
A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man: James Joyce, the Myth of Icarus, and the Influence of Christopher Marlowe

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Abstract: Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1914) concludes at the point when Stephen Dedalus – a character substantially modelled on Joyce himself – is about to leave the Ireland of his childhood and young-adult years. Presented as a means of maintaining independence and distance as a writer, this move marks the culmination of a process of self-discovery. However, beyond this basic narrative dimension, *A Portrait* is hardly a simplistic novel. In this respect, the novel's oft-discussed patterns of imagery, and its complex, sometimes ambiguous, use of irony, for instance, continue to invite new interpretations. The present article, in fact, aims to provide insight into the function of Christopher Marlowe as a role-model and precursor – to-date unrecognized in Joyce criticism – of the idealized subversive artist, a writer whose work and cultural image contributed to the Stephen Dedalus-James Joyce persona as constructed in *A Portrait*.

Key words: James Joyce, Christopher Marlowe, Irishness, individualism, radicalism / subversion, artistic independence, exile, Faust(us), Daedalus and Icarus.

Completed in 1914, James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* presents a perspective of the development of Stephen Dedalus – a character strongly based on James Joyce himself – from childhood until the time when he decides to leave Ireland as a way to maintain independence and distance as a writer. As an account of the development of a young man's mind, *A Portrait* is a bildungsroman, a form that conventionally concludes at a momentous point in the hero's life, which signals the culmination of a process of self-discovery, or the moment when a life-defining decision is made. This basic structure makes *A Portrait*, though hardly a simplistic novel, one of Joyce's most accessible works, one that is marked by the immediacy of its concerns. Just as Dante found a guide in Virgil,

we can, in turn, hold onto the hem of Joyce's coat, as the artist leads us through the circles of secular heaven and hell.

One of the aims of the present article is to illuminate the function of Christopher Marlowe as a role-model and precursor – to-date unrecognized in Joyce criticism – of the idealized subversive artist, a writer whose work and cultural image contributed to the Stephen Dedalus-James Joyce persona as constructed in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and its vision of the artist as an essentially independent social agent.

In the closing pages of *A Portrait*, the hero, Stephen Dedalus, prepares to leave Ireland, disillusioned with the cultural and political life of his country. When Stephen admits to Cranly, one of his friends, that he has lost faith in the Catholic religion, Cranly wants to confirm that Stephen is not, in fact, thinking of becoming a Protestant; Stephen replies: "I said I had lost the faith ... but not that I lost self-respect" (205). This exchange, very late in the

novel, leads the reader back full-circle to the first chapter. In Ireland's long history as a British colony, the Catholic religion was never just a question of religious faith, but also a matter of national identity. Yet the issue is not as simple as to say that Irish identity and Catholicism are necessarily complementary, much less interchangeable. The third section of the first chapter of *A Portrait*, in fact, illustrates precisely this contradiction in the Irish sense of national identity. The setting is a Christmas dinner, one of Stephen's key childhood memories, a heated argument involving Stephen's father and his friend, Mr. Casey, both of whom disagree with another guest, Dante Riordan.

These characters are, of course, divided by their responses to the political downfall of Charles Stewart Parnell in 1890-91, which followed revelations of his affair with Katherine "Kitty" O'Shea. As James Fairhall observes, the Catholic Church appears to have acted with some reluctance – probably expecting Parnell to resign, or to be replaced by his own party; nevertheless, when the bishops finally became involved in the scandal, they condemned Parnell for his personal life (1995: 134-7).

In *A Portrait*, the division between those who respected the primacy of the Church in public affairs and their opponents is illustrated by the conflict between Dante Riordan and Mr. Casey. While Dante Riordan uses the absolute terms of a religious fundamentalist when she says: "God and morality and religion comes first ... God and religion before everything" (32), Mr. Casey disagrees with corresponding fervor; if he has to choose between religion and his country's political independence, then: "No God for Ireland. ... We have had too much God in Ireland. Away with God" (32). Joyce's hero is strongly influenced by this family argument, which he witnesses as a child.

Consequently, years later, when Stephen is asked by other university students to join an Irish nationalist group, he refuses. He does not want to sacrifice his life for a nation that deserted the man whom he has been brought up to consider a heroic leader – someone more worthy than the people he wanted to lead. That story, therefore, allows Stephen to justify his own cynicism and the self-sufficient, individualistic stance which he adopts when he tells his friend Cranly:

My ancestors threw off their language and took another ... they allowed a handful of foreigners to subject them. ... No honourable and sincere man ... has given up 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 (170).

As can be seen, when Stephen – the "artist as a young man" of the title – mentions that the heroes of the past gave up, not just their "life", but also their "youth", he is associating himself with those great individuals. We can also see a linguistic shift in Stephen's statement. At first, he identifies himself with Ireland, as shown when he says "My ancestors"; then, he proceeds to refer to the Irish of the past as "they", which could be excused because they are separated from him in time. But, lastly, he shifts to the second person (you). By these means, he creates a linguistic distance – I-and-you; I-and-they – between himself and the pro-independence organization to which Cranly belongs, a movement which Stephen, more sweepingly, equates with Ireland as a whole. That is why he tells Cranly, "you sold [Parnell and other leaders] to the enemy" (170). The passage, in a way, shows Stephen at his least Irish; though, as we shall see, by embracing exile, he will assume, once again, a defining sense of Irish identity.

This, in fact, is the paradox of the novel: neither Stephen Dedalus nor James Joyce himself could really get away from Ireland. Yet, although he left Ireland, Joyce set his works in the Dublin from which he had fled. His accounts, therefore, re-construct, or reshape, a time and place in the past. Following exile, comes a mix of resentment and nostalgia – the need to re-construct the past, and the place left behind: "The end of homesickness, its cessation and its outcome, is the production of an image of leaving home that becomes itself the future habitation of the artist's image, for which he has searched in the past and which he has searched the past for" (Riquelme 1983: 71).

Stephen's mixed attitudes towards his country are illustrated in one of his final, key conversations with Cranly, shortly before his departure. At that time, Stephen expresses his sense of Irish identity, an awareness of where he comes from, even if it is a place that he must leave: "This race and this country and

this life produced me, he said. I shall express myself as I am” (170). In yet another conversation, Stephen elaborates on his sense of artistic vocation, which is inseparably linked to his alienated relationship with Ireland:

Look here, Cranly ... I will tell you what I will do and what I will not do. I will not serve that in which I no longer believe whether it call itself my home, my fatherland or my church: and I will try to express myself in some mode of life or art as freely as I can and as wholly as I can, using for my defence the only arms I allow myself to use – silence, exile, and cunning (208).

It was, arguably, also Joyce’s position to refuse to support the status quo, to support the majority by sacrificing his own personal beliefs; this is how he possibly chose to do his country the most sincere service.

A question a reader could ask is what it actually means to Stephen Dedalus – or what it meant to Joyce, for that matter – to be an artist. In other words: how is a person defined by that identity, that choice in life? This is where Joyce’s artistic forebears – and those of his protagonist, Stephen Dedalus – must include Christopher Marlowe, as a model of iconoclastic, artistic individualism.

In the novel, to be an artist is presented as a vocation, a concept that needs to be defined. The term vocation, or calling, can be used to refer to a person’s regular occupation. But, it means more than just a job; to speak of someone’s vocation implies that this is something for which the person has a “natural tendency”, or “fitness”, and often refers specifically to “divine influence or guidance towards a definite (esp. religious) career” (OED). The latter meaning is particularly relevant to *A Portrait*, because Stephen is, in fact, offered the opportunity to join the priesthood, singled out by the headmaster on account of his hard work, and what looks, at that time, like religious devotion. But, for Stephen, the moment of truth has arrived; he, therefore, makes the important decision to reject the offer. A turning point in his life, it leads, in turn, to the life-changing decision the hero makes, soon after, to pursue a life-in-writing. In addition, this decision is the basis for the novel’s implicit association of Stephen Dedalus and the iconoclastic – and idealized – figure of Marlowe.

The offer to enter the priesthood is presented in an interesting way for, in a subtle

parody of the traditional religious narrative of a spiritual journey towards salvation, the priest’s words conjure up the devil’s temptations that Stephen must avoid. There is something singularly of this world – even, implicitly, corrupt or materialistic – about the power that Stephen is offered as a blatant appeal to his pride. The following passage illustrates this quite clearly:

To receive that call, Stephen, said the priest, is the greatest honour that Almighty God can bestow upon a man. No king or emperor on this earth has the power of the priest of God. No angel or archangel in heaven, no saint, not even the Blessed Virgin herself has the power of a priest of God; the power of the keys, the power to bind and to loose from sin, the power of exorcism, the power to cast out from the creatures of God the evil spirits that have power over them, the power, the authority, to make the great God of Heaven to come down upon the altar and take the form of bread and wine. What an awful power, Stephen (133).

What awful rhetoric, Father. Aside from the repeated use of the word “power” and the idea of the priest’s authority and power above the world’s potentates, it is worth noting that God himself – called down by the priest into the form of bread and wine – features in this vision as something of a white rabbit to be pulled out of Dedalus the Magician’s top hat. Indeed, there is much of Marlowe’s *Doctor Faustus* (c. 1591) in the passage – echoes of the Elizabethan figure that Harry Levin famously dubbed “the Overreacher” (1952), with special reference to Marlowe’s allusions to the myth of Icarus in that play, gloating with pride and ambition over the power to which he aspires as he contemplates the prospect of mastering the forbidden arts:

Oh, what a world of profit and delight,
Of power, of honour, of omnipotence,
Is promised to the studious artisan!
All things that move between the quiet poles
Shall be at my command. Emperors and kings
Are but obeyed in their several provinces.
Nor can they raise the wind or rend the clouds.
But his dominion that exceeds in this
Stretcheth as far as doth the mind of man:
A sound magician is a demi-god (1.1.52-61).

In terms of the overwrought rhetorical style, we can also find a similarity between the bombastic, or *fustian*, Elizabethan stage-language that Marlowe largely established – and the passage from *A Portrait* discussed

above. Also tellingly, years later, Joyce's punning allusion in *Finnegans Wake* (1939) to the figure of Faust(us) was, implicitly but clearly, to Marlowe's – rather than Goethe's – version of the medieval myth, and it specifically pointed to that rhetorical, and histrionic characteristic: “faustian fustian” (II. 2.292). In addition, Faustus's association with the term fustian is, in fact, underlined in Marlowe's play, where the horse courser, whom the hero hoodwinks, repeatedly refers to him as “Doctor Fustian” or “Master Fustian” (*Doctor Faustus*, 4.5. ll.12, 47, 75).

There is another point of convergence between Marlowe's Faustus and Joyce's Stephen Dedalus – and between their creators, so often associated with the individualism and iconoclasm of their works. Indeed, some recent Joyce scholarship has aimed to recuperate the iconoclastic character of Joyce's work, as illustrated in Victor J. Cheng's criticism of “insidious” attempts “to defang the bite of Joyce's politics”, whereby “the writer who was condemned, marginalized, and censored as obscene, vulgar, and *déclassé* during most of his lifetime has been subsequently canonized by an Academy that has chosen to construct a sanitized ‘Joyce’ whose contributions are now to be measured only by the standards of canonical High Modernism” (1995: 2-3). In outlining the social and cultural implications of modernist literature for a reactionary establishment, another scholar – detailing evidence of the F.B.I.'s extensive campaign to suppress modernism in the United States – observes:

A founder of literary modernism, Joyce likely epitomized for J. Edgar Hoover everything about the modernist literary movement (still in transition and flux) that Hoover deemed loathsome, obscene, and corrupt: its experimentation with forms, styles, and voices; its efforts to articulate crises of authority an anxiety; its seemingly impenetrable intellectualism; its exploration of sexuality, eroticism, and the libidinal currents that give shape to the subjects and styles of the movement” (Culleton 2004: 33).

As for the perennial critical interest in Marlowe's association with the blasphemy and iconoclasm of his various heroes, J.B. Steane observed in the 1969 introduction to the edition of Marlowe's works quoted above: “Thirty years ago Christopher Marlowe was a colorful character, certainly, but a relatively

simple one, all black and red: a rebel, an atheist, a fiery soul whose works expressed his own heady exuberance, aspirations and despairs” (9). Linda Bridges, in turn, expands upon the importance of the legend surrounding the author's persona:

Despite the possibility that Marlowe may have been falsely reported to have made those well-known alleged remarks about the existence of God, and about sexuality (i.e.: “All they who love not tobacco and boys are fools”) ... Whether he said this, and, if so, whether because he believed it or merely to shock ... the point, in terms of Marlowe's reputation, is that people believed he did (Bridges 1994: 413).

It is my point, of course, that this is precisely what Marlowe represented for James Joyce. The importance of the Daedalus-Icarus myth in the work of both writers, and Marlowe's influence on Joyce's in the use of this myth, need to be addressed. While Joyce intended Stephen Dedalus to suggest the mythical *Daedalus* – the creative genius, whose son Icarus fell to his death after flying too close to the sun on waxen wings – Marlowe's life-long fascination with this myth is, likewise, well-documented, and is often argued to have played a role “in the poet's life as well” (Wessman 2001: 402). The definitive Marlovian allusion to Icarus was perhaps the one in the Chorus to his mythic tragedy of renaissance humanism, *Doctor Faustus*, in which the hero's superhuman ambitions, not sated with his already extravagant worldly success as an honored intellectual, lead to his forging a pact with the devil:

Till swollen with cunning of a self-conceit,
His waxen wings did mount above his reach,
And melting, heavens conspired his overthrow (lines 20-22).

To return to Joyce's novel, in the aftermath of his decision to turn down the offer to enter the priesthood, Stephen walks by himself, and he realizes that he is “destined to learn his own wisdom apart from others or to learn the wisdom of others himself among the snares of the world” (136). Stephen's subsequent vision of his future as an artist, envisaged in the form of a Daedalus/Icarus-figure – “a hawklike man flying above the waves” (142) – implies the capacity of the imagination to soar above the limits of everyday reality. It presents Stephen with all the spiritual guidance or yearning – the sense of vocation – that he simply lacked for

religion. As the narrator adds: “Stephen’s heart trembled in an ecstasy of fear and his soul was in flight” (142). Stephen is then rewarded with another image: a girl “in the likeness of a strange and beautiful seabird”, bathing, bare-legged, in the sea; he interprets her as a secular artistic vision: “the angel of mortal youth and beauty” (145). The reader, of course, may consider the possibility of ironic distance between the narrator and his youthful former self – the not-quite-mature, “artist as a young man”. In these terms, Stephen’s vision of that “angel of mortal youth and beauty” could be seen as a kind of dangerous illusion, comparable to Faustus’s temptation by a demonic Helen of Troy:

Sweet Helen, make me immortal with a kiss.
Her lips suck forth my soul: see where it flies.
Come, Helen, come, give me my soul again.
Here will I dwell, for heaven is in those lips,
And all is dross that is not Helena (5.2.99-103).

Yet this is arguably the point: while Marlowe’s classic play illustrated the horrific end of the deluded hero, it also devoted some of the best lines to the weaving of a rhetorical spell about those very images of temptation. We may compare Joyce’s treatment of Stephen Dedalus to Marlowe’s treatment of such overreachers as Faustus – or Tamburlaine – whom playgoers were clearly intended to find fascinating, if not attractive, and in whom the author invested tremendous emotional sympathy, despite – or because of – their excesses. In this respect, Barbara Howard Traister’s assertion that “Marlowe weighted the dice in favor of hell’s appeal over heaven’s” (1986: 86) could apply equally well to the author-hero’s position in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Joyce, in other words, may have been conscious of a certain foolish earnestness in his younger self – and he presented Stephen Daedalus with some affectionate irony, accordingly – but, still attracted to that younger self, he refused to deny who he was, or had been. In discussing this issue, another critic has stressed that “although the behaviour of a young man, who believes in himself and his purpose, may seem foolish to older, more skeptical men, the energy generated by that foolishness is the means by which some young men may pass beyond their immaturity” (Peake 1977: 84).

Artistic and religious independence are linked in the novel in various ways, and, again,

reveal pronounced continuities between Joyce’s *A Portrait* and the literary-biographical figures of Marlowe and his oeuvre. Thus, Stephen tells Cranly of an argument with his mother, caused by his refusal to take Easter Communion. When Cranly asks Stephen why he refuses to do his “Easter duty”, Stephen’s reply is final, irrevocable: “I will not serve” (201). Cranly observes that Stephen’s “remark was made before” – an allusion to Lucifer’s fall from heaven for proudly refusing to serve God, and a reply which takes the reader back to Stephen’s religious awakening of yesteryear, when the adolescent fornicator was *moo-cowed* back into the fold by a fire-and-brimstone sermon that included a central reference to Lucifer’s “sin of pride, the sinful thought conceived in an instant: *non serviam: I will not serve*” (99). Resolute, however – again, ironically, like Faustus, who says “I am resolved, Faustus shall not repent” (2.1.32) – Stephen insists more fiercely, yet: “It is made behind now” (201). There is certainly an implicit sense, here, that an older, worldly-wise Joyce looks back upon a younger, more self-righteous self with a measure of ironic amusement; but also with a measure of affirmation. Stephen – and, by implication, Joyce – would take his own chances after death.

In Stephen’s fundamental refusal to serve, we can also find an echo of the argument between Dante and Mr. Casey. As seen above, Dante says that religion comes first, while Mr. Casey says that one’s nation comes first. However, Stephen’s conscience tells him that he is, first and foremost, an artist; and, for Stephen, to be an artist, or an intellectual, means being independent, not to give up his own beliefs. In these terms, it has been suggested that Stephen will have to invent “his own imaginative community of ‘subversive writers’”, of which Byron, whom the child Stephen “defends against a boy who champions Captain Marryat”, is a prototype (Fairhall 1995: 121); with regard to Byron’s reputation as the last of a line of “wicked lords”, and his association with such figures as his Childe Harold and his Don Juan – not to mention his tragic Gnostic heroes, Manfred and Cain – it is enough to note that, in the words of one scholar, Byron’s successful appeal to a popular readership, through his self-construction as “an isolate ... received its initial impulse from the resentment of an

aristocratic poet whose historical circumstances denied him an elite audience” (Martin 1982: 3). I would, of course, add Marlowe’s name to that community of subversive writers. And, although neither Marlowe – the son of a shoemaker – nor Stephen Dedalus or James Joyce – the offspring of declining middle-class families – could hardly be defined as aristocratic, there was, perhaps, something elitist about their proudly self-sufficient embrace of writing, and their mastery of the classics, combined with their refusal merely to conform to the dominant cultural forces of their respective times.

Stephen, loyal to such a literary nation of artistic individualists, attacks the repressive morality and small-mindedness of the Ireland he wants to escape: “When the soul of a man is born in this country there are nets flung at it to hold it back from flight. You talk to me of nationality, language, religion. I shall try to fly by those nets” (171). Cranly tries to convince him of the need to serve one’s nation: “a man’s country comes first. Ireland first, Stevie. You can be a poet or a mystic after” (171). But Stephen rejects what he may perceive as an uncritical patriotism, a communal movement demanding conformity. For Stephen Dedalus is, above all, an individualist. Nor does this mean that he is a simple, self-indulgent egotist, for he is prepared to make his own sacrifices, which he will have to make when he refuses to accept prevailing opinions, or to conform to the ways of the majority. Although it has been conventional in Joyce criticism to see the author’s individualism – or of his characters – as a sign of Joyce’s apolitical nature, other critics suggest that Stephen’s choice, in fact, represents a third way “beyond the English/Irish binary opposition” (Cheng 1995: 59). Emer Nolan, in turn, argues that “the aestheticist self-creation pursued by Dedalus ... ironically re-enacts the self-making and self-discovery of the nationalist cultural project” (1995: 38).

In dealing with Joyce, it is very important to consider the question of exile; his substantially autobiographical novel, set in the Dublin of his years of growing up, was completed ten years later in Northern Italy; most of Joyce’s artistic life, indeed, was spent between Switzerland, Italy and France. I would contend that Joyce’s experience could be seen as particularly Irish; for the Irish are one of the

world’s great expatriate people. This widespread dispersal – now frequently referred to as the Irish Diaspora – is, of course, a longstanding and large-scale historical reality. Therefore, it would not be misguided to suggest that Joyce’s act of leaving his country completed his initiation into Irish cultural identity. Stephen Dedalus, in fact, claims nothing less than this when he notes in his diary, briefly before leaving Ireland, that he had told Davin that “the shortest way to Tara [ancient home of Irish royalty] was via Holyhead [a major Welsh port-of-call for Irish migrants]” (210). Joyce, like his hero, could therefore be seen as becoming fully Irish through the act of leaving his homeland – except for two important differences. Joyce’s motivation was not that of the majority, who largely left their homeland to escape economic hardship. Arguably, Joyce’s cultural and political motivations were also reflected in his destination – the Continent – which set him apart from the bulk of Irish migrants headed to North America – or Australia, for that matter. In contrast to them, Joyce retreated further into the Old World, in line, perhaps, with the paradoxically aristocratic sensibility suggested above – or in search of a cultural tradition distinct from that of the British. Thus, he chose for his destination Europe, with its promise of culture and tradition, rather than the New World of North America, and other places, from which, economic opportunity notwithstanding, artists and intellectuals commonly made a reverse journey to the European capitals until well into the twentieth century.

At this point, as a kind of postscript, I would like to underline some resonances involving *A Portrait* and its consideration of the roles of nationalism, sexual conduct, the place of religion in public life, and so forth, which may make this novel all the more fresh today. James Joyce left Ireland 100 years ago; and he completed *A Portrait* some ninety years ago; but his critical attitudes towards conservative culture, embodied in his art and in his life, continues to be relevant – even topical – today, in the so-called Age of Globalization. We need only consider that, as recently as 1998, former United States President Bill Clinton was severely damaged politically by a scandal involving his sex-life, rather than his

economic, social, or military policies.¹ Independent Counselor Kenneth Starr's digression, during the Whitewater Inquiry, into the particulars of the President's peccadilloes, served to expose the importance still attached in American public life to the outward forms of sexual conformity; it also shed light on the continuing potential for witch-hunts, and on the shadow of theocratic aspirations by the Christian Right. The fact that President Clinton's situation presents significant parallels with the Parnell scandal, which took place in the supposedly provincial nation of Ireland 100 years before, at the height of the Victorian period, is a telling detail.

It is a sign of Joyce's affinity with figures and periods of self-assertive iconoclasm that he should have alluded not only to such representatives of social and intellectual rebellion as the Romantic Byron, but also that his well-known allusions to the myth of Daedalus and Icarus should have been refracted, as shown above, through the figure of the Marlovian overreacher. This lies at the heart of Joyce's masterful homage to the legacy of his literary predecessors – innovators and individualists – in the act of negotiating his way into their ranks.

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¹ "Whitewater" 2004. *The Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia*. 6th Edn. New York: Columbia UP. Online: 12 July, 2005. <<http://www.infoplease.com/ce6/history/A0852144.html>>.