PG Sem III
CC 12 ENGLISH

Date: / /
Page No.

A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man
– Title / Autobiography / Images

"A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man" is at once an autobiography and a work of art a 'Portrait'. But the book declares the identity of Stephen Hero as an art piece and that of the author as an 'artist' and not 'a biographer'. The creative tension thus stems from Joyce's declared intention to present a personal and subjective narrative as an objective creation of art. The technique applied envisages the simultaneous operation of two artists, the embryo artist who is revealing himself while he is re-living his past and the artist-narrator who is 'portraying' him. The narrator tells the story but virtually it is the hero himself who is casting the story out of the material deposited in the sub-conscious or memory. The author registers his presence like 'the God of the creation'. The process renders the book 'extraordinarily sharp and objective for an autobiographical novel'.

Date: / /
Page No.

The nursery rhyme and the nursery tale recaptured and produced in their original texture and the child habit of thinking in a fragmentary way take us straight into the child's sub-conscious. This induces us to believe that Stephen himself is revealing his story. But the speech distortion — 'O, the green wothe bothath' implies that the whole thing is being presented by the observer - narrator, for how could the child know about his own speech habits? This simultaneity of self reporting and self distancing invests the 'portrait' with complexity. The duality becomes clear later on, when Stephen is being beaten by the pandy bat, his sensations are described as follows: "A hot burning stinging tingling blow like the loud crack of a broken stick made his trembling hand crumple together like a leaf in the fire ..." The sensations — 'burning', 'stinging', 'tingling' — are all Stephen's but the image — crumple together like a leaf in the fire — is a prop to dramatise the effect.

Date: / /
Page No.

The beauty of the book lies in the delicate harmony achieved between the subjective stuff and the objective frame of presentation. It is an achievement that makes the personal appear as impersonal, the autobiography as a 'portrait'. The bird image that occurs in the opening:

— O, Stephen will apologise

Dante said:

— O, if not, the eagle will come and pull out his eyes

The 'eagle' is associated in Stephen's memory with fear and punishment. It finds culmination in the symbol of Dedalus, the hawk-like man. Later Stephen records one of his epiphanic experience in terms of bird imagery.

A girl stood before him in midstream alone and still, gazing out to sea. She seemed like one whom magic had changed into the liveness of a strange and beautiful sea bird.

Towards the end of the book, Stephen pictures himself as a bird circling between the sea and the sky. In the dialogue with Davin he uses the bird-and-net image to project himself as an artist, "I shall try to fly by those nets."