OVID, JOYCE, AND THE WILL TO TRANSGRESS

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In *Ovid and the Moderns* Theodore Ziolkowski zooms in a particular trend in the twentieth century claiming that it has been an Ovidian era both poetically and politically. It is by all means true that Ovid has been engraved in the architectonics of memory in European artistic tradition and Western writers and poets have turned to Ovid throughout literary history for inspiration and in search of answers especially with regard to the poetics of exile. Yet, the twentieth century, which will take its rightful place in the historical accounts of humanity with its matchless reputation for the traumatic outcomes of world wars, genocides, cultural imperialism and totalitarian regimes, has proved to be a more suitable stage for the literary reincarnations of Ovid. Especially the post-decadence period of Modernism is marked by a European-wide sense of loss and longing not only in social and political arena, but also in the literary products of the time largely due to the emerging collapse of Europe's grand project of Modernity. Several writers of the Modernist canon, such as Kafka, T. S. Eliot or Ezra Pound used metamorphosis as a primary metaphor to reflect the rapidly changing world around them. Yet, James Joyce holds a unique place in the list as the modern icon of the self-exiled artist whose works overflow with mythic and metamorphic allusions. It would not be erroneous to say that Ovid entered the modern English literature with the 'metempsychosis' of Daedalus, the great artificer of classical antiquity, in the image of Stephen Dedalus in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Although *A Portrait* is Joyce's only work in which Ovid's *Metamorphoses* constitutes the primary hypotext, he continues to introduce the theme of transformation in diverse ways in *Ulysses*, in which the text itself is constantly transformed and reformed in terms of generic mutations of style and discourse, and in *Finnegans Wake* which introduces language itself as the primary object of metamorphosis. Another line of thread which combines these ground-breaking texts is Joyce's use of myth – a fixed and static generic form – to fly in the face of norms. The use of myth, therefore, turns into an ideological tool for a demythologizing act that transforms and liberates the static perceptions of history, identity and language specifically in the Irish context, which will be exemplified in this article in the case of Stephen Dedalus, the defiant and isolated embodiment of Joyce's exilic vision.

James Joyce's fascination with Ovid and the theme of metamorphosis reaches far beyond simply using the Latin text as a

palimpsest to overwrite his semi-autobiographical account of transformation and self-realization in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. His search for a new and reshaping iconoclastic form of art and existence coincides with Ireland's transformation from a colonized nation into a free state through bloody wars in the first decades of the 20th century. After all, the theme of transformation is always closely linked to violence in one way or another, for it is a form of transgression – a violation of borders; and as Keith Booker suggests "[t]ransgression can never occur simply within a text; it must occur in the interaction between a text and its social and discursive surrounding" (126). Accordingly, Stephen Dedalus's accounts of a personal condition reflect a consciousness that also voices, in Seamus Deane's words, "the hitherto unrealized and unexamined condition of race" (vii). Thus, before introducing a closer look at the occasionally twisted allusions to the myth of Daedalus and other metamorphic instances in *A Portrait*, I want to build an essential connection between the background of the myth and Ireland's cultural and political position at the turn of the century.

The famous labyrinth in mythic history, the one designed by Daedalus, served to imprison the monstrous offspring of Pasíphaë who united with the white bull which she deceived with a wooden cow – also fashioned by Daedalus himself upon the request of the queen to fulfil her sexual desire for the bull. It does not take a genius to associate this labyrinth from which Daedalus wishes to escape with Ireland from which Dedalus of *A Portrait* longs to flee at the end of the novel. So far so good, yet the full context of the mythic labyrinth offers further parallels. It is likely to metaphorically identify the Minotaur, the half-man half-bull offspring of the adulterous act of Pasíphaë, with the hybrid population (native Irish and Anglo-Irish/ Catholics and Protestants) on the colonized island. According to historical accounts, Ireland was first awarded to England as a result of the papal bull under Henry II. As a matter of fact, after the brutal murder of Thomas à Becket, Henry II was only trying to pour oil on troubled waters by showing his pretentious urge to reinforce the Catholic belief and the position of the Catholic Church in Ireland, while his foremost aim was to enter the Irish soil for purposes of usurping the land.

In this context, the Catholic Church symbolically functions as the mythic wooden cow – a means to reach the ultimate aim. This symbolic mythic connection, which associates the Church with an absolving force, unfolds in *A Portrait* in the image of the confessional that oddly combines the evil tone of sexual sin and the ironic role of religion as a moral policing force. The dark and claustrophobic image of the confessional, which is designed to hide the true identity of the confessor of evil deeds, is introduced in *A Portrait* as a central symbol of the juxtaposition of betrayal, sexuality and sterility, especially in the scene where Stephen imagines himself as a priest listening to the confessions of women: "He would know the sins, the

sinful longings and sinful thoughts and sinful acts, of others, hearing them murmured into his ears in the confessional under the shame of a darkened chapel by the lips of women and of girls" (181). In this image, the wooden cow, which Daedalus built for Pasíphaë, is transformed into the symbolic counterpart of the confession-box of Catholicism in Stephen/ Joyce's narration. Stephen's mind works along the same lines in *Ulysses*, further confirming this association. He refers to the myth in the "Circe" episode saying "Queens lay with prize bulls. Remember Pasiphae for whose lust my grandoldgrossfather made the first confessionbox" (509). In this twisted version of the myth, Ireland becomes the labyrinth that contains the hybrid race created as the offspring of the union of the English Bull and Mother Ireland which let a foreign race in. The Catholic Church, in this sense, functions almost as the Trojan horse used as a cover-up for a treacherous act, and in turn ironically forces itself upon individuals as a major agent of social and moral order.

The idea of betrayal is woven in the novel around Stephen's visions of the Catholic Church, sexuality of women, the nationalist cause, and the fake ideals of the Irish Literary Revival, each of which contribute to his final decision for flight. Stephen announces his mythic legacy inherited in his name when he says: "When the soul of a man is born in this country there are nets flung at it to hold it back from flight. You talk of me of nationality, language, religion. I shall try to fly by those nets" (*A Portrait* 231). Among these tyrannizing nets, religion seems to have a greater power of oppression over Stephen due to his Jesuit education. Besides, the themes of flight, exile and fall in the underlying mythic hypotext of *A Portrait* find an easy way through our mental association into the biblical theme of Lucifer's rebellion for autonomy followed by his fall and, therefore, exile from God's kingdom. Thus, explicating the role of religion in Stephen's alienation will unfold other interrelated cultural and political images of bondage haunting Stephen throughout the novel.

In *Stephen Hero*, the earlier version of *A Portrait*, Stephen equates the Church with militaristic and imperial rule. As Vincent J. Cheng comments, he builds a connection, even a similarity between "the English political tyranny over the Irish body and the Catholic spiritual tyranny over the Irish soul" (60): "He spurned from before him the stale maxims of the Jesuits and he swore an oath that they should never establish over him an ascendency" (*SH* 38). The Church's direct role in Irish politics and in betraying the Irish cause is made more explicit in *A Portrait* at the very beginning of the novel at the Christmas dinner when Stephen witnesses a fierce debate on Parnell between his Parnellist father Simon and Dante, a devoted Catholic:

> Didn't the bishops of Ireland betray us in the time of the union when bishop Lanigan presented an address of loyalty to the Marquess Cornwallis? Didn't the bishops and priests sell the aspirations of their country in 1829 in return for catholic emancipation? Didn't they denounce the fenian movement from the pulpit and in the confessionbox? (43)

As a member of a "priestridden" and colonized race (*A Portrait* 42), Stephen will later announce himself as "the servant of two masters . . . an English and an Italian", "[t]he imperial British state and the holy Roman catholic and apostolic church" (*Ulysses* 26). Stephen's spiritual and intellectual rebellion against such monolithic and centripetal forces as well as classificatory systems is not only "a problem of pure and simple negation" in Camus's words, but a refusal to "accept the condition in which [the rebel] finds himself" (29).

Stephen repudiates the nationalist discourse along the same lines. Religion in Ireland stinks with betrayal and so does the nationalist ideal which Stephens's soul "holds at bay" as a rebel. The mythic discourse of Irish nationalists reflects a misdirected nostalgia for a glorious Celtic past and racial purity, a longing for lost origins. This fake goal and the betrayal of the Catholic Church in Ireland reverberate also in the tantalizing image of the Irish Revival and its unrealistic enthronement of Celticism and Gaelic language. Stephen/Joyce saw very well that the Irish Revival was fake, insofar as "it reproduced – in its valorization of manliness, sexual purity, the glory of defeat, the imaginative destiny of the Celt or Gael, the spiritual and religious character of the race – the very features of the colonial Catholic oppression that it was trying to erase" (Deane ix). It is also worth noting that most of the forerunners of the Irish Revival – Yeats, Douglas Hyde, Lady Gregory and Russell among others – were from Anglo-Irish Protestant class, the grandchildren of the first generation of settlers in the plantations established by the English on lands cleared from Native Irish in the Elizabethan era. What they were trying to revive was indeed as alien to them as the culture of any distant oriental country. This Orientalist perspective took the name Celticism in the process of Revivalist politics which sought a homogenous and pure identity out of the Celtic depths of Ireland. This, of course, was a futile and groundless effort according to Joyce, who mocks the very idea by saying that "ancient Ireland is dead just like ancient Egypt is dead" (*OCPW* 173).

In the frozen image of a romanticized Celtic past, Mother Ireland is glorified in the image of holly womanhood. Any attempt to reverse or threaten this idealized image was cursed blindly by the public as was the case during the infamous debut of Yeats's *The Countless Cathleen* or Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World* at Abbey Theatre. Joyce

incorporates the voices of fake Celticist idealism into *A Portrait* through Stephen's memory. Stephen recalls these public reactions as "catcalls, hisses and mocking cries" running in "rude gusts": "A libel on Ireland!", "Made in Germany", "Blashemy!", "We never sold our faith!", "No Irish woman ever did it!", "We want no amateur atheists" (257-8). This public discourse, which alienates Stephen from the collective image, creates a sharp irony when the aforementioned mythic parallel is considered. Accordingly, the false image of mythologized Irish identity through the use of Celtic myths and legends is de-mythologized by Joyce through a symbolic reference to the Greek myth. In this case, the use of myth in Joyce's narration functions as a transformative act, which at the same time transforms art into a political praxis. Thus, the discourse of the Revival closes upon itself.

This de-mythologizing act may be best exemplified by Stephen's perception of women and femininity throughout *A Portrait*, which as a political narrative symbolically summons in its racial subconscious the evil and adulterous deed of Pasíphaë. In line with this view, the pure and holly image of Mother Ireland promoted in Revivalist and nationalist discourse is ironically contrasted in the novel with Stephen's version of Ireland's femininity. For instance, the peasant woman, who draws Davin (depicted as stereotype of a rude Filborg, a dull-witted nationalist) over the "threshold" of her house to invite him to spend the night with her, is characterized by Stephen as: "a type of her race and of his own, a batlike soul waking to the consciousness of itself in darkness and secrecy and loneliness and, through the eyes and voice and gesture of a woman without guile, calling the stranger to her bed" (208). Interestingly, Stephen uses the same words while thinking of Emma, the object of his romantic and sensual musings:

> she was a figure of the womanhood of her country, a batlike soul waking to the consciousness of itself in darkness and secrecy and loneliness, tarrying a while, loveless and sinless, with her mild lover and leaving him to whisper of innocent transgressions in the latticed ear of a priest. (251)

It goes without saying that Stephen's vision of Emma juxtaposes womanhood, betrayal, and the Church – in the iconic image of the priest.

The "batlike soul" of womanhood in Stephen's view transforms the ideal image into a monstrous one. Joyce also introduces other versions of monstrosity equated with femininity and motherhood. During his conversation with Davin on the nationalist cause, Stephen justifies his rejection of embracing such ideals by defining Ireland as "the old sow that eats her farrow" (231). Although Stephen's rejection to serve the nationalist cause and his will to transgress by flying through the Irish nets is conceived by the likes of Davin as another form of betrayal, Stephen's particular

problem lies beyond the dichotomic perspective based on the either/or opposition. Stephen's imaginative flights of the intellect open up a new way of restoring experience and creating new channels of renewal, and seek a way to serve Ireland without being devoured or destroyed by her. By "forg[ing] in the smithy of [his] soul the uncreated conscience of [his] race" (288), he wants, above all, to pull Ireland out of the illusionary twilight of the Revivalist politics.

To accomplish this goal along with his quest of creating his artistic self, Stephen harkens the voice beyond the world of his visual perception, feeling in himself the quasi-divine power of artistic creation. This conviction is brought out in the description of Stephen after the composition of his villanelle, standing on the steps of the library. Ashplant in hand, he imagines himself as an augur in an ancient temple while he is observing the flying birds. The overtones of his supernatural reverberations are intensified as he observes himself observing the birds, and he thinks of his mythical patron, Daedalus:

> A sense of fear of the unknown moved in the heart of his weariness, a fear of symbols and portents, of the hawklike man whose name he bore soaring out of his captivity on osier woven wings, of Thoth, the god of writers, writing with a reed upon a tablet and bearing on his narrow ibis head the cusped moon. (256)

In the juxtaposed images of Daedalus and Thoth– the scribe of gods, the theme of fall resonates with further implications. *Logos* becomes the subject of the tension between flight and fall, because Thoth is also the inventor of speech and letters. In Egyptian mythology, Thoth is the 'tongue' of the sun god, a vehicle through which the word and will of god is translated into speech. Stephen's linguistic awareness, which is emphasized especially in his early childhood in terms of names and naming, is a potent element in the development of the artist as a young man. It is language through which Stephen apprehends the world. In Kenner's words "[l]anguage is a Trojan horse by which the universe gets into [his] mind" (368). Linguistic constructs, therefore, brings about another form of betrayal – betrayal of meaning. The barriers encountered by Stephen in constructing and conveying meaning through an 'acquired language' are marked by the gap between the signifier and signified, into which language falls in linguistic consciousness. Through this linguistic consciousness, which demolishes the Saussurean dichotomy between the signifier and signified, Stephen observes and records, and finally prepares for flight – flight from Ireland on the wings of Daedalus, the old artificer to whom Stephen prays in the very last words of the novel. Language itself, which also entraps meaning, is introduced by Joyce as another labyrinth-like construct. Stephen's mental engagement with

sounds, in this sense, gains further significance when we consider that 'labyrinth' also refers to a tortuous anatomical structure of the body, namely the internal ear.

Since the central theme in Stephen's internal feud is betrayal, these final preparations for flight lead to ironic interpretations. Stephen's rejection of fathers and everything they stand for and his rebellious declaration of independence also allude to several instances of the fall in mythic as well as biblical narratives: fall of Lucifer, Adam and Eve, and obviously that of Icarus. The possible association of Stephen with both Deadalus the father and Icarus the son introduces the reader to a paradoxical puzzle. The fall of disobedient Icarus, who rebels against the word of his father, is juxtaposed in the novel with Lucifer's rebellion against God marked in his words "*non serviam: I will not serve*" (133), and therefore brings up the fall of Lucifer and his exile from heaven. Lucifer's anarchy, which is retold in the sermon that kindles the flames of remorse and guilt in Stephen's heart after his sexual experiences, reverberates in Stephen's words towards the end of the novel as he says:

> *I will not serve* that in which I no longer believe, whether it call itself my home, my fatherland, or my church: and 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. (281) (Italics mine)

This decisive challenge is further associated with Lucifer's exile in everlasting fire when Stephen declares that he "[is] not afraid to make a mistake, even a great mistake, a lifelong mistake, and perhaps as long as eternity too" (281), and that he is willing to "take the risk" (282).

Joyce's conscious act of identifying Stephen in the novel with Lucifer by placing Lucifer's words into his mouth, calls into question whether Stephen's search for a path through the labyrinth leads him back to the point where he has started, therefore to a dead end – an inevitable fall. Such a claim may be reinforced with Stephen's return to Dublin in *Ulysses* upon the death of his mother. This dilemma is indeed the labyrinth in the middle of which Joyce drops the reader without introducing Ariadne's ball of yarn to navigate him/her to the exit. As a result of Joyce's refusal to provide authoritative commentary on his characters, the author's voice becomes only one of the voices, and narrative becomes truly polyphonic and dialogic in Bakhtin's terms. After all, the artist "like the God of creation" should remain "within or behind or beyond or above his handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent, paring his fingernails" (*A Portrait* 245). Besides, trying to pin down a single answer to the question whether Stephen is Deadalus or Lucifer-like Icarus would also detract us

from Joyce's aesthetic ideology. Rather than pulling things to the centre as every static definition does, Joyce embraces a centrifugal perspective, which trespasses also the boundaries of static definitions. Thus, it would be a futile and irrelevant attempt to draw a clear-cut border between Stephen's mythical identifications. After all, as Gregory Castle rightly asserts, "colonial *Bildung* isolates and splits the subject, pits it against itself" unlike classical *Bildung* (162).

It should also be taken into account that the theme of fall is not introduced in the novel only as a dilemmatic concept. Joyce assimilates it into the process of becoming of Stephen as an artist and his process of maturation related to what the title of the novel as well as its genre of *bildungsroman* lead us. In this respect, it does not matter much whether Stephen's dream of flight is an illusion or not. The significant point is that sin is introduced as a stage of development in *A Portrait*. The passages, in which Stephen contemplates on his detachment and his choice of an artist's life, combine images of flight with those of flowing water. In other words, Stephen's spiritual and intellectual development embraces the images of both air and water, which recalls the destinations of both Daedalus and Icarus. For instance, as voices of his friends are calling his strange name, Stephen seems "to hear the noise of dim waves and to see a winged form flying above the waves" at the name of the fabulous artificer (192).

He walks barefoot in the sea water, "dark with endless drift," and sees the wading girl, who seems "like one whom magic had changed into the likeness of a strange and beautiful sea-bird" (194, 195). Eventually, the two separate images unite in the transformed image of the girl – "a strange and beautiful sea-bird". This fusion remarkably marks one of the climatic epiphanies experienced by Stephen. Although Stephen is deeply moved by the girl's image, he sees the girl as an object of contemplation rather than an object of desire. This epiphanic moment marks the transformation of his experience of desire from "kinetic" to "static" emotion, therefore to an "esthetic emotion" experienced when "[t]he mind is arrested and raised above desire and loathing" (233). This instance further announces his flight from the oppressive nets of religion, and its doctrines especially on female body and beauty. The fall is no longer a doomed condition for Stephen, but a liberating act: "Her image has passed into his soul for ever and no word had broken the holy silence of his ecstasy. Her eyes had called him and his soul had leaped at the call. To live, to err, to fall, to triumph, to recreate life out of life!" (196). This victorious fall summons the image of Icarus, rather than Lucifer, with the words "as under sea": "His eyelids trembled as if they felt the vast cyclic movement of the earth and her watchers, trembled as if they felt the strange light of some new world. His soul was swooning into some new world, fantastic, dim, uncertain as under sea . . ." (196). Thus, the images of flight accompanied by those of flowing water suggest a freedom,

but without a specific emphasis on escape. The flight marks, above all, a widening of consciousness, an investigation of the unknown as Joyce reminds us in the paratextual quotation– located beyond the boundaries of the main text: "*Et ignotas animum dimittit in artes*" (*Metamorphoses*, VIII, 18). Accordingly, the images of flight relate freedom, increasing perception, awakened consciousness, and creativity. Stephen seeks freedom from fathers, authoritative powers, as a condition necessary for artistic creation. Yet, this freedom comes at a price for the rebel, as has been the case since Adam and Eve's expulsion from the Garden of Eden. Adam tells Dante in *Paradiso* that "the tasting of the tree / Not in itself was cause of such great exile / But solely the o'erstepping of the bounds" (Canto XXVI, lines 115-117). Exile becomes the ultimate and unavoidable consequence of the defiance of norm and authority.

The mythopoetic legacy of Ovid as the epitome of the exiled writer is introduced in the epigraph of *A Portrait*, and fulfilled at the end of the novel through Stephen Dedalus's self-transformation. As the voice in the novel shifts from the third person to the first person, Stephen is no longer a character in someone else's narration. He is no longer a quoted object whose thoughts and feelings are conveyed through the words of a narrator. The quoted object is transformed into the quoting subject, indicating autonomy over words and meaning. As Bakhtin notes, "[m]etamorphosis serves as the basis for a method of portraying the whole of an individual's life in its more important moments of crisis: for showing how an individual becomes other than what he was" (115). The diary records of Stephen, which mark this transformation resulting in the birth of the writer, start with March 20 entry – Ovid's birthdate, and end with the hope of an exilic quest to "forge in the smithy of [his] soul the uncreated conscience of [his] race". Just like Dedalus, who alters the laws of nature by fashioning wings for himself and his son to flee the island of Crete, Stephen is ready to alter the imposed laws of Irish existence in the paralysed consciousness of his race. By textualizing his own history in his semi-authobiographical novel, Joyce also points at the fact that history is a 'narrativized' account of the past, therefore never static, and that history is accessible to us through literature. While the Romantic Revivalist movement was drawn to mythlogizing history and pinning it down to a stable centre, Joyce used myths to introduce multi-faceted and dynamic perspectives of possibilities in identifying selves and races with origins, and turned myth against itself to offer alternative futures.

Stephen's artistic theory, which he bases on the "necessary phases of artistic apprehension" manifested by Aquinas as "*wholeness, harmony and radiance*" (*A Portrait* 241), seems to introduce a contradiction in terms at first glance when we consider the anarchic nature of rebellion against any imposed order which in one or another seeks to create a homogeneous whole within a given social, political or cultural construct. However, paradox is an

epidemical condition among Irish writers – most notably Oscar Wilde – in searching alternative ways of constructing a new manner of experience by transforming the very structure of perception. Paradox is, indeed, a perfect example for transgression, for it turns language against itself by "asserting both terms of contradiction at once"; and by breaking the rules, paradox "can penetrate to new and unexpected realms of experience, discovering relationships syntax generally obscures" (Harpham 23). Thus, Stephen's simultaneous search for harmony and discordance justifies his double selves identified as Daedalus and Icarus at once, as well as his accomplished flight and doomed fall. This perspective also accounts for the nature of border crossing. As Terry Eagleton notes, "[d]ifference presupposes affinity" (159) and "[d]issonance is reliant on a sense of harmony" (67). This seemingly paradoxical condition is the underlying principle of transgression, because any act of transgression requires the recognition and acceptance of the existence of rules and norms to be transgressed. In ontological terms, this very condition enables the subject of transgression to be both inside and outside the realm of the normative, and both within and beyond boundaries. Joyce's attachment to and rejection of Ireland at the same time is an Anti-Aristotelian way of experience demolishing the either/or opposition of binary formations as in Irish and all things not Irish, or belonging and isolation. Accordingly, when he was asked after so many years in self-exile in Europe whether he would ever go back to Ireland, his answer was a question: "Have I ever left it?"

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