# An Artistic Composition of Hell

Stephen's visualization of Hell is juxtaposed with its traditional description provided by the Catholic Church in Chapter Three of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man.* These two detailed versions are paradoxically similar and dissimilar at the same time. Both destinations are characterized by: repetitive diction; the torment of the sinner's visionary, auditory, and olfactory senses; open-mouthed images of the damned, their eternal murmurings, foul stenches, and "suffocating filth" (122). The principle difference between the two versions is that the Church's fundamental focus on eternal punishment utilizes physical torture, which, interestingly, Stephen's Hell completely lacks. While the idea of an eternity with physical torture is understandably frightening to his peers at Clongowes, Stephen's Hell is far more personal and intellectually gruesome; its imagery is borrowed from his past experiences and serves to aggravate his innermost horrors. It appeals to unconscious fears that, for him, supersede physical pain: the "soiling" of something otherwise innocent; mental and physical paralysis; and his family's impending poverty. For Stephen, all of these obstacles are fatal to the obsessively scripted life of his imagining—which is his greatest fear of all. His visualization of Hell can be viewed as a detailed composition of imaginative art that is ultimately a personal triumph over both the oppressive Church and his greatest fear.

The pastoral imagery of the landscape and its creatures is fundamental to Stephen's vision of Hell and unquestionably echoes the cowyard scene in chapter two when he sees for the first time a field empty of "the cattle which had seemed so beautiful"(63). He laments over "the filthy cowyard at Stradbrook with its foul green puddles and clots of liquid dung" (63), and defines his sudden feelings of revulsion towards cattle as to the point that he "could not even look at the milk they yielded" (63). Stephen's visual and olfactory accounts of his Hell deeply

mirror that of this cowyard scene, describing the landscape as: "A field of stiff weeds… Thick among the tufts of rank stiff growth lay battered canisters and clots and coils of solid excrement" and "stale crusted dung" (137). Also strikingly similar between these two scenes are the animals referenced: cattle and goats—both of which are pastoral animals that produce milk. The presence of the goats in Stephen's Hell correspond to the revulsion experienced in chapter two with the defilement of the cattle which he originally found beautiful. Both scenes speak directly to his fear of the otherwise pure and innocent becoming spoiled and dirty. This concept has profound resonances of Catholicism and proves to be a constant struggle for Stephen throughout the novel due to his rigorous Catholic upbringing.

The goatish creatures' importance extend beyond their representation of spoiled innocence. There is a marked significance behind the repetitive and counterproductive nature of their rhythmic motions: essentially movements and shapes that have no endpoint. To emphasize this, Joyce utilizes onomatopoeia to name and describe the endless "hither and thither" motion—a motion that continuously reverses its previous movement and thus lacks progress. Consequently, this motion signifies both eternity and paralysis. To add to the stagnation, this "winding hither and thither" phrase describes the individual movement of each creature within the more uniform yet still futile movement of all six creatures collectively in "slow circles" (thus, still lacking progress and finality). The phrase "hither and thither" is reused often throughout the remainder of the book following Stephen's vision of Hell. It is generally his own unconscious reference to his current state of paralysis: either mental as on page 161: "a din of meaningless words drove his reasoned thoughts hither and thither confusedly"; or physical as with his inability to approach the "seabird girl" moving her foot in the same fashion at the end of Chapter

four. This paralysis of thought and action is yet another obstacle that Stephen struggles with during his childhood and adolescent years.

The remaining details of this composition are the initially puzzling images of a "torn flannel waistcoat" (138) worn by one of the goatish creatures and the two references to "battered/rattling canisters" (137/138). While their presence is seemingly inappropriate in a destination such as Hell, these images are meaningful if the Dedalus family's fast-approaching poverty is taken into account. The nature of the material is important; flannel is known for its ability to sustain warmth, thus originally making it popular among blue-collar workers in cold environments, such as farmers. Also significant is the quality of the waistcoat, being in a torn and weathered state. Furthermore, the scanty clothing is mirrored by the animal that wears it: a farm animal, thus also alluding to blue collar individuals--possibly more specifically to the impoverished state of Irish farmers during the period in which the novel takes place. When the waistcoat is coupled with that of the dump-like presence of rattling canisters, the reader can understand that these images are indicative of Stephen's fear of poverty.

Stephen's vision of Hell is a triumph for him for various reasons. First, he has triumphed over the Church, freeing himself of the images and fears they attempted to forcefully instill in him and instead fearing only that which is relevant to his life. Secondly, it is an artistic triumph, as his composition--though less violent--is insurmountably more eerie and terrible than the theatrically trite version provided by the preacher. Finally and incredibly ironically, Stephen's composition is in fact a triumph over his greatest fear itself. His Hell is comprised of obstacles capable of spoiling the carefully controlled life scripted in his mind. In imagining such a place, Stephen has succeeding in scripting, and thus controlling, all that he fears most.