

Stephen's Aesthetic theory in "Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man" by James Joyce

by Dr. Ashoke Kumar Agarwal

Stephen's aesthetic theory, which he himself called, "applied Aquinas", is the most debated and discussed issue in the novel. Whether Stephen used Aquinas as the foundation of his theory or not, the later additions and modifications to it prove Joyce's ingenuity. S. Forster Damon asserts that Stephen "has mastered Aquinas and Aristotle so well that he saw the whole world through their eyes". Some also find incompatibility between what Stephen preaches and what he does. Actually, Stephen's source is Aquinas, but he manipulates the Thomistic principles in such a way to serve his own necessity that it ultimately becomes his own.

The theory advanced in 'A Portrait' appeared fragmentarily in two earlier forms: in Joyce's notes, first published in Herbert German's 1940 Biography, and in the rejected version of A Portrait as 'Stephen Hero' (1944). In his theory, Stephen draws three main principles from two statements by Aquinas. He begins saying, "Aristotle has not defined pity and terror. I have." Both 'terror' and 'pity', he avers, 'arrest' the mind in the presence of whatsoever is grave and constant. What Stephen means is that the word 'arrest' refers to the static quality of pure art which elevates mind, "I mean that the tragic emotion is static". On the contrary, art which arouses 'desire' or 'loathing' is 'kinetic' – it is didactic or pornographic in nature. Beauty, Stephen further says, must be separated from good and evil, because good and evil excite the kinetic emotions of desire or loathing. The concept of art as 'static' and the separation of beauty from good and evil are based upon one sentence by Aquinas: Pulchra sunt quoe visa placent (That is beautiful the apprehension of which pleases). Stephen's theory here is thus amoral – he seems to believe in art for arts' sake.

In the next section Stephen defines art: art is the human disposition of sensible or intelligible matters for an aesthetic end. Truth and beauty are recognized by Stephen as by Keats, to be akin. Joyce's essay on James Clarence Mangan (1902) also states "Beauty, the splendour of truth, is a gracious presence.... and beauty is the holy spirit of joy." By the time, Joyce wrote the Portrait however the holy spirit of joy becomes less celestial, but he retained the conviction that beauty is the splendour of truth.

After defining art, Stephen mentions Aquinas' conditions for beauty – "Integratus, consonantia, claritus," translated as 'Wholeness', 'Harmony' and 'Radiance', and proceeds to define them. On looking at the basket he tells Lynch, the mind first separates the basket from its surroundings and thus sees it as 'one thing' – this Stephen terms as 'wholeness'. Having recognized the basket as 'one thing', one now notices, "its formal lines ... feel the rhythm of its structure... feel now that it is 'a thing'". This he terms as 'harmony'. The quiddities, the

whatness shining out of the perceived object is the 'radiance'. Actually, the original connotation of the word 'claritus' was somewhat 'spiritual' – but in Joyce it is purely aesthetic.

Stephen concludes his theory by defining in brief the three main literary types – the lyric, the epic and the drama. The lyric is entirely subjective, the epic portrays the artist in immediate relation to himself and others, whereas, drama is exclusively objective. But these forms interpenetrate, or rather form a natural continuum so that the personality of the artist gradually develops and moves from the lyrical through the epical to the dramatic. In stating this Stephen actually agrees with Eliot that the dramatic is the highest form of art and that there should be a separation between 'the man who suffers and the mind which creates'. In fact, David Daiches finds this novel lyrical in its first section, epical in the second, and dramatic in the third. Interestingly Joyce's career also may be described as lyrical (Portrait), epical (Ulysses) and dramatic (Finnegan's Wake).

However, it seems that the conditions of Stephen's aesthetic theory have been violated by Joyce himself. Stephen's belief that art should take into consideration and arouse only artistic sensations has been proved meaningless as the novel hints at the myriad impressions regarding the Irish religio-political condition among the readers. The concluding diary entries also show the incapability of the fifth chapter to become fully dramatic. Perhaps Stephen's theory is too narrow, as it lacks the warmth of humanity, compassion, charity and understanding,

Maurice Beebe in his famous article, "Joyce and Aquinas: The Theory of Aesthetic", emphatically says, "We have seen that Joyce consistently secularises Aquinas." In fact, Aquinas' definition of beauty appears as a passing reference in a section on "God, the divine unity". But Stephen, or for that matter Joyce, dissociates it from the altar and secularizes the Thomistic insistence on the artist's moral obligations by demanding instead intellectual or psychological obligations. By equating the artist to God, Beebe proves, under the guise of traditionalism, Stephen advances a theory that is revolutionary – or if traditional, closer to the tradition of Gustave Flaubert, Henry James & Walter Pater than to the tradition of the Thomists.