Khrrrrklak:
Stephen's Deconstruction of Himself through a Series of Alternative Identities

As he walks along Sandymount Strand in the "Proteus" chapter of James Joyce's Ulysses, Stephen Dedalus's immediate surroundings prompt him to meditate on the world around him. Yet for all his efforts to "read" the deeper metaphysical meanings latent in these surroundings, Stephen categorically resists mulling over the one aspect of his environment that would seem to matter to him the most: himself. This is not to say that Stephen never thinks of himself or what is going on in his life as he meanders along the Strand. On the contrary, no matter how far-ranging or obscure his thoughts become, Stephen's musings always channel themselves back into the anxieties he feels over the recent turn of events that have come to define his everyday life. Since he cannot mentally or emotionally deal with these anxieties, however, he spends much of "Proteus" channeling thoughts related to these anxieties back into the philosophical arguments and creative mental scenes so conducive to his artistic turn of mind.

Tellingly, the most effective strategy Stephen has for diverting away these anxious personal thoughts is identifying his situation with similar situations experienced by various literary and historical figures. This process of identification proves effective in helping Stephen circumvent his personal troubles because it calls strongly on his intellect; by forcing himself to invest his intellectual and imaginative faculties in the situations of other people, Stephen is able to temporarily escape the confines of his life and its attendant worries.

Stephen's reliance on this mental strategy becomes more and more pronounced as "Proteus" goes on, to the point where he stops merely identifying with literary and historical figures and starts literally imagining himself in their places. He then takes this progression away

from himself one step further, inhabiting imaginary doppelganger selves that place him at an even greater remove from his anxieties without ever letting him entirely escape them. The result is a string of alternative identities for Stephen that generally occur in response to the three main nodes around which his personal problems center: his family, his artistic ambitions, and his Irish heritage. Ultimately, Joyce uses these identities to show Stephen in the process of learning how to deconstruct himself and his personal fears by imagining himself in positions other than his own—a psychological process that will be crucial to Stephen in his quest to define himself as an author.

Stephen first trades out his identity for an alternative identity in order to escape the anxiety he feels at being born into a lower class Irish family. Intriguingly, Stephen's desire to give up his identity as a member of the Dedalus family is rooted in a supposed identity theft committed by Stephen's father: "[I was made by] the man with my voice and my eyes" (Ulysses, 3.45-6). Contrary to the natural order of things, Stephen claims that his father has his voice and his eyes, not that he has the voice and eyes of his father. In thus inverting the natural progression of genetic traits from father to son, Stephen gives the impression that his father has somehow taken his voice and his eyes from him—in a sense, that he has unrightfully taken two crucial pieces of Stephen's identity. The result is a family dynamic inverted from the norm: whereas most people feel that they derive a good part of their identity from their fathers and other family members, Stephen feels that his family (and particularly his father) has taken a good part of its identity from him. The result is an identity theft that runs oddly athwart of nature.

Stephen tries to reclaim his identity from his family throughout Portrait and Ulysses by creating identities for himself that are separate from his identity as a member of the family. He even tries to do so as a child, telling "the Clongowes gentry [that he] had an uncle a judge and a uncle a general in the army" (3.101-102). By the time that the events in "Proteus" occur, however, Stephen has started to ponder how much of his identity he does in fact owe to his family. Characteristically, Stephen escapes the emotional strain of the issue by means of a mental problem in which he implicitly substitutes himself and his father into the theological problem of how God the Father relates to God the Son. Tellingly, he first performs this substitution only a few sentences after he refers to his father as taking his eyes and his voice: "They [Stephen's parents] clasped and sundered, did the coupler's will. . . . A *lex eterna* stays about Him. Is that then the divine substance wherein Father and Son are consubstantial?" (3.47-50). Stephen then goes on to refer to Arius, the first century "heresiarch" who argued for the transubstantiality "of the Father over the Son" (Gifford, 3.50-52).

Taken together, these two remarks show Stephen mentally trading places with Christ in the Holy Trinity and invoking a theologian who said that God and Jesus are not of the same substance. Combined, they comprise a mental maneuver that allows Stephen an intellectually aloof way of conceptualizing his own identity as distinct from the identity of his father and, consequently, his family. More importantly, it takes the emotional sting out of what Stephen is really saying: namely, that he wants to be nothing like his father and wants to be as separate from his family as possible.

Stephen's anxiety over his family is not nearly as prominent throughout "Proteus" as his anxiety over his artistic ambitions, however. After reflecting on the decay of the house of his

family as well as the decay of all Irish houses, Stephen ponders his desire to create beauty as an artist:

> Come out of [these houses of decay], Stephen. Beauty is not there. Nor in the stagnant bay of Marsh's library where you read the fading prophecies of Joachim Abbas. For whom? The hundredheaded rabble of the cathedral close. A hater of his kind ran from them to the woods of madness, his mane foaming in the moon, his eyeballs stars. Houyhnhnm, horsenostrilled. A garland of grey hair on his comminated head see him me clambering down to footpace. . . . (Ulysses, 3.106-115)

Though it may not seem like it at first, Stephen's above vision of Jonathan Swift cuts across many of his fears pertaining to his vocation as an artist. The first is the poignant sense of isolation that Stephen's self-imposed exile from other people has brought him. Stephen arrogantly declares this exile towards the conclusion of Portrait when he says that ". . .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" (Portrait, p. 268-9). By the time the events in "Proteus" take place, however, Stephen has had some time to feel the full effect of this exile, including the isolation that prompts him to declare that: "I am lonely here. . . . I am quiet here alone. Sad too. Touch me, touch me" (Ulysses, 3.433-5).

Stephen's imagining of himself as Swift (whom he describes as "him me") fleeing from his congregants cuts to the quick of Stephen's professed loneliness. Important to note is that Swift is not only cut off from what he degradingly calls the "hundredheaded rabble" of his congregation but that his status as a "hater of his kind" has driven him to a solitary existence in "the woods of madness". Crucial to Stephen's imagining of Swift here is that Swift's artistic fame rests on works such as Gulliver's Travels that are thought to be founded upon Swift's deep hatred for his fellow man (Gifford, 3.109-10). Consequently, Stephen's vision of himself as Swift

beautifully illustrates his fears of what his self-imposed artistic exile may lead to: namely, that the isolation he already feels may turn into insanity, and that such insanity may be the price he has to pay if he is to ever achieve literary immortality on a par with Swift.

Stephen's temporary identity switch with Swift also has interesting artistic ramifications in light of Stephen's refusal to join the priesthood in section IV of Portrait. Unlike Stephen, Swift opted for artistry *and* the priesthood, a double-vocation the inherent tension of which Stephen calls to mind when imagining Dryden speaking to him/Swift: "Cousin Stephen, you will never be a saint. Isle of saints. You were awfully holy, weren't you?" (Ulysses, 3.128). Stephen's imagined phrase comes from a similar comment Dryden once made to Swift: "Cousin Swift, you will never be a poet" (Gifford, 3.128). The alterations Stephen makes are telling: in trading "saint" for "poet", he once again renounces his potential identity as a priest, but he also brings in the question of vocation as it pertains to poetry and the arts. In effect, Stephen seems to be implicitly wondering whether his self-determined vocation as an artist is his true calling or whether he is simply faking a sense of destiny. Stephen may never be a saint, but the tacit question of whether or not he will be an artist worries him enough to launch him into an excoriation of his own literary ambitions the instant his vision of himself as Swift dissipates (Ulysses, 136-146).

A final alternative identity of Stephen's that gets at the core of his artistic anxiety occurs not between Stephen and a literary or historical figure but between Stephen and an imaginary doppelganger. Stephen conjures up this doppelganger in one of his more disturbing recollections of his time in Paris:

> Just say in the most natural tone: when I was in Paris, *boul' Mich'*, I used to. Yes, [I] used to carry punched tickets to prove an alibi if they arrested [me] for

> murder somewhere. Justice. On the night of the seventeenth of February 1904 the prisoner was seen by two witnesses. Other fellow did it: other me. *Lui, c'est moi.* You seem to have enjoyed yourself. (3.178-183)

Stephens ostentatious reference to the *boul' Mich'*, or the Boulevard Saint-Michel, once again brings to mind his artistic ambitions (the *boul' Mich'* was a renowned hangout for aspiring young artists), but the context in which he makes that reference seems to suggest some sort of psychological link in his mind between art and murder. Curiously enough, Stephen never explains why he feels the need for an alibi for murder while in Paris. But even more curious is that when Stephen imagines himself being arrested, he does not claim that he is innocent, but that the perpetrator of the murder was some other version of himself that cannot be justified by the paper tickets "Stephen proper" carries around. What's more, whether or not Stephen knows it, the murder Joyce is referring to was an actual murder committed in Dublin "off Stephen Street" and charged by a judge named "Mr. Swift", recalling not only Stephen's vision of himself as Jonathan Swift but all the artistic anxieties associated with it. Whatever Joyce's specific intention is in blending all of these elements together, the overall impression is that Stephen's decision to leave his family and pursue his artistic ambitions in Paris is so fraught with guilt and anxiety that he associates his decision with murder, whether or not he is consciously aware of it. Try as he might to pawn the blame for this "art murder" off on a doppelganger, however, Stephen seems unable to fully foist his guilt onto one of his imagined identities—that is, onto some "other me".

The final node of real-life anxiety that Stephen tries to avoid by trading places with certain imagined identities is his uneasiness over his Irish heritage. Once again, a good jumping-off point can be found in Stephen's imagining of Dryden telling him/Swift that he "will

never be a saint", prompting Stephen to recall that one of Ireland's epithets is the "isle of saints" (3.128). In addition to shutting Stephen out from the priesthood, Dryden's imaginary comment, by a process of simple substitution, seems to be Stephen's way of telling himself that he will never be Irish. The substitution is especially fitting because, like the priesthood, Stephen also renounces Ireland when he is still very young; now a little bit older, Stephen has had more of a chance to think over what that renunciation truly means.

Stephen's grappling with this renunciation occurs more strongly in relation to his acquaintanceship with the Irish expat Kevin Egan. Like Stephen, Egan has forced himself into exile in Paris, but unlike Stephen, Egan spends most of his time "remembering thee, O Sion"—that is, drinking heavily and wallowing in Irish nostalgia. Characteristically, Stephen finds Egan's nostalgia nauseating (though he willing sits through it), as evident in his summation of Egan's stories about the Fenians:

> How the head centre [James Stephens] got away, authentic version. Got up as a young bride, man, veil, orangeblossoms, drove out the road to Malahid. Did, faith. Of lost leaders, the betrayed, wild escapes. Disguises, clutched at, gone, not here. (3.241-44)

Stephen's description of "lost leaders" and "the betrayed" is typical of his view of Irish politics and their constant dynamics of betrayal and failed leaders—dynamics consistent enough for Stephen's words to apply just as aptly to Parnell as they do to Stephens. Yet what's really interesting in Stephen's disdainful comment about would-be Irish revolutionaries such as Egan and Stephens is Stephen's contempt for their 'clutched at, missing disguises'. Ostensibly, Stephen is referring to the story that Stephens disguised himself as a woman to escape Ireland (Gifford, 3.241). Yet, though he may not be aware of it, Stephen could just as easily be talking about himself: like the countrymen he has renounced, Stephen too is clutching at disguises in

the form of the many identities he mentally inhabits in order to get away from his worries, including those worries related to his heritage as an Irishman.

Stephen's inadvertent description of himself as yet another Irishman clutching at a disguise takes on an even more pointed meaning when he criticizes himself for hoping to gain his countrymen's praise by means of his art: "For what are you pining, the bark of their applause? Pretenders: live their lives. . . . All king's sons. Paradise of pretenders then and now" (Ulysses 3.312-17). Crucial to understanding the full impact of this passage is the passage that directly precedes it, in which Stephen imagines himself as a ghost watching his ancestors hack apart a beached whale: "Their blood is in me, their lusts my waves. I moved among them on the frozen Liffey, that I, a changeling, among the spluttering resin fires. I spoke to no-one: none to me" (3.6-9). Stephen is again invoking his doppelganger, his "other me", only this time his other self is watching violence instead of actively participating in it. The image of Stephen's doppelganger as an isolated specter watching the brutality of his fellow Irish citizens can serve as an apt metaphor for Stephen's detached observation of Irish politics. Yet Stephen also says that the barbaric lust of his ancestors' blood is in him: removed as he may be from their violent activities, he still partakes of their violence by means of being their offspring.

Consequently, though Stephen may view Ireland as a "paradise of pretenders", he himself cannot claim to be separate from the chronic pretending that he sees as permeating Irish politics and culture. Unlike most of his fellow Irish, however, Stephen's pretending is an artistic pretending—though he himself is constantly between artistic disguises and traded identities, these "other" Stephens are at least of his own creation and, on the surface at least,

free from the anxieties of family, artistry, and heritage that cause Stephen's "true" self so much suffering.

By the end of "Proteus", Stephen has managed to temporarily trade his way through several identities and selves, undergoing a series of Protean metamorphoses in response to pressure of being pinned down by his everyday worries and fears. The result is a semi-controlled atomization of Stephen's sense of self, the effect of which recalls Stephen's violent fantasy killing of a Paris poster worker: "shoot him to bloody bits with a bang shotgun, bits man spattered walls all brass buttons. Bits all khrrrrklak in place clack black" (3.187-88). Like the shot-gunned postal worker, Stephen's sense of self is blasted to bits throughout "Proteus" as his anxieties prompt him to search for other selves to temporarily inhabit. The question, however, is whether Stephen will ever "clack back" into the fully formed artistic self he desperately longs to be. True to form, Joyce never does show Stephen fully put back together again, even after the novel reaches its finish. But by showing him beginning to grasp the psychological process of taking on other identities—a process crucial to the kind of character creating abilities necessary to become a competent artist—Joyce hints that Stephen will one day be the kind of author who can write a book as complex and filled with other selves as Ulysses.

Works Cited

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