RUINS

1.2.23

Thinking about art with Stephen Dedalus

James Joyce has a reputation for being either intimidating or irksome due to his final two monstrous novels and their modernism, pretentiousness, and all-around impenetrability. But readers who are put off by all that will find a pleasant surprise in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man,* Joyce's semi-autobiographical account of his own upbringing as told through the perspective of his fictional alter ego, Stephen Dedalus. Although still a work of experimental modernism, the book is very clear and approachable. It shares a protagonist with Joyce's magnum opus, but it does not need to be read as some sort of "prelude to *Ulysses*"; it succeeds on its own merits and is a splendidly satisfying read. It is a very dark, grey, green, damp novel; but I might just be saying that because my copy is a Modern Library edition from 1929 in a dark green binding, and I first read it when I was working at a cemetery, on breaks or waiting for funerals to arrive, outdoors in the summer; it was probably raining when I first read it.

The whole book is written masterfully and beautifully (the "Christmas dinner / Parnell, my dead king" scene is brilliantly executed, and the sermons about hell and damnation sent shivers up my spine when I first read them), but the first four chapters serve merely as a prelude to the fifth and final chapter, wherein James Joyce has his protagonist ponder aesthetic philosophy and craft an artistic credo of his own. Stephen highly values the idea of aesthetic perfection, and he is not humble at all. Instead of reviewing the book, I'm going to pull quotes from this final chapter and comment on them.

> ***His mind, in the vesture of a doubting monk, stood often in shadow under the windows of that age, to hear the grave and mocking music of the lutenists or the frank laughter of waistcoateers until a laugh too low, a phrase, tarnished by time, of chambering and false honour, stung his monkish pride and drove him on from his lurking-place.***

A little context is necessary here. Stephen Dedalus is thinking about the Elizabethan dramatists, and Ben Johnson in particular. Am I the only one to notice that, in writings of that period, there are often some really stupid parts? Like, I thought Shakespeare was supposed to be some kind of genius—why does he mix so much vulgar humor into his plays? This is why Dedalus is annoyed. The "laugh too low" strikes him as a discord in the complete object of his aesthetic contemplation, and he tosses the book aside with exasperated disgust.

Dedalus, you're an anti-social being, wrapped up in yourself. I'm not. I'm a democrat: and I'll work and act for social liberty and equality among all classes and sexes in the United States of the Europe of the future.

Is McCann right to accuse Dedalus of being "anti-social" for brooding over aesthetic philosophy instead of getting down to the work at hand? I believe not—I believe Dedalus is playing the long game, a much longer game than McCann's politics is capable of playing. Any effort on McCann's part to "act for social liberty and equality" will go nowhere if the people around him aren't sympathetic to his position; but Stephen, through his poetry, can cast a vision so powerful that anyone who reads him will be convinced. However, Stephen has to study his craft before he can accomplish that task. Hence the apparent aloofness and anti-social tendency: Stephen has something else on his mind.

But why does art have to be "useful" at all?

It is common among conservative Christian circles to feel as if art is not "useful" enough. Art is often considered one of the frivolities of life; it is thought that artistic pursuits are not sufficiently practical to be of use to people who are supposed to be trying to make the world a better place. I say nonsense to all that, because art needs no justification; by its very existence, it serves the human need for beauty, order, and creativity. We can argue about what kinds of art serve these purposes better (in fact, that is the whole point of the discipline of aesthetics), but we all must agree that art does not need to have a utilitarian purpose to be considered good art—and in so affirming this I also proclaim that art's use is to be useless. Makato Fujimura, in *Culture Care*, says it this way: "Art is ultimately not useful. It serves no practical function. This is why it is indispensable, especially in the modern age. Arts are not a luxury but a path to educate the whole individual toward thriving. They are needed simply because a civilization cannot be a civilization without the arts." This is distinct from Oscar Wilde's famous statement that "all art is quite useless." Wilde meant that if an artwork is found useful, its aesthetic worth is cheapened; thinkers like Fujimura (and Andy Crouch, in *For the Beauty of the Church*) are stating that art is a gift, a gratuitous but ultimately essential part of human society, the icing on the cake.

It wounded him to think that he would never be but a shy guest at the feast of the world's culture.

Not sure whether Stephen is sad because he knows he will never *understand* the world's culture, or because he will never *contribute* to it—is he upset that he is a *shy* guest, or that he is a *guest* and not one of the chefs? Personally, if I were invited at all to the feast of the world's culture, I would be quite happy enough. There is an old hymn which contains the line "content to fill a little space if Thou be glorified"; I wouldn't mind if all the history books ever get around to saying of me is "their father, a minor artist in his own right, encouraged their artistic pursuits." But I don't think I would have felt that way when I was Stephen's age.

"The feast of the world's culture" is such a fine way of putting it. How many kinds of efforts go together to make the feast of the world's culture! There are, of course, the dishes—the great masterworks of art. But then there are the plates and forks upon the table; the table itself; the chairs, the chandelier, the dining hall; the guests, dressed in their best; and on and on. The feast of the

world's culture is multifaceted, an inexhaustible wealth; and it does not consist only of the books and the paintings and all the rest that we usually call art.

> ***One moment now, Mr Dedalus, and you will see. There is an art in lighting a fire. We have the liberal arts and we have the useful arts. This is one of the useful arts.***

An interesting distinction. Can we even call lighting a fire an art? This bleeds into the "everything is art" philosophy of Seth Godin's *The Icarus Deception*. I am perfectly willing to admit Godin's argument; however there are readers of mine whom I know disagree with that position. But we hold something back when we call something a "useful art"— in some sense, we are saying the thing in question is "not really" art. Saying that lighting a fire is "one of the useful arts" is like saying a Gilbert and Sullivan opera is "*light* classical" or the Narnia books are "*children's* literature": all these are ways of saying "these count, but not really." The implication is that there is a category which is considered higher, better, than the works in question. Why do we think that?

> ***You are an artist, are you not, Mr Dedalus? The object of the artist is the creation of the beautiful. What the beautiful is is another question.***

These kinds of "definitions of art" always annoy me somewhat. They just seem like pushing the question out one referential level, like saying "love is the feeling you get when you love someone" or arguing for the panspermia theory of the origin of life. To say "art is the creation of the beautiful" is to say nothing. Also, it opens the door to arguments of "that's not art," when I think a much stronger position is "that's *bad* art."

> ***To speak of these things and to try to understand their nature and, having understood it, to try to slowly and humbly and constantly 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 the beauty we have come to understand—that is art.***

That is much better. "Art is human action" is a much more useful definition. Notice that the key verb here is "to try"—now we can speak of good art and bad art, where before we could only say "Not beautiful? Then it's not art," which is obviously untrue. With this new definition we can now say that fallen leaves or pieces of driftwood (when taken on their own) are not art. We can now also say that a curated driftwood or leaf collection *is* art. Are there any limits, then, to what counts as art? I'll speak to that in a moment.

> ***The artist, like the God of the creation, remains within or behind or beyond or above his handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent, paring his fingernails.***

This is the second-most famous line in *A Portrait*. I'm all for it; if an artwork is attracting attention to the artist, how is it anything more than an advertisement for the artist's brand? It seems a rather vain thing for artists to make art which is more about themselves than anything else. Artists are a notoriously egotistical bunch, and in general they need to develop some humility. I'm surprised that Stephen is the one who says this—especially since the relationship between Joyce himself and his own works continues to be incredibly complex, and he is decidedly *not* in the background or invisible.

> ***Did that explain his friend's listless silence, his harsh comments, the sudden intrusions of rude speech with which he had shattered so often Stephen's ardent wayward confessions? Stephen had forgiven freely for he had found this rudeness also in himself. And he remembered an evening when he had dismounted from a borrowed creaking bicycle to pray to God in a wood near Malahide. He had lifted up his arms and spoken in ecstasy to the sombre nave of the trees, knowing that he stood on holy ground and in a holy hour. And when two constabulary men had come into sight round a bend in the gloomy road he had broken off his prayer to whistle loudly an air from the last pantomime.***

This rudeness which Stephen references—is it not the rudeness of deliberately preventing the aesthetic moment from being what it is? I see this rudeness all the time; it is the carnival spirit of Dostoevsky in a debased and destructive form—a fart at a funeral. Men, especially, seem to fall into it often. There is something frightening, for the average male, in those moments of aesthetic bliss or "ardent wayward confessions," something which men feel they must exert power against and therefore must sabotage with joking comments or rude speech. Stephen notices this tendency in himself, which makes it doubly saddening; it is one thing for a jokester like Cranly to try and take down the aesthetic moment and another thing altogether when Stephen the aesthete does it even to his own self. But also: there are aesthetic experiences which cannot and must not be shared, which must be kept private, secret. Just a moment later, Stephen "walked away slowly towards the deeper shadows of the colonnade, beating the stone softly with his stick to hide his revery from the students whom he had left." It is better to not reveal one's aesthetic experiences to those who would not understand or who would be hostile to them.

> ***Blake wrote: "I wonder if William Bond will die, for assuredly he is very ill." Alas, poor William! I was once at a diorama in Rotunda. At the end were pictures of big nobs. Among them William Ewart Gladstone, just then dead. Orchestra played "O, Willie, we have missed you." A race of clodhoppers!***

Stephen's diary makes up the last ten pages or so of the novel. Here, he expresses (murkily) a similar thought to his annoyance at Ben Johnson from earlier. This time, he shows the contempt of a snob who holds the world to a much higher standard than is likely to be achieved. This is not merely disgust at bad taste as such; Stephen, here, seems to be offended that the proper aesthetics of a state funeral are marred by a corny Stephen Foster song. The biggest problem with aesthetics is its

constant tendency toward perfectionism; too often, it seems, beauty cannot be enjoyed if there is even one flaw in it.

This is an entirely western idea, however. In Japan there is a long tradition of embracing imperfection as part of the aesthetic value of an object; this tradition is called *Wasi-sabi* and is pervasive in Japanese art and design, most notably in the *Kintsugi* tradition of repairing ceramics in a very deliberately obvious and noticeable way. To me this feels like a much more humane and humble way of approaching aesthetics—a much more *Christian* way. I will have to look into this idea further; for now all I can say is that I, too, like Stephen, have been annoyed at things which just feel "off": and I understand how he feels, while being upset with myself for feeling that way.

> ***A long curving gallery. From the floor ascend pillars of dark vapours. It is peopled by the images of fabulous kings, set in stone. Their hands are folded upon their knees in token of weariness and their eyes are darkened for the errors of men go up before them for ever as dark vapours.***
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> ***Strange figures advance as from a cave. They are not as tall as men. One does not seem to stand quite apart from another. Their faces are phosphorescent, with darker streaks. They peer at me and their eyes seem to ask me something. They do not speak.***

In his diary Stephen recounts two dreams. These are my interpretations thereof:

The gallery represents the history of the world's culture. The statues of great kings are the immortals of art—the Beethovens, the Michelangelos, the Shakespeares of this world. They are set in stone because what they have to say has been said, and cannot be changed. They are weary because we moderns continually misinterpret them; and our follies get in the way of their clarity.

The cave is the twentieth century and the modern artistic experiment. The dwarfs coming out of the cave are the modern artists from Braque and Picasso, Ezra Pound, Shoenberg, and so on, up to the present day's Koonses and Davids Foster Wallace. They blend into each other because they are all really the same. The weird colors and effects of their art mar and blemish their faces. They are more interested in us, the art loving public, than they are about their own art: and this is not good. They are silent because they have nothing to say, nothing worth our notice.

> ***Welcome, O life! I go to encounter for the millionth time the reality of experience and to forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race.***

This, the penultimate line in *A Portrait*, is the most famous line in the book. There is quite a lot to unpack here. James Joyce himself was very keen to realize, through his own poetics, an expression of "the reality of experience." But are the plainly told stories in *Dubliners* more realist than the stream-of-consciousness wanderings in *Ulysses*? The allusive power of words is certainly a real part of the poetic value of language; if that is so, is *Finnegans Wake* a work of realism?

Of course, the debate about the purpose of art is a long one and will not be solved anytime soon. Should art be an expression of reality, or not? If so, whose reality? Should art be aspirational, or should it merely record what's there in front of the artist? If the works of painters like Van Gogh, Kandinsky, or Jackson Pollock are simply records of the painters' internal emotional states, can they be considered "realist" artworks?

Each faction, movement, and ism has its own answers to these questions, but I tend to just say "yes" to all of them. There are too many exceptions for rules like these to be firmly established. Artists are always surprising me by taking *any* principle and making great art with it; like Tevye, I just want to say "you are also right."

But what strikes me most about this line from *A Portrait* is Stephen's plan to forge "the uncreated conscience" of his people. An artist certainly does have a profound ability to speak in a didactic or moralizing tone; this has been one of the chief roles of art throughout the ages, and why Shelley calls poets "the unacknowledged legislators of the world." Even a seemingly neutral piece of art such as the latest Thomas Kinkade print can carry a value-judgment within it. And in my opinion, artists should lean into this power of theirs—but, *please*, with skill and competence. Enough didactic art has been made by people with something to say but with no idea how to say it skillfully. Christian artists, especially Christian filmmakers, are frequent perpetrators of this error.

Whether or not Joyce himself was successful in forging the "uncreated conscience" of the Irish people is a question best left to the scholars. I'm not even sure how much of Stephen is meant to be taken as Joyce's own views; it's hard to tell whether Stephen is Joyce's mouthpiece, or an ironic send-up of what Joyce wished to be. But Joyce is a giant with a very long shadow, and much of the literature of the past hundred years is dependent on what he did; anyone who wants to speak intelligibly through literary fiction has got to contend with him. I think it is wise to study his artistic philosophy if we want to learn about the modern iteration of the craft of writing—how it is done, how it conveys meaning, the boundaries of what is possible. This year I'm planning on reading his two monstrous novels. And if any of my readers know of any good scholarly works on Joyce's poetics, please do point me towards them.

RUINS is published and printed by the Farnam Institute, a Christian organization devoted to thoughtful, humble, and respectful commentary and discussion of the arts. If you would like to learn more about the institute and its work, please contact us at w_collen@hotmail.com.