

Portraits of the Artist: Joyce, Nietzsche, and Aquinas

Thomas S. Hibbs

Kettle . . . pleased Joyce with the remark that "The difficulty about Aquinas is that what he says is so much like what the man in the street says." In Paris, as Joyce was discussing Aquinas, someone objected, "that has nothing to do with us," and Joyce replied . . . , "It has everything to do with us."¹

Drawing widely upon work in the Neo-Scholastic revival of Aquinas, William T. Noon's *Joyce and Aquinas* makes a compelling case for the importance of Aquinas in the entirety of Joyce's literary corpus. The book, published forty years ago,² is still regularly cited in studies of Joyce, even if its suggestions of Joyce's affinities with pre-modern philosophy have been less well received in the trendy attempts to deploy Joyce as an authority for a host of "post-modernisms." The recent study by Weldon Thornton, entitled *The Antimodernism of Joyce's Portrait*, puts into serious question these recent trends and reasserts the link between Joyce and pre-modern philosophy.³ Thornton does not, however, consider the possibility of a Nietzschean reading of the *Portrait*. Given what I just said about the implausibility of current post-modern interpretations of Joyce, the suggestion of parallels between Joyce and Nietzsche might seem surprising. But even on

¹ Richard Ellmann, *James Joyce* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), p. 63.

² William T. Noon, *Joyce and Aquinas* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1957).

³ Weldon Thornton, *The Antimodernism of Joyce's Portrait* (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 1994).

Thornton's understanding of the *Portrait*, there are striking similarities between it and Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy*. Indeed, recent work on Nietzsche puts into question the deconstructive appropriation of his writings.⁴ What I will pursue in this essay is a reading of the *Portrait* that takes seriously the possibility of a Nietzschean interpretation. In light of the strengths and weaknesses of that approach, I will consider the viability of a pre-modern, specifically Aristotelian-Thomist, interpretation of the *Portrait*.

In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche depicts the history of the West as a struggle between two gods, two models of art, and two experiences of the relationship of the individual to the whole of society and nature.⁵ The hidden source of Greek society and hence of the West is Dionysius, the primordial will, the surging force of chaos at the root of all human activity and thought. Dionysius is prior to the distinctions between good and evil and among objects. Dionysius, who is the primal suffering and source of wisdom and creativity of all things, is the spirit of music and is prior to language. Since it eliminates the possibility of individuation, it is void of conscious awareness and hence cannot know its own wisdom. By contrast, Apollo, as the *principium individuationis*, is responsible for the introduction of distinctions between good and evil and among objects. It is embodied in the plastic arts. It thus makes rational comprehension and articulation possible.

Given its dependence on Dionysius, the triumph of Apollo is always tenuous and unstable. If Apollo seeks to dominate Dionysius, it becomes effete, rationalistic, and static. The "entire existence" of Apollo depends "on a hidden substratum of suffering and knowledge revealed to him by Dionysius."⁶ Nietzsche writes,

And now let us imagine how into this world, built on mere appearance and moderation and artificially damned up, there penetrated, in tones ever more bewitching and alluring, the ecstatic sound of the Dionysian festival; how in these strains all of nature's excess in pleasure, grief, and knowledge became audible, even in piercing shrieks; and let us ask ourselves what the psalmodizing artist of Apollo, with his phantom harp-sound, could mean in the face of this demonic folk-song.⁷

⁴ See, for example, Stanley Rosen, *The Question of Being* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1993) and Peter Berkowitz, *Nietzsche: The Ethics of an Immoralist* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1995).

⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1967).

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

⁷ *Ibid.*

For a brief but remarkably fertile period, the period of Greek tragedy, the Dionysian and the Apollonian existed in a kind of harmony. The Apollonian elements in tragedy, the role of speech and individual characters, make possible our indirect apprehension of the primal will, whose confrontation we cannot endure directly. Apollo, who is the source of the maxims "know thyself" and "nothing in excess," individuates and allows for conscious apprehension and expression.

The history of the West is the story of the increasing dominance of Apollo, the crucial stage of which is the Socratic turning away from poetry and music toward the good, the true, and the beautiful. Socratic rationalism is developed further in Christianity and especially in modern science. The following out of the trajectory of rationalism undermines itself: "Science, spurred by its powerful illusion, speeds irresistibly toward its limits where its optimism, concealed in the essence of logic, suffers shipwreck."⁸ The "limits of theory" engender a "turn to art";⁹ logic "bites its own tail" and gives rise to a "tragic insight."¹⁰ Socratic culture suffers from "the delusion of limitless power."¹¹ Another way to express science's undermining of itself is in terms of the search for truth, which Judaism and Christianity introduced into the world and which is carried forward most forcefully by science. That very pursuit leads inevitably to the acknowledgment that all these systems are but lies, concealing the chaotic abyss at the root of all things.

By contrast, tragic culture exalts "wisdom over science," seeks a "comprehensive view," and embraces "with sympathetic feelings of love, the eternal suffering."¹² Tragic art serves life and restores health and wisdom to the human soul. Nietzsche urges that we consider science in light of art and art in light of life.¹³ This does not entail the rejection of reason but rather its relocation. It can no longer stand apart from the rest of nature as its tribunal; instead, it is but a part, subordinate to, and nourished by, an extra-rational order of instinct. Its ideal is the Socrates who practices music. Where does this view leave the artist?

In some ways, Nietzsche's theory is compatible with a romantic understanding of the artist. He exalts art over science, instinctive wisdom over discursive reason, and myth over inquiry. In other and more important ways, his theory is surprisingly critical of the standard romantic view of the

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 97.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 96.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 98.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 111.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 112.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

artist. As Peter Berkowitz observes, it deprives the artist of self-consciousness, autonomy, and creativity.¹⁴ As a participant in the Dionysian primordial unity, he is "no longer an artist"; instead, he has "become a work of art."¹⁵ Nietzsche goes so far as to say that the "individual with egoistic ends" is the "antagonist of art."¹⁶ He also repudiates the romantic, and for Nietzsche residually Christian, view of nature. He comments that "this harmony . . . this oneness of man with nature . . . is by no means a simple condition that comes into being naturally. . . . It is not a condition that, like a terrestrial paradise, must necessarily be found at the gate of every culture. Only a romantic age could believe this."¹⁷ This view of nature, which is an Apollonian myth, culminates with the thoroughly modern image of the "sentimental, flute-playing, tender shepherd."¹⁸

How would a Nietzschean reading of the *Portrait* proceed? The very structure of the *Portrait* mirrors that of the progression toward a recovery of pagan art in *The Birth of Tragedy*. The Christian religion occupies the third and middle chapter in the *Portrait*; it has the same intermediate status in the novel that it does in Nietzsche's history. The description of the religious life is reminiscent of the dominant themes in Nietzsche's own account. It is founded in fear; the entire focus of the third chapter is the part of the Ignation retreat that treats of the last things: death, judgment, heaven, and hell. Yet heaven is not touched upon at all. Fear of the unknown or of the certainty of eternal punishment for the unrepentant drives a wedge between the rational system of final judgment and the passions and instincts. Indeed, the notion of the self is atomistic, isolated into discrete moments, and to be subject to the control of isolated acts of will. The narrator describes Stephen's life immediately after his conversion as being "laid out in devotional areas."¹⁹ As he begins to be tempted again by the "insistent voices of the flesh," he experiences an "intense sense of power to know that he could by a single act of consent, in a moment of thought, undo all that he had done."²⁰ But then "almost at the verge of sinful consent," he would be "saved by a sudden act of will."²¹

¹⁴ Berkowitz, *Nietzsche: The Ethics of an Immoralist*, p. 45.

¹⁵ Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, p. 37.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

¹⁹ James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, eds. Hans Walter Gabler and Walter Hetsche (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1993), p. 172. Hereafter cited as *Portrait*.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 177.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 178.

To emphasize exclusively the negative elements in the Christian religion is to obscure Nietzsche's view of it; for, he detects in the religious impulse an inchoate and unconscious artistic impulse. We are awed by the interplay of opposites in the saint, by his project of self-overcoming, of transforming the self into a work of art.²² Similarly, Stephen Dedalus inclines toward an aesthetic view of the religious life. He speaks of how "beautiful" it would be to love God. To the mortification of the senses, especially touch, "he brought the most assiduous ingenuity of inventiveness."²³ The kinship between art and grace is clear from its power to create an entirely new world, "The world for all its solid substance and complexity no longer existed for his soul save as a theorem of divine power and love and universality."²⁴ In fact, certain elements of the purported life of grace as Stephen experiences them resemble the vices of the romantic artist. Stephen's scrupulous vanity is akin to artistic self-absorption.²⁵ Both grace and art sever his ties with the ordinary lives of others. He was unable to "merge his life in the common tide of other lives."²⁶

As in *The Birth of Tragedy* so too in the *Portrait*, the opposition of the pagan and the Christian is prominent. The contrast is present in the name of the novel's protagonist, Stephen Dedalus, who has both the name of the first Christian martyr and that of the famous artificer of Greek myth. At the crucial transitional section of the novel, Stephen rejects the possibility of a vocation to the priesthood and proceeds to realize his artistic call. In his meeting with the Jesuit who suggests that he pursue the path of a religious calling, he is counseled: "And let you, Stephen, make a novena to your holy patron saint, the first martyr."²⁷ Later in that chapter, precisely when Stephen realizes his artistic vocation, he is called Stephanos by his friends. The Hellenization of the Christian part of his name signifies the transition from the modern, Christian world to the pre-modern, pagan world. It thus reflects Nietzsche's rebirth of tragedy, wherein the limits to the Christian world-view open up the possibility of a recovery of the primacy of pagan culture.

In spite of these similarities between the development of Stephen's real-

²² See Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Viking Press, 1968), sections 47 and 58 of the chapter entitled, "What is Religious?"

²³ Joyce, *Portrait*, p. 176.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 175.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 179.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 177.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 185.

ization of his artistic vocation and Nietzsche's history, there are crucial differences, differences that might lead us to appraise Stephen's character as falling short of the Nietzschean vision of the artist. As we noted above, Nietzsche does not celebrate the crude romantic depiction of the artist as an isolated individual, cut off from others, who creates from autonomous sources. Precisely this vision of the artist entraps Stephen. Many commentators have expressed a sense of disappointment at the final chapter of the *Portrait*. Instead of a further development of Stephen's character, we find a kind of stasis and an inability to create anything substantial. His lone piece of writing is a short villanelle that critics have described as narcissistic and as Joyce's parody of symbolism. Stephen thinks it crucial to his artistic achievement that he "fly" past the nets of nation, language, and religion. His goal is "to discover the mode of life or art whereby" his "spirit could express itself in unfettered freedom."²⁸ Stephen's assertions of independence are undermined throughout the novel, but nowhere more explicitly than in his growing awareness of and identification with the myth of Dedalus. The primacy of that myth is evident in the epigraph to the entire work from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*: "Et ignotas animum dimittit in artes."²⁹ The primacy of myth indicates that, although there is a gap between Nietzsche and Stephen's self-understanding, that gap may be bridged by the perspective of the narrator.

Stephen is repeatedly described as yearning for and answering a call: first in his desire to sate his lust with the prostitute, then in his repentance of his lust and his flirtation with a religious vocation, and finally in his realization of his artistic mission. In all these cases, he is moved by things outside him or by passions that are within him yet beyond his control. In fact, the entire work begins with Stephen's father telling the children's story of the meeting between a moocow and baby tuckoo, in which Stephen is identified with the "nicens little boy named baby tuckoo."³⁰ The location of an individual within a myth, story, or tradition can be given various interpretations. One plausible interpretation is that of Nietzsche.³¹ Consider, for example, Stephen's earliest non-religious experience of self-transformation which occurs as he performs his part in a school play, where he sheds his normal timidity and self-consciousness: "Another nature seemed to

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 274.

²⁹ *Metamorphoses*, VIII, 188, quoted in Joyce, *Portrait*, p. 23.

³⁰ Joyce, *Portrait*, p. 25.

³¹ For an alternative, Thomistic account of myth, see Frederick Wilhelmsen, "The Philosopher and the Myth," in *The Paradoxical Structure of Existence* (Irving, Texas: University of Dallas Press, 1970), pp. 129-47.

have been lent him. . . . It surprised him to see that the play which he had known at rehearsal for a disjointed lifeless thing had suddenly assumed a life of its own. It seemed now to play itself, he and his fellow actors aiding it with their parts."³² The passage is strikingly reminiscent of Nietzsche's description of the tragic chorus: "[T]he tragic chorus is the dramatic proto-phenomenon: to see oneself transformed before one's own eyes and to begin to act as if one had actually entered into another, another character. . . . Here we have a surrender of individuality and a way of entering into another character."³³

Consider, furthermore, that the rebirth of tragedy arises, as Nietzsche's subtitle indicates, out of the spirit of music. Stephen is frequently described as hearing and being moved by music. "The vast cycle of starry life bore his weary mind outward to its verge and inward to its center, a distant music accompanying him outward and inward."³⁴ Music breaks the artificial divisions, characteristic of Apollo, between inner and outer. As he begins to escape from family into the university, he anticipates a "new adventure." He hears "notes of fitful music leaping upwards a tone and downwards a diminished fourth. . . . It was an elfin prelude, endless and formless; and as it grew wilder and faster, the flames leaping out of time, he seemed to hear from under the boughs and grasses wild creatures racing, their feet pattering like rain upon the leaves."³⁵ The passage comes remarkably close to Nietzsche's depiction of the Dionysian.

For all the apparent approaches toward the Dionysian, Stephen falls short of the achievement Nietzsche lauds. Stephen's lack of creativity mirrors his moral and psychological solipsism. He is detached from and indifferent to all others and thus suffers from an inability to communicate or to love. In a telling exchange with Cranly, he is asked whether he loves his mother and responds that he doesn't know what the words mean. Cranly persists, "Have you ever felt love toward anyone or anything?" "Staring gloomily at the footpath," he responds, "I tried to love God. . . . It seems to me now I failed. It is very difficult. I tried to unite my will with the will of God instant by instant. In that I did not always fail. I could perhaps do that still"³⁶ The most persistent themes in the final fragmentary sections of the novel have to do with women. He is troubled by his inability to love or even remember in any detail his mother and confused and angered over his

³² Joyce, *Portrait*, p. 107.

³³ Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, p. 64.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 126.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 191.

³⁶ Joyce, *Portrait*, p. 269.

complicated feelings toward the woman he cannot love and yet cannot free himself from. His adolescent self-consciousness is evident in one meeting with her: "Talked rapidly of myself and my plans. In the midst of it unluckily I made a sudden gesture of a revolutionary nature. I must have looked like a fellow throwing a handful of peas into the air."³⁷ Stephen's pathologies and vices are summed up in his repeated use of the phrase "*non serviam*." His life is a kind of comic *imitatio diaboli*. How are we to appraise Stephen's multiform lack of fecundity?

Given what I have argued above about the parallels between the novel and Nietzsche's theories, it might make sense to understand Stephen's impotence as a failure to break through the Apollonian to the Dionysian. Does not Stephen embody precisely that antagonism to art that Nietzsche detects in the individual with egoistic ends? Stephen's romanticism is the antithesis of, and an enduring impediment to, true art. For the Nietzsche of *The Birth of Tragedy* and *The Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life*, creation is possible only through a kind of historical rootedness and, at least in *The Birth*, through a radical subordination of the individual self to the primordial will, by becoming its instrument. The modern notion of progress with its abandonment of tradition and memory eliminates the conditions for the possibility of creativity. Yet Nietzsche himself often depicts creation as an act of violence and destruction, as an evisceration of the past and present for the sake of an unknown future. Perhaps on account of his growing realization that Germany would not provide creative, cultural soil, Nietzsche moves in the direction of the life-affirming individual who sets himself against a decadent culture to become a creator of values. This is but one of the many unresolved tensions in Nietzsche's thought.

In the *Portrait*, Stephen embodies this tension in Nietzsche's account of creativity. In Stephen's mind, the contrast is embodied in the distinction between the feminine cultivation of memory and the voluntarist, masculine orientation toward the future. One pertinent passage runs thus, "Certainly she remembers the past. Lynch says all women do. Then she remembers the time of her childhood—and mine if I was ever a child. The past is consumed in the present and the present is living only because it brings forth the future."³⁸ The emphasis on creativity and novelty entails not only overcoming the past but also emptying the present—the only moment of time we actually experience—of any except instrumental significance. Stephen's conscious attempt to repudiate the past is rooted in his voluntarist concep-

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 281.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 280.

tion of Christian conversion, evident in his momentary belief that the past was now behind him. The project of gaining an autonomous, conscious control over all of one's powers alienates one from the past and from the penumbral elements of one's conscious awareness. Such a project is doomed to failure. As Stephen attempts to forget the object of his affection, "on all sides distorted reflections of her image started from his memory. . . . She was a figure of the womanhood of her country, a batlike soul waking to the consciousness of itself in darkness and secrecy and loneliness."³⁹

One difficulty in aligning the Nietzsche of *The Birth of Tragedy* with the narrator's appraisal of Stephen is the former's emphasis on, and understanding of, the tragic. The *Portrait* might be read as a kind of tragedy of an exceptional human being's failure to realize his potential. The ending of the work anticipates a tragic fall. Stephen's calling upon Dedalus in the words, "Old father, old artificer, stand me now and ever in good stead,"⁴⁰ clearly portends Stephen's own failure, as it identifies Stephen with Icarus whose ambitious flight ended in a fall. Yet whatever elements of tragedy there may be at the end, they arise not by our hero facing the Dionysian and thereby undergoing a kind of destruction but precisely by avoiding the darker sources of the human race.

The deeper incongruity between Joyce and Nietzsche has to do with the latter's celebration of aristocratic tragedy, which is virulently anti-democratic, perhaps even anti-political. Joyce's approach, by contrast, is democratic and more comic than tragic. The only passages wherein Stephen seems heroic he also appears foolish. In the penultimate fragment, Stephen writes of his mother, "She prays now, she says, that I may learn in my own life and away from home and friends what the heart is and what it feels."⁴¹ Her answer to Stephen's dilemma is that he should identify himself more fully with ordinary folk. This seems to be the attitude the narrator wishes to induce in the reader as well. Stephen is young; we feel a sympathy for him that we feel for a precocious but inexperienced child. We also pity his foolishness; we want to laugh gently at his silly ambitions.

Such a perspective presupposes that the narrator's point of view is not simply to be identified with that of Stephen. If this is right, then the simplistic account of Joyce's style as first person stream of consciousness must be abandoned. The individual consciousness gives way to a more comprehensive third person point of view. As Thornton persuasively argues, the

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 248.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 282.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

narrator does not seek to reflect the flow of conscious activity in the protagonist but to capture the more complex flow of his entire psychic environment, much of which Stephen is unaware.⁴² The narrator does, as Stephen suggests he should, disappear behind or beyond his work, but it is not at all clear that he adopts a position of neutrality or indifference toward his main character. As both Thornton and Sultan show, Joyce's use of irony frequently serves to enrich rather than merely subvert a character's self-understanding.⁴³ Irony does not undermine the individual quest for meaning, but rather locates it within a more comprehensive account; it urges compassion toward human weakness; and its laughter presupposes some measure of identification with ordinary human beings. Ellmann nicely captures this: "The initial and determining act of judgment in his work is the justification of the commonplace. . . . Joyce's discovery . . . was that the ordinary is the extraordinary."⁴⁴ This locates Joyce's project more in the lineage of Aquinas, at least as that is adumbrated in our opening quotation linking Aquinas and the common man, than in that of Nietzsche.

The prominence of the common man calls to mind Aristotelian comedy, wherein there is a certain proportion between characters in a drama and the audience. Comedy contains persons at our own level or slightly lower. The narrator in Joyce's novels treats these ordinary folks as objects neither of romantic celebration nor of cynical dismissal. He may share some of Nietzsche's reservations about the deleterious effects of religion on the human psyche, but he shares none of his virulent criticisms of slave morality or his devotion to noble ethics. The references to Zarathustra are thoroughly comic and mocking; indeed, in *Ulysses* they are spoken by the cruelly mocking Buck Mulligan, the least admirable character in the novel.⁴⁵ One can of course find comic elements in the later Nietzsche. In contrast to *The Birth of Tragedy's* dismissal of comedy as the realm of the absurd, later works assert a correspondence between the rank of character and a scale of laughter. Nietzsche urges us to mock the spirit of gravity, found in religion, morality, and all too often in philosophy itself. But when he associates his laughter with the project of making himself into a god, a result of which would be superhuman laughter, he is at variance with Joyce, whose laughter is closer to that appropriate to Aristotelian comedy.

⁴² Thornton, *The Antimodernism of Joyce's Portrait*, pp. 71–76, 109–36.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 79. See Stanley Sultan, *Eliot, Joyce, and Company* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), pp. 63, 76.

⁴⁴ Ellmann, *James Joyce*, p. 5.

⁴⁵ James Joyce, *Ulysses*, ed. Hans Walter Gabler (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1986), chap. I, p. 19, lines 727–28.

If this interpretation is correct, then there is a disparity between Stephen's account of the relationship between author and work and that operative in the novel. At the end of his development of his aesthetic theory in chapter V, Stephen traces the transition from the lyrical through the epic to the dramatic, wherein the author progressively distances himself from his work. "The personality of the artist . . . finally refines itself out of existence, impersonalizes itself. . . . The mystery of esthetic like that of material creation is accomplished. 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." Lynch's retort, "Trying to refine them also out of existence"⁴⁶ is aptly sardonic and indicates that the creator's indifference is actually an antipathy. Aquinas, to whom Stephen has been appealing as his authority in things aesthetic, pervasively deploys analogies between human and divine artistry, but he does not take them as literally as Stephen does, nor does he depict the creator of the universe as indifferent to his creation. The author of the *Portrait* does not cynically mock the all-too-human foibles of his characters, nor does the narrator imply that he is indifferent or that the reader should be.

The ambivalence we feel toward Stephen at the end of the book allows for multiple interpretations. As some critics have argued, the vices that impede Stephen's growth as a human being and an artist are precisely those decried in the sermon on Hell that stands at the center of the story. Consider, for example, the echoes of Satan's "*non serviam*" in Stephen's proud refusal to identify himself with the lot of others and his self-absorbed attempt to create *ex nihilo*. The painful isolation of Stephen at the end recalls St. Thomas's teaching—cited by the priest—that the greatest spiritual punishment of Hell is the pain of loss, the isolation from the greatest good and hence from all other goods.

As critics have remarked, Joyce may have lost his faith but he retains many of its philosophical categories. In part what the novel seems to retain is a Thomistic moral and philosophical critique of the exaltation of the creative will. The final section of the *Portrait* draws out the untoward consequences of radical voluntarism, a voluntarism that emerges in the sermon on Hell, a sermon replete with a thoroughly modern and typically Jesuit conception of the Christian life. As Stephen's pagan roots begin to eclipse his Jesuit education, the voluntarism continues to surface. The echoes of the Satanic refusal to serve reveal the envy and pride at the root of Stephen's willfulness. The self thus supplants the divine and becomes a sort

⁴⁶ Joyce, *Portrait*, p. 242.

of self-creating divinity. For all of the positive reflections of Nietzsche in the novel, there is in the critique of voluntarism a crucial departure from certain tendencies in his thought. According to the perceptive analysis of Berkowitz, the fundamental tension in Nietzsche is this: Although he wished to base right making on right knowing, to ground a proper evaluation of levels of creative power on a rank order of character, his complete repudiation of any sort of natural, civil, or religious standard puts his entire project into question. As Berkowitz puts it, Nietzsche "pursues the antagonism between knowing and making to its breaking point."⁴⁷ The primacy of the will stultifies the understanding and ends up paralyzing the will itself, since there is nothing in light of which the will might deliberate and act. The project of absolute self-mastery, of unconstrained independence, engenders a self without action and void of freedom. Nietzsche's project of incessant self-overcoming would seem to lead to precisely the sort of nihilism that he detests.

To see this more clearly, we need but advert to the structure of the *Portrait*, which exhibits the problem of individual creativity by juxtaposing and thus putting into question diametrically opposed conceptions of the relationship between the individual and the community.⁴⁸ The first four chapters alternate between corresponding sets of opposites: the social vs. the individual, outer vs. inner, and male vs. female. The family and the cliques at school dominate the first chapter; in these social contexts, where men are dominant, Stephen struggles to decode the language and to find his place within the community. The discovery of the interior impulses to sensuality pervades the second chapter; these impulses set Stephen apart from others and lead up to his encounter with the prostitute. The third chapter focuses upon the Jesuit teaching of religious doctrine, in light of which he strives to interpret his own experience. Finally, in the fourth chapter, Stephen, in isolation from all others, experiences the vision of the girl on the beach and the accent is on his internal sense of ecstasy. The alternation between these opposites is not so neat as it might appear. Two examples will suffice. Stephen supposes that his lust is somehow peculiar to him, yet he comes to see it as common to all men. Conversely, he thinks that he can willfully separate himself from the institutional church, yet its teachings are deeply constitutive of who he is. These superficially clear oppositions, upon which the novel plays and which are endemic to modern thought, are characteris-

⁴⁷ Berkowitz, *Nietzsche: The Ethics of an Immoralist*, p. 269.

⁴⁸ See the masterful explication by Thornton in *The Antimodernism of Joyce's Portrait*, pp. 85-107.

tics of the immature Stephen, of the sorts of conflicts he must overcome to reach maturity. The novel works toward, without ever reaching, their reconciliation. In fact, Stephen's retreat into quasi-solipsism in the last chapter serves to re-entrench the dichotomies. What has thwarted the progress is precisely the exaltation of the creative, individual will in Stephen's self-understanding.

Another way to bring out the problem of aesthetic self-creation is to attend to the novel's persistent contrast between art and life and the way the former can be used as a refuge from and falsification of the latter. At the very end of chapter IV, Stephen experiences his aesthetic ecstasy, which is described variously as a "profane joy," as an ecstasy and a rapture.⁴⁹ At the very beginning of the next chapter he is at home with his family the following morning: "He drained his third cup of watery tea to the dregs and set to chewing the crusts of fried bread that were scattered near him, staring into the dark pool of the jar."⁵⁰ As he leaves the house and walks through the squalid neighborhood, his mind takes refuge in books. The "splendor" of his thoughts allows the world to "perish about his feet as if it had been fireconsumed."⁵¹ Art is ambivalent; it provides for a transforming experience of the world, even as it tempts the artist to an evasion of life. Of course, the artistry of the narrator of the novel captures all of this and so his art is not subject to the same criticisms as is that of Stephen. How are we to understand the art of the narrator?

A Nietzschean interpretation is possible, since for him art affirms all things, both good and evil.⁵² Indeed, Nietzsche's insistence that art be appraised in light of life rather than the reverse offers a corrective to Stephen's understanding. Yet Nietzsche's typology of tragedy and comedy does not fit neatly with Joyce's writing. Nietzsche contrasts the universal typology of the tragic hero with the treatment of the individual as an individual in the comic.⁵³ He attributes the decline of tragedy to the "victory of the phenomenon over the universal, and the delight in a unique, almost anatomical preparation." In place of tragedy's "eternal type," we find the "prevalence of character representation and psychological refinement."⁵⁴ Joyce's novel might be described as treating Stephen as a type of the artist, but the peculiarities of his history and character are also prominent. In spite

⁴⁹ Joyce, *Portrait*, p. 198.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 200.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 203.

⁵² Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, p. 41.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 73.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 108.

of Nietzsche's claim to comprehensive affirmation, his own tendency toward the portrayal of universal types in tragedy could be the basis of Joycean counter-accusation that he has failed to embrace the petty, ugly details of life. Joyce's narratives have no place for ideal, aristocratic types, either of the tragic sort or of the laughable *übermensch* variety.

Another interpretation, derived from Aristotle and Aquinas, of the comedy of the *Portrait* is possible. A congruence can be seen in the *Portrait's* conception of art and life. On Aristotle's view, art partly imitates and partly completes nature, by aiding in the realization of possibilities to which nature points but rarely achieves. Do not the first four chapters point to an overcoming of a set of peculiarly modern oppositions? Given the parallel and related failures of Stephen as artist and human being, would not this anticipated reconciliation mark the way toward a healthy human life and a fecund artistry? If Stephen thwarts the realization of this *telos*, the art of the narrator gives us more than a glimmer of it. Such a reading of the *Portrait*⁵⁵ presupposes something like the Aristotelian teaching on potency and act, which Hugh Kenner has identified as the "sharpest exegetical instrument we can bring to the work of Joyce."⁵⁶ Although Kenner does not draw out this line of reasoning, an important role of the doctrine of potency may be to suggest unrealized possibilities toward which the action of the novel points but which remain frustrated by particular defects in the characters.

The prominence of Aquinas and Aristotle in the final section of the book lends further support to this interpretation. Aquinas appears as an authority late in the book, after Stephen has acknowledged his artistic vocation, when Stephen elucidates his aesthetic theory. But this is precisely the point at which we begin to realize that Stephen's progress as an artist and a human being is far from complete. If art is sometimes conceived as an inappropriate escape from life, then Stephen's taking refuge in aesthetic theory rather than immersing himself in the artistic process might be seen as a further retreat from life. Stephen would thus embody an antithesis to Nietzsche's subordination of science or theory to art and of both of these to life. Furthermore, Stephen's emphasis on the stages in the rational apprehension of objects in aesthetic perception lies clearly on the side of the Apollonian, not the Dionysian. All this is true but it fails to capture the complexity of Stephen's character as revealed in his theory. One of the problems with ap-

⁵⁵ Thornton develops this interpretation in *The Antimodernism of Joyce's Portrait*, pp. 39-63.

⁵⁶ Hugh Kenner, "The Cubist Portrait," in *Approaches to Joyce's "Portrait,"* eds. Thomas F. Staley and Bernard Benstock (Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1976), p. 179.

praising the use of Aquinas is that there are so many errors of interpretation interspersed with the insights that it is difficult to know what to attribute to whom.

That we should take the theory somewhat seriously is, I think, evident from its usefulness in accounting for Stephen's ecstatic, aesthetic vision of the girl on the beach, a vision that marks the realization of Stephen's call and the highpoint of the novel. The vision illustrates not only the stages of apprehension, but also the claim that aesthetic perception is void of desire and loathing, indeed of kinesis itself. The vision is an example of static, aesthetic experience.

The theory, which Stephen explicitly claims to have borrowed from Aquinas, explicates the famous statement that "the beautiful is that which pleases when seen" in light of the three marks of the beautiful: wholeness, harmony, and radiance. The first stage is the observation of an object as distinct from all others, as "selfbounded and selfcontained."⁵⁷ So, on the beach, Stephen first sees a "girl . . . before him in midstream, alone and still."⁵⁸ In the second stage, there is an apprehension of the fitting relationships among the parts of the object and of each part to the whole. So, he proceeds to observe her bodily parts, her legs, her thighs, her waist, her bosom, her hair, and finally her face. Stephen compares the first stage to the second as the "synthesis of immediate perception" to the "analysis of apprehension." The third stage is also described as a synthesis, in which the "supreme quality of beauty, the clear radiance of the esthetic image, is apprehended luminously by the mind which has been arrested by its wholeness and fascinated by its harmony."⁵⁹ So Stephen sees in the girl's face, to which her bodily parts have gradually led his gaze, the "wonder of mortal beauty."⁶⁰

There are a number of problems with Stephen's purported fidelity to Aquinas, not the least of which is his couching the theory in epistemological terms. What is more important, the theory embodies a set of dualisms alien to Aquinas. The split between soul and body, intellect and sensation, reason and desire runs through the entire discussion. True art, according to Stephen, is static rather than kinetic because the latter is associated with passions that are nothing "more than physical."⁶¹ At one point, Stephen revealingly comments to Cranly that, although we are animals we are just

⁵⁷ Joyce, *Portrait*, p. 239.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 197.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 240.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 197.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 233.

now in a mental world. While in his examples of aesthetic perception he focuses on the concrete apprehension of sensible objects, he also speaks of the senses as "prison gates of the soul." None of these oppositions is characteristic of Aquinas. Might these dichotomies point us in the direction of a more unified and more adequate account of aesthetic experience, the rudiments of which can be found in Aquinas?

If there is a compatibility between the narrator's description of Stephen's aesthetic vision of the girl on the beach and Stephen's own aesthetic theory, then perhaps the weaknesses of the latter can also be seen in the former. In the exultant, "Yes. Yes. Yes. He would create . . . as the great artificer,"⁶² there is an important affirmation of the beauty of the girl, of his place in the cosmos and of his own vocation. Yet the affirmation may be constrained by the limits of Stephen's own character. It does mark a progress over his previous interactions with women: he is no longer the son in need of coddling, nor the immature devotee of Mary, nor the adolescent succumbing to a woman merely as an object to satisfy his lust. Between him and the girl on the beach there is a sort of communion, even a kind of reverent acknowledgment of one another. And yet in the detached vision, "no word had broken the holy silence of his ecstasy."⁶³ Is it wrong to see in this an anticipation of the multiple failures of speech in the final chapter, failures that both illustrate Stephen's defective character, his isolation from others, and that have a mysterious connection to his inability to create? Language is the vehicle of communication between persons. It is the instrument through which we have access to the traditions and myths in light of which we understand ourselves in relationship to others. By contrast, Stephen's aesthetic vision, to which we have access only because of the language of the narrator, is a sort of Rousseauian attempt to bypass language in the attempt to establish a pre-linguistic harmony.

Immediately preceding the vision, Stephen speaks softly to himself: "A day of dappled seaborne clouds." The narrator comments, "The phrase and the day and the scene harmonized in a chord."⁶⁴ As Stephen begins to contemplate the words, he seems to retreat from the harmony of word and world into language itself. The question is then asked, "Was it that . . . he drew less pleasure from the reflection of the glowing sensible world through the prism of language manycoloured and richly storied than from the contemplation of an inner world of individual emotions mirrored per-

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 196.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 198.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 192.

fectly in a lucid supple periodic prose?"⁶⁵ The collapse of language upon itself is symptomatic of Stephen's artistic failure. He fails to mediate his ideal, timeless vision of beauty to others through language.

Further support for this interpretation can be found in the "Nausika" chapter in *Ulysses*, wherein Bloom's contemplation from afar of the young Gerty culminates with his act of auto-eroticism. Only vision links them, yet Bloom comments that there was a kind of language between them. The irony of the assertion is lost on Bloom but not on the reader. The absence of speech, the safe distance of sight, enables Bloom and Gerty to idealize one another in their imagination. When Bloom realizes that Gerty is lame, the falsity of his idealized vision is revealed and he is disappointed. Conversely, the masturbatory culmination of Bloom's watching of Gerty underscores his own isolation and impotence.

Aquinas's emphasis on the unity of understanding, speech, and will in communication and on friendship as essential to the human community provide Stephen with the theoretical and implicitly practical material to overcome the voluntarism and atomism endemic to modern philosophy. In order to see this, we must leave the *Portrait* and turn to *Ulysses*.

In the opening chapter, Buck Mulligan, Stephen's nemesis, jokes to another fellow that Stephen has a theory about Hamlet: "He proves by algebra that Hamlet's grandson is Shakespeare's grandfather and that he himself is the ghost of his own father."⁶⁶ Later in the same chapter Stephen reflects to himself about the earlier Trinitarian heresies, among which the error of Sabellius, who held that the "Father was Himself His own Son,"⁶⁷ figures prominently. The same pairing of Stephen's Hamlet theory and Trinitarian doctrine is central to Stephen's lengthy theoretical diatribe later in the book. He refers to the "bulldog of Aquin, with whom no word shall be impossible," as refuting Sabellius.⁶⁸ Yet Stephen's theory of artistic creation is itself a version of the Sabellian heresy. He asserts not only a special relationship between Shakespeare and Hamlet, but also an identity of Shakespeare with every character in the play. "He is the ghost and the prince. He is all in all. . . . In *Cymbeline*, in *Othello* he is bawd and cuckold. He acts and is acted on."⁶⁹ Stephen then generalizes from art to life: "He found in the world without as actual what was in his world within as possible. . . . Every life is many days, day after day. We walk through ourselves, meeting

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 192-93.

⁶⁶ Joyce, *Ulysses*, p. 15.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 171.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 174.

robbers, ghosts, giants, old men, young men, wives, widows, brothers-in-love, but always meeting ourselves."⁷⁰ It is not surprising that this theory, which entirely denies the reality of otherness and is thus a variant on Sabellianism, leads Stephen to conclude by echoing Hamlet's prohibition of future marriages. There are no independent others left to be united in matrimony and no new beings to be brought forth into the world. Both procreation and artistic creation have been rendered otiose.

Three Thomistic teachings are mentioned during the discourse. First, there is Thomas's refutation of the heresy of Sabellius, to which we have referred. Thomas's orthodox position depicts the divine life as a union of thought, speech, and love among three distinct persons, a social harmony of personal differences. Second, Stephen quotes Aquinas on the necessity for society of there being friendship among many: "In societate humana hoc est in maxime necessarium ut sit amicitia inter multos."⁷¹ Friendship presupposes distinction between the persons united through common activities and traits of character. The friend may be described as another self, but he is a distinct self, whose association with me expands and enlarges my experience and my knowledge. What distinguishes true friendship from its simulacra is that only in the former is the friend loved as an end in himself, not as a means to my achievement of some extrinsic good. For Aristotle and Aquinas, friendship is the centerpiece of their view of human nature as inherently social. The unity of civil society presupposes distinct individuals who complement one another in the pursuit and enjoyment of common goods, chief among which is the good of friendship itself. By contrast to the Aristotelian-Thomist understanding of friendship, Stephen's account of the unity of characters and persons negates all difference.

It is no coincidence that in the midst of Stephen's diatribe, reference is made to both incest and masturbation. In the discussion of incest, we find the third use of Aquinas. In his "gorbellied works," Aquinas writes of "incest from a standpoint different from that of the new Viennese school" and "likens it to an avarice of the emotions. He means that the love so given to one near in blood is covetously withheld from some stranger who, it may be, hungers for it."⁷² Incest thus shortcuts an affection whose natural *telos* is to communicate with an-other. Thus, experience and creation utterly lack novelty or difference; they are but redundant expressions of the self. In the order of sexual sins, the logical term of this failure to open oneself to the offer and reception of love is auto-eroticism. Stephen's theory, which he

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 175.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 169.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 170.

concedes even he does not believe, involves a similar sin on the level of intellect. After the speech, Mulligan mockingly announces a play. The title, "Everyman his own Wife or a Honeymoon in the Hand," captures the upshot of Stephen's theory. We are invited to compare Stephen's form of intellectual masturbation with Bloom's physical act of auto-eroticism in chapter XIII. In both cases, impotence or sterility is the theme. As he departs the library, he senses with apprehension the presence of Mulligan behind him and stands aside to let him pass. "Part. The moment is now. . . . My will: his will that fronts me. Seas between."⁷³ In life, if not in theory, Stephen confronts otherness. He thus alternates between indulging in a theory that consumes otherness in the self and living a life of evasion of others, whom he sees as threats to his autonomous will. Creation itself lacks difference or novelty; it is but the redundant expression of the self.

Implicit in Stephen's theory of artistic creation is a series of oppositions, which pervade the whole of *Ulysses*. Perhaps the most important oppositions are those between the same and the other, and between newness and repetition. Both can be found in Bloom's reflections in the Nausika chapter. Just as his idealized view of Gerty is corrected by her movement, so too he comes to see that what he had at dusk taken as clouds on the horizon were actually trees. Gaining a new perspective thus allows one to correct the limitations of one's previous point of view. Bloom observes to himself in this context that it is good "to see oneself as others do."⁷⁴ He proceeds to ponder over the fact that "history repeats itself" and that "there is nothing new under the sun." The conclusion is that you "think you're escaping and run into yourself."⁷⁵ A short time later, Bloom wonders to himself what it is women love in men and responds hypothetically "another themselves?"⁷⁶ Yet at the end of the same paragraph, he recalls posing the question to Molly of why she chose him. Her answer: "Because you were so foreign from the others." These oppositions are, I think, related to the sets of contraries that Thornton has identified in the *Portrait* and they may well perform similar functions. Neither of the mutually exclusive alternatives is adequate and the story points toward but never exhibits their reconciliation. In Thomistic language, the reconciliation would involve seeing the self-other relation as neither univocal nor equivocal but analogical. How might we determine the validity of such an interpretation?

Since the scope of this paper precludes the possibility of making a final

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 178.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 307–08.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 309.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 311.

judgment, it will suffice to indicate precisely what would need to be done to reach a judgment. The principal alternative to the quasi-Thomistic exegesis we have been developing is the so-called deconstructive reading, which celebrates the "drama of the alternatives." On this view, the oppositions we have described perish. There is no sense of potentiality, realized or unrealized, but only the dynamic interplay of opposites without hope of resolution. The sense of sameness and continuity is exploded by the jarring encounter with otherness and with utterly unanticipated novelty. The question, then, is how to decide between these two views?

At least three issues are at stake. First, there is the question of the self-other relationship, especially of friendship. Stanley Sultan has argued that the overlappings of, and resemblances between, the life-stories of the various characters in *Ulysses* represent more than mere coincidence. They hint at the substantive likenesses between characters and at subtle interconnections in their destinies. He develops a compelling case for seeing Buck Mulligan and Bloom as representing the fundamental options for Stephen. The latter's movement from Mulligan to Bloom would thus be a sign of progress in the development of his character.⁷⁷ Given the way we have framed the issue, the key question is whether we can see the Stephen-Bloom relationship as a kind of friendship? If we can, then it would be necessary to provide a detailed comparison of Aristotle's friendship among those of complete virtue, Aquinas's conception of friendship as charity, and Joyce's view.⁷⁸

A second and related issue concerns the question of teleology in the novel, of whether there is a potency, a direction to the action it describes. Many critics adopt the view that the characters of *Ulysses* are incapable of growth, insight, or development. A Nietzschean interpretation of the lack of development suggests itself: eternal return. The circular shape of Bloom's travels, which dimly mirror those of Odysseus, fails to reconcile opposites or to reveal any progress. There is instead only the affirmation of the interplay of differences, the resounding "Yes" of Molly's soliloquy. If, on the other hand, Molly's affirmation indicates a kind of progress in her domestic relationship with Bloom, then it may be seen as a sign of development in the action of the novel.⁷⁹

⁷⁷ Sultan, *Eliot, Joyce, and Company*, pp. 49–87.

⁷⁸ Marilyn French, *The Book as World* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1976), p. 85. French argues that Bloom embodies *caritas*.

⁷⁹ For a summary of recent interpretations and a reading of the soliloquy as an "auto-debate" in which Molly resolves her attitude to Bloom and reaffirms her fidelity, see Sultan, *Joyce, Eliot, and Company*, pp. 289–98.

In his depiction of Molly, Joyce seems simultaneously to identify her as the life source, the earth-goddess so many feminist critics celebrate, and to undercut the seriousness with which we are to take ~~that~~ association. Upon a careful reading, her celebrated sexual freedom seems more imaginary than real and more conventional than disruptive. In the midst of her musings, she pauses to slight the atheists, who "might as well try to stop the sun from rising" as to uproot belief in God from the human heart.⁸⁰ Her conception of God as a just judge is blandly traditional. The question of the divine is intimately connected to the question of directedness. The link between the two is, as Sultan has noted, providence. Ample use of coincidence by an author leads inevitably to the question of who is orchestrating events and thus to the question of providence, the third relevant issue. Defending an alternative to the deconstructive reading of Joyce, then, would involve an articulation of the explicit and implicit theology of his works.

Even if the theological element in Joyce can be resurrected in this way, it will remain the case that his theism is far from that of Aquinas. It might seem to occupy an uneasy middle position between the orthodoxy of Aquinas and the blatant secularism of the self-proclaimed post-modernists. Such an approach is popular among those who wish to fend off nihilism without embracing revealed religion.⁸¹ Of course, the Nietzschean rejoinder is that such an approach is an unwarranted and incoherent attempt to retain the rudiments of Christian morality and certain of its symbolic elements while disregarding their peculiar historical origins. In their pessimism regarding the prospects for the success of such a theism, Nietzsche and Aquinas are closer to one another than either is to Joyce.

As is true of many of the issues we have touched upon, Joyce's dramatic reckoning with theism and the threat of nihilism merits further literary and philosophical analysis.

⁸⁰ Joyce, *Ulysses*, chap. XVIII, lines 1561–70.

⁸¹ See James Edwards, *The Plain Sense of Things: The Fate of Religion in an Age of Normal Nihilism* (University Park, Pennsylvania: The University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997).