

OID, MYTH AND EXILE
IN JOYCE'S *A PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST AS A YOUNG MAN*

Nicoleta Stanca
Ovidius University, Constanța

Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* starts with an epigraph from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*: "*Et ignotas animam dimittit in artes*", meaning "Then to new arts his cunning thought applies" and the line continues in the classical writer's text: "And to improve the work of Nature tries" (VIII 189-190). This is a portrait by the classical writer of Daedalus, the famous sculptor who allegedly created the first statues with legs apart: "He was the first, that from a knob of brass/ Made two strait arms with widening stretch to pass" (Ovid VIII 242-243) and the first man who attempted to fly with wings created by himself together with his son, Icarus: "since none, but they,/ Thro' their own azure skies cou'd find a way (Ovid VIII 268-269). If we also consider Joyce's protagonist, Stephen Dedalus, who, in the last lines of the novel, invokes the "Old father, old artificer" (Joyce 288), we may conclude, only by looking at the beginning and the ending of the novel, that Daedalus both begins and ends the novel, offering one of the major keys for reading it. Thus, the aim of this article is to show the relevance of reading Joyce through the lens of the "mythical method", the concept defined by T.S. Eliot in his essay on Joyce's *Ulysses*, and as a revisitation of Ovid's story of the labyrinth and the myth of Daedalus and Icarus.

The two legends mentioned were tackled by Ovid in Book VIII in his *Metamorphoses*, which was presumably finished around AD 8, the date of Ovid's exile, when Augustus's rule had been long in effect and the republic still existed but within a more tyrannical frame. Thus, the essence of *Metamorphoses* could be comprised in two words *omnia mutantur* ("everything changes"), as the Augustan writers, like Ovid, tried to understand the transformations of their world. Ovid's book is mainly illustrative of Roman and Greek myths of changes of human beings into birds, animals, trees, rock and natural phenomena, trying to give a symbolic account of the origin of things. Joyce's *Portrait* is equally a book about change since it is concerned with Stephen's early experiences at home and school, his adolescent crisis and his final urge to forge himself into an artist, who would create his own individual voice while maintaining the link with his community: "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" (288). Interestingly, this is also a book about the

changes in Joyce's life, since he decided just like the protagonist of his novel to leave for Paris (he left Dublin in 1902; he lived the life of an exile; he was convinced of the necessity of escaping Ireland, so he would spend nearly all his mature life in Europe), and it is also a book about the Ireland in the 1920s, when the republic finally got its independence.

Ovid gives in his *Metamorphoses* a full account of the legend of the labyrinth and the story of Daedalus and Icarus. Minos, son of Zeus and Europa, refused to sacrifice a white bull that Poseidon had sent for that purpose. Poseidon punished the king by causing his wife, Pasiphaë, to lust after the white bull. She made Daedalus, the court artisan to create a hollow wooden cow within which she might consummate her passion with the bull. To hide their shame, Minos concealed the offspring of this union, the Minotaur, in the labyrinth built by Daedalus. The monster with the body of a man and the head of a bull became the bovine god of Crete to whom, every eight years, seven Athenian young men and maidens were sacrificed.

Daedalus had designed the labyrinth in such a way that no man, having once entered, could find his way out. It was a prison, into which Minos threw Daedalus and Icarus as a punishment for having created the wooden cow: "And Daedalus was puzzled how to find/ The secret ways of what himself design'd" (Ovid 173-174). Daedalus's craft was thus tested by his imprisonment within his own creation. According to Ovid, if Daedalus found his way out, he could not have escaped because Minos had blocked all exits from Crete by land or sea:

In tedious exile now too long detain'd,
Daedalus languish'd for his native land:
The sea foreclos'd his flight; yet thus he said:
Tho' Earth and water in subjection laid,
O cruel Minos, thy dominion by,
We'll go thro' air; for sure the air is free. (183-185)

Daedalus solved the problem by inventing wax wings for himself and Icarus. In spite of his father's advice, Icarus flew too close to the sun, the wax melted and he found his death in the sea. Thus, the only two people to have escaped the labyrinth were Daedalus and the Athenian prince Theseus, who killed the Minotaur and found his way through Ariadne's help.

Similarly, Stephen will find himself imprisoned in his family home, by his religion and in his country in general and the images of the birds contemplated by him at key moments in the novel are symbolical of his longing for escape and flight. The imagery of flight is involved in references to the myth of Daedalus (the hawlike man), to birds, bats and Lucifer; characters bear birds' names: Cranley, Heron; the eagle is the one to pluck out the boy's eyes if he disobeys, yet the hawlike man and the wading girl

looking like a bird will confirm the protagonist's development and his refusal to obey authority. Joyce uses the motif of the bird similarly to Keats's nightingale, whose song may be seen as the eternal beauty of the poet's song; Joyce allies the artist's vocation with these winged creatures. The myth of the labyrinth deals actually with lust, imprisonment, betrayal, sacrificial death and exile (Fortuna 188), which are revisited by Joyce in the novel in question and in his all other writings as a matter of fact.

This paper will also attempt to show why Joyce may have chosen the name Stephen Dedalus for his protagonist in *A Portrait*. Stephen, the first Christian martyr and Daedalus, the first artist of the classical world, confer authority on Stephen, a young Irishman willing to become an artist and "forge a skillfully wrought aesthetic" (Fortuna 188). Both Diane Fortuna in her article "The Art of the Labyrinth" (187-212) and Marguerite Harkness, in her book on *A Portrait* (66-69), discuss the significance of names in Joyce's book. The reader only finds out Stephen's name when he goes to school (Clongowes Wood College), presumably at six, and is questioned by a colleague regarding his name and father:

What is your name?

Stephen has answered.

- Stephen Dedalus.

Then Nasty Roche had said:

- What kind of a man is that?

And when Stephen had not been able to answer Nasty Roche had asked:

- What is your father?

- A gentleman.

The Nasty Roche had asked:

- Is he a magistrate? (Joyce 8-9)

The name was Latin: *daedalus*, from the Greek *daidalos*, meaning "skillfully or cunningly wrought" and was derived from the Greek mythic artist, Daedalus, the legendary inventor of "axes, plumb lines, masts of ships and dolls, especially those used as votive offerings; sculptor who first separated the legs of statues; and architect of the labyrinth built for the Cretan king, Minos" (Fortuna 187). Stephen's father is named Simon, which could be read as an anagram for Minos and the mentioning of the magistrate could be another mythological reference to a magistrate in Hades, Minos, who, according to Homer in the *Odyssey*, became a judge of the dead.

While walking on the beach, Stephen hears his classmates call him mockingly "Stephanos Dedalos! Bous Stephanoumenos! Bous Stephaneforos" (Joyce 192) [Martyr and cunning one! Martyred Bull! Crown-bearing Bull!]. "Both crowned celebrant and crowned victim,

Stephen is the priest about to be bathed in the blood of the bull and the animal about to be sacrificed” (Fortuna 206). Mythology, symbolized by Daedalus, and Christianity, represented by St. Stephen, are, thus, interwoven through Joyce’s protagonist.

Stephen sees in his name his destiny:

Now, as never before, his strange name seemed to him a prophecy ... Now, at the name of the fabulous artificer, he seemed to hear the noise of dim waves and to see a winged form flying above the waves and slowly climbing the air ... Was it a quaint device opening a page of some medieval book of prophecies and symbols, a hawlike man flying sunward above the sea, a prophecy of the end he had been born to serve and had been following through the mists of childhood, a symbol of the artist forging anew in his workshop out of the sluggish matter of the earth a new soaring impalpable imperishable being? (Joyce 192)

The discovery of his destiny in his name leads directly to the vision of the girl on the beach, under whose eyes he is transfigured. Stephen’s path leads him to the bird-girl, an Ariadne figure, traditionally associated with a bird, the crane. After leaving Crete, she accompanied Dionysus, another bull-god, and presided over death and rebirth, guiding the soul towards a new existence. This is how Joyce uses the Ariadne-girl, who initiates Stephen into a new life of art, which throws “open before him in an instant of ecstasy the gates of all the ways of error and glory. On and on and on and on!” (Joyce 196).

According to Diane Fortuna, “Stephen is the bull victim who dies in order to live again. His boyhood is dead, and he is reborn as the artist as a young man, purified of the fear and guilt that has attended his entry into the labyrinth of the book” (Joyce 207). If Stephen is to be taken as Daedalus’s son, he may be reconsidered in terms of Icarus’s destiny as well. As the son of the great artificer, he may not only be destined to fall from grace, in the Catholic sense, when Stephen gives up priesthood but he may die like Icarus by falling into the sea, as suggested by Stephen’s classmates crying: “ - O cripes, I’m drowned” (Joyce 193). However, the Icarian fall may be considered crucial to genuine art and a fortunate fall, like that of Eden, because it made possible the redemption through Christ (Harkness 68).

Another element which may have led Joyce to his particular interest in the Daedalian myth was the rediscovery of the labyrinth, around 1900-1911 (Fortuna 188). In the Ireland of Joyce’s day, the classical tradition was the foundation of the educational system. Classical studies included ancient literature, history, language, mythology, philosophy, archeology and anthropology. Under the circumstances, it is easy to understand the scholarly

public excitement in April 1900, when the *Times* of London let its readers know that Arthur Evans had discovered the ancient palace of Minos. The excavations supported details of the myth, with rituals based on bull worship. Evans received, among others, an honorary degree from the University of Dublin. At the time, Joyce was in his third year at University College, so he must have been familiar with Evans's name and his discovery. Evans's achievement was popularized over the next ten years in various journals and magazines, such as *the Fortnightly Review*, in which Joyce published his review of Ibsen in 1900. In the winter of 1902-1903, under the auspices of the Royal Society, Burlington House exhibited Evans's collection of Cretan art. Joyce was in London for a day on his way to Paris (December 1-2, 1902) to see W.B. Yeats and Arthur Symons (Fortuna 190). Later, Joyce was calling himself Stephen Dedalus, using the pseudonym in his letters and his first published short stories.

Labyrinths have fascinated generations of writers, historians, anthropologists and researchers of all kinds, whose works must have been familiar to Joyce. They were considered to symbolize the tortuous route of the Inferno. Initiatory journeys of the dead took place in such structures. For Virgil, the labyrinth symbolized hell; Aeneas entered the cave to Tartarus and descends through the dark windings. Interestingly, pagan rituals of life and death could be assimilated to the Christian pattern of life, death and resurrection. Moreover, mazes are not meant to be entirely unconquerable. Mazes teach us about how the mind, socially programmed in regard to space, works. Thus, Stephen, following Daedalus's example, will attempt to set his mind to making the unknown become less of a limit and to search for new moves in old spaces.

Critics consider that both the structure and the imagery in *A Portrait* follow the legend of the labyrinth. According to Fortuna, "no novel has ever wound itself through so many repetitions of prior incidents, so many recapitulations of terms associated with winding corridors, threads, and mazes, so many deliberate passages in which the protagonist seems to be involved in an intricate initiation that includes caves; gates; staircases; riddles; dances; divination; auguries; ritual birth; death and rebirth; nets; snares; hidings; escapes; and finally ascension" (195). Therefore, many early Joyceans used the term labyrinth to characterize the novel. Jean Paris devoted a chapter to the labyrinth in his work *James Joyce par lui-même* published in 1957. He prefixed the discussion with a reproduction of Brâncuși's portrait of Joyce – a five-folded spiral – and included nine illustrations: Celtic interlaces from the Book of Kells, mazes from the National Library and a bas-relief depicting Daedalus making wings for Icarus (Fortuna 195). Paris discusses the table under which little Stephen hides when reprimanded by his aunt and mother for wanting to marry Eileen as the entry into a punitive existence. The basic elements of the rituals in the

labyrinth are resumed at the beginning of the novel; lustration, dance, marriage and sacrifice are paralleled by Stephen's wetting the bed, dancing the hornpipe, wanting to marry Eileen and being forced to apologize.

The novel starts with the story of the moocow: "Once upon a time and a very good time it was there was a moocow coming down the road and this moocow that was coming down along the road met a nicens little boy named baby tuckoo ..." (Joyce 7). Darkness and light or blindness and sight when Stephen breaks his glasses invoke the image of the labyrinth. Later, when repenting after listening to the sermons of hell on the occasion of St. Xavier's celebrations, Stephen is confronted with a bovine God:

His soul was fattening and congealing into a gross grease, plunging ever deeper in its dull fear into a somber, threatening dusk while the body that was his stood, listless and dishonored, gazing out of darkened eyes, helpless, perturbed and human for a bovine god to stare upon. (Joyce 192)

When Wells asks the boy whether he kisses his mother before he goes to bed, this is part of an initiating ritual. During Parnell's funeral, Stephen, ill in the infirmary at Clongowes, imagines himself dying and being carried to heaven. When the boy travels from Clontarf Chapel (Clontarf is the Gaelic word for the Meadow of the Bull), he goes past the Bull Wall and is identified with Bous Stephanoumenos and Bous Stephaneforos. Dublin's night-town was described as a maze:

He had wandered into a maze of narrow and dirty streets [...] the yellow gasflame arouse before his troubled vision against he vapoury sky, burning as if before an altar. Before the doors and in the lighted halls groups were gathered arrayed as for some rite. He was in another world: he had awakened from a slumber of centuries [...] The encounter with the prostitute acquires a mythical dimension. (Joyce 113-114)

Stephen finds in the prostitute's room "a huge doll" with "her legs apart in the copious easy-chair beside the bed" (Joyce 114); this may be a reference to the first artisan to separate the legs of statues and the dolls invented by him to be used as votive offerings. Aquinas, like Ariadne led Stephen through the labyrinth of art. Thus, imagery throughout the novel adds up to the mythological dimension of the text.

Daedalus's labyrinth was artistically represented as a two-dimensional spiral with a bull at its centre. Dante imagined the Inferno as a three-dimensional gyre-labyrinth. As spiral, gyre or widening hell, these forms metaphorically define the structure of *A Portrait*. The movements are

at times those of expanding circles: from Clongowes to Dublin and from Dublin to the entire world:

Stephen Daedalus
Class of Elements
Clongowes Wood College
Sallins
County Kildare
Ireland
Europe
The World
The Universe (Joyce 17)

The searchings and uncertainties associated with the walking corridors at Clongowes and the streets of Dublin represent an intricate initiation; the patterns of the novel is that of a rising and falling movement, like the successive spirals of the labyrinth. In the central section of the central chapter, referring to the retreat sermons and the discussion about hell, Stephen reaches the core of hell itself, where he has to confront the bovine god. Having reached this point, the movement is reversed. He is released from the burden of sin after the confession and later rejects priesthood in favour of art.

In chapter 5, section iii, Stephen stands on the steps of the library watching the birds crying and circling above. The image of the flight brings thoughts of Daedalus and of his own destiny. Stephen discusses with Cranley the problem of his relationship with his mother. He has refused her request that he should go to confession and to Easter communion. Cranley urges Stephen to save her from further suffering since a mother's love is a reality compared to ideas. Stephen begins to feel decisively that his vocation is to go away, as he refuses to serve what he no longer believes in, whether it is home, fatherland or Church. At the end of the novel Stephen can escape the maze of nationality, language and religion, by means of aesthetics, which leads him out of the labyrinth.

In the last chapter of the book, Stephen wanders in the streets of Dublin again and the corridors of the college resume those of Clongowes. The way out of the final circle of the maze is symbolized by the Stephen's lecture on aesthetics delivered to his colleague, Lynch: "Stephen has slain the Minotaur within himself" (Fortuna 208). The last section of the book consists of scraps from Stephen's journal for the five weeks before his departure. They touch briefly on his friends, on further arguments with his mother, on his interest in Emma. On 16 April, the entry speaks of the call of distant places and the companionship of fellow-exiles. He prepares to set out and prays for a blessing from his ancestor, Daedalus. The last pages of *A*

Portrait, the diary, mention dark streams swirling, masts of ships and a cavern in which underworld figures seem to ask questions with their eyes. The ending is similar to the beginning of the novel, containing in a nutshell references to the myth of the labyrinth. Ovid's Daedalian myth stands as an equivalent to the structure of *A Portrait*.

Interestingly, throughout the novel, Stephen has been trying to escape the imprisoning labyrinth of his biological father, Simon Dedalus, of the Catholic faith, of the fatherland of Ireland and of Romantic literary fathers, such as Shelley and Dumas. However, the outcome of his journey as an escape from fathers is undermined through his final invocation addressed to another father figure, Daedalus: "Old father, old artificer, stand me now and in good stead" (Joyce 289). Stephen is Icarus, the fallen son; he is also Daedalus, the fabulous artificer, who makes art out of the ordinary stuff of life. Stephen may also be equated with the labyrinth itself. Life in Dublin is puzzling for young Stephen. If one reconsiders the passage in Ovid depicting the maze, new meanings arise out of Stephen's connections to the myth throughout the novel. Therefore, Ovid's *Metamorphoses* should be received as a source of symbols, images and patterns, reconfiguring relations of self and identity experience through new rewritings and rereading, such as the one offered by Joyce's novel.

WORKS CITED

- Fortuna, Diane. "The Art of the Labyrinth". *Critical Essays on Joyce's A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Eds. Philip Brady and James Carens. London and New York: Prentice Hall International, 1998. 187-212.
- Harkness, Marguerite. *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man. Voices of the Text*. Boston: Twayne, 1990.
- Herr, Cheryl. "Deconstructing Dedalus". *James Joyce. A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Ed. R. B. Kershner. Boston and New York: Bedford Books, 1993. 338-372.
- Joyce, James. *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. London: Penguin, 1996.
- Ovid. *Metamorphoses*. Trans. John Dryden and others. Ed. Sir Samuel Garth. Hertfordshire: Wordsworth, 1998.