

Becoming who you are: *Gay Science 290 and Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*

In this essay, I argue that knowing that Stephen will become an artist from the beginning allows us to understand Stephen's self-creation in a novel way: we see self-creation as *becoming* rather than *creation*. Rather than constructing an entirely new self, adding, removing, or otherwise modifying one's nature as Nietzsche suggests in *Gay Science 290*, we understand self-creation as remaining true to one's nature—cultivating one's innate tendencies, accepting one's weaknesses and defending against outside influences.

I make my argument by first reconstructing and interpreting Nietzsche's *Gay Science 290*, focusing on the hidden premises and implications of creating the self in his sense. Then, I move on to the story of *Portrait* as a whole, examining the becoming of Stephen from a broad perspective in relation to *GS 290*, examining some difficulties of applying the self-creation in *GS290* to a real persona. Finally, I discuss Stephen's own view on his becoming and some implications of seeing self-creation as *becoming* instead of *creating*.

In *Gay Science 290*, Nietzsche argues that one must give 'style' to one's character. There are three core components that are necessary to achieve this style: self-understanding/self-awareness, intentionality, and consistency. First, one must "survey all the strengths and weaknesses of their nature and then fit them into an artistic plan". This statement implies that one must first have an absolute understanding of the entirety of one's attributes, with no parts of the self hidden or unknown.

Otherwise, it'd be impossible to 'survey' as completely as Nietzsche describes. Nietzsche then goes on to emphasize the importance of intentionality: he writes that both strengths and weaknesses must appear as "art and reason and even the weaknesses delight the eye[...]through long practise and daily work". Thus, a self with 'style' must be entirely intentional, and hence

artificial. The self is comparable to a work of art: every component has received the careful, calculating attention of the artist. Thus, Nietzsche seems to deny the possibility that a person could have been born with 'style'. Finally, Nietzsche writes it must seem that "a single taste governed and formed everything large and small" and that whether this taste is good or bad is not as important as it is a single, consistent taste.

But Nietzsche also allows for the possibility of a type of person who hates constraints, including that of a single taste. These people "interpret their environment as *free* nature: wild, arbitrary, fantastic, disorderly, and surprising". They are spontaneous and can change at any moment. But it is just as difficult to be free-spirited in this manner, to have no allegiances in anything, as giving style as above. It is not that these free-spirits have no single taste because they follow no restraints, rather their everchanging nature forms their single taste. A person who desires to be free-spirited while having another taste (e.g., a hippie who secretly desires mansions and sports cars) would be self-contradictory and considered "intolerable" by Nietzsche, just as a person is a Frankenstein of different tastes. But if a person is indeed a true free-spirit, then Nietzsche says that the "one thing needful" is the person is satisfied with himself.

Here, we should point out that Nietzsche's conception of the sculpted self, like art, is intended to be viewed by and appreciated by others. Although this is not explicitly stated, it is implied at many moments. First, Nietzsche writes that even weaknesses should "delight the eye". Then, he writes that the "ugly" parts of us that we neither conceal, change or remove should be "saved and exploited for distant views; it is meant to beckon toward the far and immeasurable". The "distant views" and "beckon" imply the existence of an audience to the self, outside of the self. What Nietzsche says here is that for the flaws we cannot do anything about, we suppress them and let them be seen as little as possible, only under circumstances where it might make us

appear more attractively mysterious and unpredictable.¹ Hence, in giving style to one's character in the Nietzschean sense, one is not only becoming a better version of oneself, but also a more attractive, charismatic person.

I now discuss Stephen's development and maturing in *Portrait* from a broad perspective, starting with the attributes of Stephen's life, focusing on how he is at the beginning and the end. In Part I, we meet a toddler Stephen grow into a child who questions conventions and accepted beliefs. For example, thinking about how God understands different languages when people of different nationalities pray to Him, Stephen thinks:

“But though there were different names for God in all the different languages in the world and God understood what all the people who prayed in their different language said still God remained always the same God and God's real name was God.

It made him very tired to think this way. I made his head very big.” (16)

We see that early in Stephen's development before he has consciously sculpted anything of himself, he has the innate attitude to think, question and examine what he is taught. It seems as if while thinking, Stephen naturally comes upon the thought of God and languages and finds a contradiction. Stephen is shown to have a strong awareness of perspectives other than his own from a young age, and the unanswerable question here seems to be why is God's real name *God* instead of, for example, *Dieu* as a French person would think. What justifies placing the Irish perspective about others? The reason why it made him “why tired” and his head “very big” is perhaps because thinking this way has the potential to undermine everything that he's believed in about religion and God. It would mean that all the adults and wrong, and for a young child that is impossible. Thus, being not yet ready to turn his back on all his beliefs and adults, Stephen

¹ The creation of the self to be *perceived* is also supported by Nietzsche's description of the un-sculpted self – he says that “we others will be his victims, if only by having to endure his ugly sight”

forces himself to stop thinking. He repeated what has been given to him as an answer – God’s real name is God – an effort to force his mind to believe and prevent any heretical thoughts.

Similarly, while thinking about Father Arnall’s anger, he began to question the relationship between priests and sin, and whether it was a sin for him to “be in a wax” (48). Stephen attempts to convince himself that it was impossible for Father Arnall to sin for many reasons. First, he suggests a higher, altruistic purpose to a sinful action – “that made them study better”. Second, he suggests to himself that Father Arnall is only letting the boys believe that he is sinning but not actually sinning (“only letting on to be in a wax”) –as if Father Arnall is a higher being whose actions and intentions are always good and never transparent. Then, Stephen continues to convince himself: “It was because he was allowed because a priest would know what a sin was and would not do it.” A priest cannot sin because he would know what sin is and wouldn’t do it. But clearly, Stephen finds this kind of quiet obedience impossible to achieve, and his mind wanders. Stephen asks “But if he did it by mistake what would he do to go to confession?” Despite all his attempts to tame his mind, to just *believe* like all of the others, he cannot help but question. The conflict with Father Dolan is another case where Stephen’s inner sense of fairness and ‘what is right’ conquers his fear of punishment non-conformity.

Hence, in Part I, Stephen already sees the world differently. As we know that Stephen will become an artist, we are able to better see he already has attributes that separate him from a non-artist. He naturally places truth over faith, fairness over obedience, and he is not afraid to defy authority for what he views as right. At this point, according to GS290, Stephen is in no sense a character who has given himself style, nor someone who is free-spirited. As a child, he has very limited self-awareness, this loyalty to truth was not the result of an intentional and conscious effort to change himself, and he is not governed by a single taste—he both wants to be a

good pupil and to stay true to his natural beliefs. He is not a free spirit, as he follows most rules quite well (whether that of the Clongowes or his family), and values things that are commonly valued. At this point, he has no awareness of what he will eventually become. However, we know that these traits are already nudging him towards the life of an artist.

In Part II, Stephen remains ‘on track’. He now is more passionate about literature and has some awareness of its importance in his life. For example, he cannot conceal his incredulity at Lord Tennyson being crowned the ‘best poet’ by his schoolmate: he burst out and says “Tennyson, a poet! Why, he’s only a rhymester!” (80) and later refuses to ‘admit’ that “Byron is no good” (82). He also sees the weekly essay as “the chief labour of his week” (78). And he is rewarded for his efforts—he wins the literary prize, and his identity as an artist is affirmed and slowly grows stronger. However, Stephen does not go through what Nietzsche described as self-creation: he neither adds on a desirable piece of second nature nor removes any original nature that is unlikeable. Indeed, Stephen becomes socially even more isolated; now he is keenly aware of his isolation and the separation between himself and others. During a children’s party, he sits alone, unbothered by his peers. “His silent watchful manner had grown upon him and he took little part in the games.” (68). But rather than mourn this withdrawnness that could be considered a weakness, Stephen relishes it. When he finally goes home to his quiet room, he “began to taste the joy of his loneliness. The mirth [...] was like a soothing air to him”. He sees nothing wrong in this trait that others might see as ‘ugly’, something that makes somewhat of a strange outcast of him. While he is not a completely free spirit, he seems to not value the values of the time as strongly. For example, Stephen meeting the prostitute at the end of this chapter implies that the teachings of the Church never had a forceful grasp on him².

² Stephen’s problem is that he is ‘in-between’ – as a natural questioner and rebel brought up with religious education, he does not believe enough to not commit sinful facts but is not free enough to not feel guilt.

In Part III and the beginning of IV, Stephen's growth as an artist is thrown off track — in a sense, he loses himself and the person he was supposed to become. After meeting the prostitute at the end of chapter two, he cannot help but feel guilty. Then, Father Arnall's sermon at the annual retreat, with its vivid imagery of the physical horror of the cursed souls, terrified him into submitting. Stephen cannot help but feel that "Every word of it was for him. Against his sin, foul and secret, the whole wrath of God was aimed" (115). Stephen—still relatively young and impressionable—becomes paralyzed by fear, and so repents and lives a strict religious life, deviating from his original life as an artist. Stephen becomes extremely spiritually self-disciplined, ascetic and self-depriving in the way he mortifies his senses and avoids any contact with women. However, we must recognize that Stephen does not have a tendency to believe or be religious. Rather than faith, belief, trust or love of God, Stephen becomes religious due to fear of unbearable punishment in the afterlife³. Indeed, there is a sense of emptiness and falseness to it all: as if he's simply parading as devout Catholic. As he himself questions: "I have amended my life, have I not?" (153).

In the latter half of Part IV Stephen has an epiphany; in V we see him after he returns to secular life and attends university and returns to his old self. His epiphany seems caused by the three things in conjunction: the wild ocean and air, the sound of his classmates calling his name, to join them in the ocean, and a bird-like girl. While this may seem a random sequence of events, it is what reminds Stephen of what he always was destined and wanted to be—an artist. When his classmates call his name *Stephanos Dedalos*, he has a sudden sense that "his strange name seemed to him a prophecy" (168) and seems to see "a winged form flying above the waves" (168). This is a clear reference to Stephen's namesake Daedalus, the great mythical Greek artist

³ We can easily imagine an alternate timeline where Stephen did not hear this sermon and was not converted by fear into fervent belief

who forged wings in his workshop on which he fly out of the labyrinth that he created — the labyrinth of himself. Here, Stephen’s “heart trembled” (169) but he was still unsure of what it all meant. With the repeated calling of his name, he realizes: “Yes! He would create proudly out of the freedom and power of his soul, as the great artificer whose name he bore” (170). This is all he needed to end his ascetic life. But he still sees a bird-like girl as the final confirmation. She symbolizes both becoming the self through creation and the physicality of the youth that Stephen has feared. At this moment, Stephen literally lives up to his name, embraces himself instead of being enslaved to his shame. At this moment the prophecy is fulfilled – the one which “he had been born to serve and had been following through the mists of childhood and boyhood[...]the artist forging anew in his workshop[...]a new soaring and palpable imperishable being”.

Now, I turn to Stephen’s own conception of his transformation. In Part V, Stephen says to Davin that the birth of the soul happens after that of the body, and “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 to me of nationality, language, and religion. I shall try to fly by those nets.” (203). Here, the use of “flight” and “fly” is no coincidence –Stephen is Daedalus, thus to fly is to become himself through creating art, and these nets are what prevent one from becoming oneself. He also says to Cranly “I was not myself as I am now, as I had to become.” (240). In the latter sentence, Stephen makes it obvious that it took a conscious effort to “become” himself. However, in none of the parts did Stephen entirely practice what was described by Nietzsche as giving style to one’s character. Considering the three requirements of Nietzsche (complete self-awareness, intentionality and consistency), it is simply impossible to give style to one’s character before maturing. Yet, an important part of Stephen’s battle against outside influences has already been won—he no longer fears his family, his country or his church. Interestingly, in part V, Stephen is

not too different (in terms of personality) from the rebellious child that he was in part I, or the detached teen in part II. In some ways, Stephen is still the withdrawn kid who is scared to approach the girl he likes. It is almost as if his development followed a circular trajectory; he strayed off the path but then returned to the beginning. If he's now morning confident and charismatic, it is because of his experience and knowledge, not because of sculpting himself.

One might object that one cannot *become* anything if one does not have an idea of what one is becoming. Stephen was never becoming an artist until the conscious moment that he decided so; while Stephen was living a strictly religious life, why do we not say that he was *becoming* himself by becoming a priest? How is anyone supposed to know which one is the self that he is 'supposed' to become? To respond, despite Stephen not knowing that he would become an artist during at first, his behaviour (e.g preferring to observe life rather than participate in it, love of poetry and writing) is preparing him to become an artist. Further, Stephen's rebellious, questioning nature and dedication to truth is incongruent with the life of a priest and congruent with that of a writer, and one cannot become someone who would conflict with one's nature. Thus, we decide *who* to become by examining our innate tendencies.

Knowing from the outset that Stephen will become an artist allows us to see a form of self-creation that relies on keeping the self *consistent* and defending against outside forces, rather than altering it. Where Nietzsche suggests self-creation by fashioning and sculpting the self like a piece of art, Joyce suggests a different vision of self-creation: by *creating* art while maintaining the self. Perhaps we are looking for self-creation in the wrong places. Rather than a myopic vision, adding here and removing there, we are to look for the self in the world *outside* of ourselves: by identifying the forces that hinder us and lead us astray, and by finding and filling ourselves with the knowledge and experience to create what makes us *us*.