A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man  
From Modernism Lab Essays

Like T.S. Eliot’s “Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” James Joyce’s Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man (1916), though a work of youth, seems prematurely aged. Joyce treats his fictional version of his younger self with a mixture of irony and sympathy. The novel tells the story of Stephen Dedalus, a young Irishman, from earliest childhood until his decision to leave Ireland for Paris and become a writer. Before achieving his destiny as an artist, however, the young man experiences various epiphanies, mostly misleading ones.

The early chapters of the novel chronicle Stephen’s confusions as a small boy at a strict Jesuit school; in his adolescence, he visits prostitutes and wallows in sin; later, he becomes deeply religious and considers entering the priesthood; finally, he recognizes that his destiny is to become not a Catholic priest but a writer, “a priest of eternal imagination, transmuting the daily bread of experience into the radiant body of everliving life.” Joyce signals Stephen’s premature agedness when, after hearing the catalogue of his sins, “a squalid stream of vice,” at confession, a priest asks him his age and Stephen responds: “Sixteen, father.”

The distinctive characteristic of Joyce’s storytelling is his attempt to represent each stage of the boy’s developing consciousness in the language through which the child himself perceives the world. Thus, the narrative itself demonstrates the artist’s exploration of language. On the opening page, the novel relates the child’s impressions of hearing a fairy tale and wetting the bed: “When you wet the bed first it is warm then it gets cold. His mother put on the oilsheet. That had the queer smell.” As the novel progresses, Stephen continually meditates on sights, sounds, smells, and especially words: green, maroon, suck, queer, Dolan, Heron, foetus, sin, home, Christ, ale, master, tundish, esthetic, lyrical, epical, dramatic. In earlier semi-autobiographical novels about the life of an artist, such as Dickens’s David Copperfield (1849-50) or Great
Expectations (1860-61), the narrator generally speaks from a safe distance. He has undergone some transformation or maturation and remembers childhood from afar. In Portrait, the remembered childhood is narrated from the perspective of the child. Joyce accomplishes this linguistically, through a development of the technique of free indirect discourse.

The critic Hugh Kenner named Joyce’s version of free indirect discourse the “Uncle Charles Principle” and illustrated it with this passage: “Every morning, therefore, uncle Charles repaired to his outhouse but not before he had creased and brushed scrupulously his back hair and brushed and put on his tall hat.” One critic objected to “repaired to the outhouse” as euphemistic, but Kenner noted that the expression is what Uncle Charles himself would say. For the most part, the novel seems to be told from the perspective and with the language of Stephen himself at various ages, but at times, the narrator is relating not what Stephen himself thinks, but what the character being described (such as Uncle Charles) thinks, or perhaps what Stephen thinks that the character thinks, so that we are getting Stephen’s own artistic way of viewing the world through the minds of others. This complex play with perspective became characteristic of modernism and is closely related to Woolf’s later experiments in To the Lighthouse (1927).

Joyce explicitly modeled his techniques on Flaubert’s. If Flaubert leaves the reader in some doubt as to how to judge Emma Bovary, however, Joyce gives the reader virtually no external information with which to judge Stephen Dedalus. The final pages of the novel consist of Stephen’s diary for the days before his departure for Paris. In the penultimate entry, he writes “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.” Joyce refuses any comment. The reader must decide whether Stephen will succeed in this glorious goal or whether, like Icarus the son of Daedalus, his wings will melt and he will fall into the sea. The close identification between author and hero,
combined with the absence of a distinct omniscient narrator who can comment on the action, leaves the question of Joyce’s irony towards Stephen wide open.

The attempt to render Stephen’s growing consciousness can be seen as a precursor of the stream-of-consciousness novel, which represents the thoughts of a character in a sort of continuous present as they pass through his or her mind. The long time frame and focus on development in Portrait distinguish it from the stream-of-consciousness novel in this narrower sense, but passages like Stephen’s diary hint at Joyce’s later experiments.

This page has been adapted from Pericles Lewis's Cambridge Introduction to Modernism (Cambridge UP, 2007), pp.122-124.