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The Artist and His Body

James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*¹ follows the childhood and adolescence of its hero, the Irish Stephen Dedalus, leading finally to his transition into adulthood. Stephen's development as a person who will one day be an artist is characterized by his self-absorption and by his preoccupation with aesthetics. Both of these are tied in Stephen's case to questions of the body and sensory experiences. As Stephen progresses into the artist that he will become, he becomes more aware of the importance of his body. His bodily senses—sight, touch, smell, taste, and hearing—become crucial to his development as an artist, as certain sensory stimuli lead him to the thoughts and epiphanies that compose his art and define him as an aesthete. Moreover, his increased awareness of sensory stimuli parallels his decreased interest in the lofty questions and ideals of religion. This can be seen as a progression, as Stephen at first is given to indulging his bodily senses and then has a religious awakening that leads him to abstain from sensory experiences. Stephen finally turns again to his bodily senses when he rejects the possibility of priesthood and realizes that it is art and not religion that moves him.

As a college student, Stephen proposes this view of art: "To speak of these things and to try to understand their nature and, having understood it, to try slowly and humbly and constantly to express, to press out again, from the gross earth or what it brings forth, from sound and shape and colour which are the prison gates of our soul, an image of beauty we have come to understand—that is art" (173). Stephen here clearly expresses the idea that it is sensory experiences that help to shape and define beauty, and thus art. Even though he calls the sensory experiences that he has set forth "prison gates," he affirms their importance to art. This is the

¹ Joyce, James. *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. 1916. Ed. Jeri Johnson. New York: Oxford UP, 2008. Print.

culminating moment in Stephen's understanding of the importance of the body as an artist.

However, his arrival at this conclusion is lengthy, developed throughout his youth.

Stephen's understanding of the body develops from a young age, but at first he experiences a great deal of confusion due to the fact that he intuitively feels a divide between the body and religion. On the day that he and his fellow schoolboys put on a play, "he was aware of some desecration of the priest's office or of the vestry itself, whose silence was now routed by loud talk and joking and its air pungent with the smells of gasjets and grease" (71). The sounds and smells that he experiences in a religious space are profane to him, and he is subsequently disillusioned with this space that is so easily fouled and changed in his mind through his senses. He gives himself over to his senses at this point, subtly at first and then wholly and explicitly. When he is on the train with his father on the way to Cork, he is frightened and cannot sleep due to the stillness and silence of the train. He attempts to pray at first but his prayer "began with a shiver...and ended in a trail of foolish words which he made to fit the insistent rhythm of the train....This furious music allayed his dread and, leaning against the windowledge, he let his eyelids close again" (73). Here Stephen tries to turn to religion to help him feel at ease, but it is instead the jumbled song that he creates from "foolish words" and the natural rhythm of the train that puts his fears to rest. It is not prayer, but rather the art that he creates from what he hears, that gives him peace.

He finally fully gives in to sensory experience when he has his first sexual encounter with a prostitute. When he encounters her, he, "seeing her face lifted to him in serious calm and feeling the warm calm rise and fall of her breast, all but burst into hysterical weeping" (84). When they finally kiss, he is "conscious of nothing in the world but the dark pressure of her softly parting lips" (85). The sight and touch of the prostitute are a poetic transition into

manhood for Stephen. Though he regrets it later, in this moment he turns away from religion and gives into the sensory experience of sex. He chooses what he desires, gratifying his senses, moving away from the church.

In the very next chapter he comes to feel deeply guilty because of his sensual gratification. Father Arnall's sermon, centered on hell, describes in great detail all of the horrifying sensory experiences that a person condemned to that fate will undergo. It is almost as though Father Arnall knows Stephen's secret sins and is speaking to him directly. Stephen, terrified, repents and experiences a religious awakening, temporary though it may be. Stephen meticulously begins to deny himself the pleasure that his senses bring him. He "did not allow himself to desist from even the least or lowliest devotion, striving also by constant mortification to undo the sinful past rather than to achieve a saintliness fraught with peril. Each of his senses was brought under a rigorous discipline" (126-27). This passage shows that it is not even closeness to God that he seeks, but it is rather the fear of divine retribution that makes him purposely undergo sensual mortification. The narrator goes on to describe how Stephen abases each of his five senses, including willfully subjecting himself to smells that are disagreeable to him and refusing to move away from noises that hurt or anger him.

The discipline that Stephen subjects himself to stagnates his growth as an artist. This can be seen in the following passage: "He seemed to feel a flood slowly advancing towards his naked feet and to be waiting for the first faint timid noiseless wavelet to touch his fevered skin. Then, almost at the instant of that touch, almost at the verge of sinful consent, he found himself standing far away from the flood upon a dry shore, saved by a sudden act of the will" (128). His strenuous efforts to avoid sin are closely linked with his physical senses. Though his efforts are admirable, they keep him from growing as an artist. Even the narrator's voice becomes dulled

and bland in this section. Stephen's thoughts at this point are similarly centered solely on religion and Stephen's poetics leave him as he cuts himself off from his senses.

He comes to realize this when a priest mistakes his abasement for piety and tells him that he should join the priesthood. Though Stephen dabbles at first with the idea, he almost immediately rejects it, knowing that the religious life is not for him. When he then realizes that he will be attending the university, he immediately feels that he made the right decision, and "It seemed to him that he heard notes of fitful music" (139). When he understands that he has found his path and that it is not the path of religion, his artistic sensibilities return to him. And with these sensibilities, the faculties of the senses which he had so long denied himself return as well. He has a deep epiphany when he sees a young girl in the stream. After he watches her reverently for a moment, he realizes that "Her image had passed into his soul for ever and no word had broken the holy silence of his ecstasy. Her eyes had called to him and his soul had leaped at the call" (145). By referring to his ecstasy as holy, Stephen shows that he feels that there is nothing wrong with gratifying his senses with the girl's image. A moment of pure beauty has passed unspoken between them in Stephen's eyes. This is the moment in which he learns to truly appreciate beauty, and in which he comes into his own as an aesthete.

The beginning of the final chapter presents a young man who is comfortable with the person he has become. The following passage shows this: "His morning walk across the city had begun, and he foreknew that as he passed the sloblands of Fairview he would think of the cloistral silverveined prose of Newman, that as he walked along the North Strand Road, glancing idly at the window of the provision shops, he would recall the dark humour of Guido Cavalcanti and smile" (147-48). By freeing his senses, Stephen has freed his mind to once again make its ruminations, to learn with relish, and to transform him into a poet.

Stephen's bodily senses and his capacity for art and aestheticism are closely linked throughout *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Though the sensual gratification that he eventually wholly gives into leads him away from religion, it is clear that it is necessary for his growth as an artist. The fact that he cannot both give in to his senses and follow a strictly religious life, though obvious, is important for our understanding of what Stephen is meant to be. Joyce sets up his artistic hero *in opposition to* religion as a young man who doesn't blindly follow the church, but instead allows himself to truly see (and touch, and smell, and hear, and taste). His understanding and appreciation of his body and of the way it allows him to receive information through the sensual faculties is crucial for his transformation into what he is destined to become: a great aesthete, and an even greater artist.