and moral separation, and the dismantling of the concept of duty, all these gestures do not constitute (*pace* Kenner) "flight into adolescent 'freedom'," but an attempt to subvert the formidable ideological machinery of modern nationalism. It is therefore time to recognize that in rescuing Joyce from cosmopolitan aestheticism, we have been rescuing him from himself. Worse still, in doing so, we have repeatedly surrendered him back to the suffocating force he was trying to escape.

NOTES

¹ For influential Joycean scholars including Seamus Deane, Emer Nolan, Vincent Cheng, Andrew Gibson, and Gregory Castle, the aestheticist and cosmopolitan Joyce emerges as a construction embodying the mid-century new critical ideals, if not something more sinister. As Cheng argues in a particularly forceful formulation of this view:

one effect, however, of this canonization—of the elevation of an Irish-Catholic colonial writer like Joyce into the pantheon of the Modernist greats—is hardly innocent but rather insidious: for it shifts attention away from the manifestly political content and ideological discourse of Joyce's works onto his unarguably potent role and influence in stylistic revolution (...) The net effect is to neutralize the ideological potency of Joyce's texts, to defang the bite of Joyce's politics. Perhaps only in this way could an Irishman whose works bristle with bitter resentment against the imperiums of State, Church, and Academy be somehow appropriated and rendered acceptable, even revered, as a High Modernist icon of the Great English Literary Canon. (Cheng 2)

For a useful account of the movement from an apolitical towards a political view of Joyce, see Rabaté, *James Joyce and the Politics of Egoism* 38–39.

² In Gibson's book *The Strong Spirit*, which incorporates a revised version of this essay, the final sentence is omitted. However, the book's introduction contains a similarly determined call for a distinctly Irish contextualization of Joyce's work (2–3).

³ As Edward Said noted, the exile "exists in a median state, neither completely at one with the new setting, nor fully disencumbered of the old, beset with half-involvements and half-detachments, nostalgic and sentimental on one level, an adept mimic or secret outcast at another"(Said 49).

⁴ For instance, Emer Nolan argues that "Art, for Joyce, should be autonomous, above the realm of propaganda and politics: he rejected outright the cultural nationalism of Yeats and the Irish Literary Revival. It is, however, seriously misleading to consider Joyce's relationship to Irish politics solely in these terms" (23).

⁵ The classic version of this argument is Hobsbawm's (*Nations and Nationalism* 103ff). I am aware that Hobsbawm's and Benedict Anderson's theories, while immensely influential, are often vigorously challenged by scholars, such as Anthony Smith, who claim that both nations and nationalism are much less "invented" or "imagined," and much older than these dominant views would suggest. However, for the purposes of my argument, the dispute between "modernists" and "primordialists" has only limited significance, as the question I am addressing is not whether some of the crucial elements of national identity are essentially premodern. What I take from Hobsbawm is the claim, rarely disputed, that the sense of ethnic and linguistic identity became an immensely powerful political force, and a basis of a widespread populist ideology whose meteoric rise in the late nineteenth century corresponded to the emergence of mass literacy and mass male enfranchisement. For Smith's critique of "modernist" approaches to nationalism and Hobsbawm in particular, see Smith 125ff.

⁶ See Zimmer, in particular Chapter 3 “Boundaries of National Belonging: Nationalism and the Minorities Question,” and *Nations and Nationalism*, 106-107.

⁷ Gibson rightly notes this tendency when he writes that “Irish nationalists were acutely aware of the place of their political cause within this larger movement [of emerging nations against their powerful oppressors]” (*The Strong Spirit* 19). However, he doesn’t seem to believe that this fact—that the Irish context also has a wider context of its own—should have any bearing on his own “microhistorical” method.

⁸ Christine van Boheemen-Saaf offers essentially the opposite conclusion, arguing that “in the case of an Irish writer, growing up with English as his first language, the aspiring artist is forced to allude allegorically, and in the *sermo patris* of the oppressor’s language, to what can never be voiced with immediacy: the loss of a natural relationship to language, the lack of interiority of discourse and coherent selfhood” (2). Joyce’s relationship to English is therefore irreparably marked by trauma: “criticism tends to ignore the pain inscribed in his writing—the pain of linguistic dispossession, of the radical severance at the point of origin which belonged to growing up Irish around 1882” (33). However, this claim is not based on an engagement with the concrete realities of Irish history and Joyce’s biography, but on an *a priori*, even essentialist distinction between the language of the forefathers as the only natural and “immediate” medium whose loss constitutes a trauma, and the language of the oppressor with which the oppressed can never establish a “natural” relationship. Although Boheemen-Saaf’s interpretation is primarily informed by the legacy of poststructuralism, her reading actually reproduces the binary opposition between “natural” and acquired language which remains central to the discourse of ethno-linguistic nationalism and which Joyce worked to deconstruct in *A Portrait*.

⁹ As Jean Michel Rabaté points out, Borges makes this argument by explicitly invoking the Irish example. Argentinians, like the Irish and the Jews, can hope to profit from their hybrid status as both insiders and outsiders in relation to the European literary tradition: they are in a position to borrow irreverently and productively from the entire Western culture (“Borges’s Canny Laughter” 174).

¹⁰ The Kantian sources of Stephen’s theory have been acknowledged for a long time, and are sometimes used to question the coherence of his theory, particularly by critics who were otherwise inclined to argue that Joyce maintained an ironic stance towards Stephen. Ever since Hugh Kenner characterized Joyce’s attitude to Stephen as nothing short of “mockery,” there is a persistent tradition of ironic readings of *A Portrait*, usually based on various complaints about the quality of the hero’s artistic achievements and the coherence of his aesthetic views (see Kenner, “The *Portrait* in Perspective”). Although I am interested in Stephen’s aesthetics primarily in the context of his rejection of nationalism, this is an appropriate moment to acknowledge that I remain unpersuaded by ironic readings of *A Portrait*. For a particularly helpful rebuttal of this critical attitude, see Yee 68ff.

¹¹ On the transformation of beauty into a relational predicate in eighteenth-century British aesthetics, see Stolnitz. For Kant’s description of the judgment of taste as an instance of subjective universality, see Kant 77.

¹² By emphasizing the redemptive political aspects of aesthetic disinterestedness, my analysis participates in a larger movement away from what Fredric Jameson calls “Bourdieu’s blanket condemnation of the aesthetic as a mere class signal and as conspicuous consumption” (132). Contrary to the tradition of the “sociology of aesthetics,” a field largely informed by Bourdieu’s work, I follow the lead of scholars such as Amanda Anderson and Leela Gandhi who recognize the more complex ideological implications of both aesthetic detachment and cosmopolitanism. By reasserting the significance of Joyce’s aestheticism I am not robbing *A Portrait* of its political potential, but emphasizing what Amanda Anderson calls “the critical, dialogical, and even emancipatory potential of cultivated detachment” (A. Anderson 177). For a defense of the cosmopolitan aspects of Joyce’s politics as something more than “a view from nowhere, which registers only gray neutrality or abstract universality” see Valente 63. The most extensive recent argument emphasizing the importance of modernist cosmopolitanism and its political implications can be found in Walkowitz. Although Walkowitz is focusing on Joyce’s uses of triviality rather than on Stephen’s explicit aesthetic theory, my argument here complements her reading of *A Portrait* in arguing for the liberating political potential of cosmopolitanism (Walkowitz 65–70).

¹³ Curiously, Stephen promises the creation of national “conscience” rather than “consciousness.” While the latter term unambiguously points to a sense of national identity, the former can just as easily point to a very literal understanding of collective moral concern. For instance, a 1908 article in *The Irish Times* speaks of the “awakening

of national conscience” with respect to the dangers of tuberculosis (Editorial). “National conscience” quite often points to collective sense of moral outrage or increased awareness of some pressing concern. This suggests, I believe, that Stephen sees Ireland not just as an underdeveloped nation, but as an ethically flawed community.

¹⁴ A decade earlier, Douglas Hyde wrote: “we must strive to cultivate everything that is most racial, most smacking of the soil, most Gaelic, most Irish, because in spite of the little admixture of Saxon blood in the north-east corner, this island is and will ever remain Celtic at the core, far more Celtic than most people imagine, because, as I have shown you, the names of our people are no criterion of their race” (159).

¹⁵ Hyde had a very different vision of the same process: “We will become, what, I fear, we are largely at present, a nation of imitators, the Japanese of Western Europe, lost to the power of native initiative and alive only to second-hand assimilation” (160).

¹⁶ Gibson writes that “as a whole, ‘Ireland, Island of Saints and Sages’ produces a richly various perspective on Irish history and culture. In its desire to do justice to Ireland when others were disinclined to, it deploys a range of implicitly contradictory positions” (*The Strong Spirit* 119). And while I appreciate this insistence on Joyce’s nuanced and complex attitude towards Ireland—as Gibson correctly puts it, “defence of Ireland can turn into critique of Ireland, and vice-versa” (*The Strong Spirit* 118)—I cannot escape the impression that Gibson’s version of “Ireland, Island of Saints and Sages” is quite a bit more nuanced than Joyce’s. John McCourt’s comments on an article Joyce produced during his Trieste period do more justice to the position espoused in “Ireland, Island of Saints and Sages”: “no matter how great Joyce’s fascination with the Irish situation the piece shows that he neither had faith in, nor wished to serve, the Irish cause. So what is offered is an entry into the inconclusive nightmare of Irish history. Joyce the journalist/artist consciously sticks his pen into the spokes of history, into the standard temporal trajectory of most nationalist historical narratives” (McCourt 38).

¹⁷ Pericles Lewis has attempted to resolve the tension between nationalism and cosmopolitanism in *A Portrait* by arguing that Stephen really offers an alternative to more conventional versions of nationalism: “in seeking to forge in the smithy of his soul the uncreated conscience of his race, Stephen draws upon the organic nationalist conception of the intimate relationship between the individual and his ethnic group which precedes all cultural ties and fundamentally conditions the individual’s experience” (Lewis 41). Stephen therefore sees himself as a Christ-like martyr (50) who sacrifices his soul for Ireland (34). By subscribing to the idea of mystical unity with his race he can paradoxically reconcile the individualist desire for self-realization with the imperative of serving his race, because they are one and the same thing: “through his writing, then, Stephen will offer the sacrifice of his own soul to Ireland. Just as this act of martyrdom will save the Irish, however, it will also allow Stephen to achieve unfettered freedom because, in embracing his moral unity with the Irish race, he will reconcile his ethical self with his socially constructed identity” (33).

My main objection to this in many ways masterful reading is that it asks us to assume that Stephen is critiquing the “merely superficial nationalism” (41) of the Gaelic League from a position of a “deeper” mystical nationalism that promises a much more immediate unity between the individual and his “race” (41–42). There are at least two reasons why this is difficult to accept. The first is that Stephen offers a typical liberal-cosmopolitan critique of the nationalist commitment to the purity of national myth and national language. It is hard to imagine how Stephen can utterly reject “the broken lights of Irish myth” (*A Portrait* 195) while he simultaneously “places Irish history in the context of a mythical religious pattern that culminates in his own person” (Lewis 32). The second problem is that, in spite of the attention it affords to the debates about national identity and to Stephen’s intellectual preoccupations, the novel has little to tell us about the hero’s mystical nationalism, except for the vague formulation towards the end of Stephen’s diary. In my view, what naturally follows from Stephen’s arguments about myth, art, language, and religion is a quasi-nationalist position (expressed by Borges, Konrád, and Joyce himself) which defers nationalist objections to individualism by declaring all self-expression to be the expression of a national spirit.

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