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Fire Symbolism in A Portrait of the Artist As a Young Man

Joseph Aspell, S.M.

“When you wet the bed first it is warm then it gets cold.”

This is a microscopic capsule of Stephen's relation to fire. He is periodically abandoning old fire sites and seeking warmth and meaning in new ones. In chapter I there is the great fire of authority which grows dull in chapter II. The liturgically garmented fire of lust in chapter II is recognized as the squalid quarter of the city in chapter III. The everlasting fires of chapter three are relegated to two candles sheltered by a scrupulous mind in chapter IV. The Pentecostal fire of mortal beauty in chapter IV dwindles to the loveless fire of the dean of studies in chapter V, which is also replaced by the fire of Stephen's aesthetic intuition.

Stephen progresses on the vertical scale from a primitive to a man saturated with a sophisticated pride, unwilling to face love or serious art. The fire symbol illumines his situation by progressing from the primitiveness of a cottage hearth to the electric lights in the reading room of the college; from the physical burning of the pandybat to an individual, burning frustration of pride and love. Yet, through frustration and disillusionment Stephen rises and falls within the fire image-structure of the book like a phoenix constantly resurrecting from its own death, or as an Icarus soaring close to the sun but not yet plummeting toward his ultimate holocaust, the burning of his pride.

Stephen in the first chapter is in many ways a primitive. He lives in fear and ignorance, sheltered only by an absolute docility to the authority-structures around him. Related to this primitivism is the elementary level at which fire is presented. Stephen is attracted to fires only for physical warmth and protection, and is repelled by its physical destructiveness. However, these sensations have symbolic implications.

Just as a primitive man seeks warmth and protection from wild animals, so too, Stephen finds the needs of warmth and protection fulfilled in his first encounter with fire. In the cold chapel during night prayers he remembers the fire of the peasants of Clane:

They lived in Clane, a fellow said: there were little cottages there and he had seen a woman standing at the halfdoor of a cottage with a child in her arms It would be lovely to sleep for one night in that cottage before the fire of smoking turf, in the dark light by the fire, in the warm dark But O, the road there between the trees was dark! You would be lost in the dark. It made him afraid to think of how it was.¹

He associates the warmth of the fire with the basic tribal security he senses in the peasants, and in particular in the image of the mother and her child at the half-door. Again, just as primitive men came together around fire to seek warmth against the cold, light against the dark, and security against wild animals, so too, Stephen finds in the fire of the cottage warmth against the coldness of the chapel, light against the darkness of night and safety against the unseen enemy – “*drive away from it all snares of the enemy.*” (p. 18) However, as with primitive men, fire also has superstitious connotations for Stephen based on fear and ignorance.

His fingers trembled . . . He had to undress and then kneel and say his own prayers and be in bed before the gas was lowered so that he might not go to hell when he died . . . quickly quickly, fearing that the gas would go down. (p. 18)

Under the spell of the gaslight, which gives no heat, Stephen seeks salvation from the unknown darkness, enduring even the dreaded cold. This shows the tremendous grip authority has on Stephen for it is his only source of protection against darkness. Later, the power of authority will be reasserted in the fire sermon as his only protection against the spiritual darkness of his own soul.

He experienced fire, a second time, in a dream in which his imagination is steeped in the legendary darkness of the history of old Clongowes Castle's. The servants are gathered around the fire performing their mundane chores while the master, the marshal, is in the night darkness, dying on a faraway battlefield. This magnifies Stephen's fear of darkness but it also arouses his curiosity as to “what did they wish to say that their faces were so strange?” (p. 19) There are two possible answers to what they wished to say: first, it could be a prophesy of the fall of authority. Stephen's father was just made a marshal, yet unlike the adventurous marshal in the dream, his father does not leave the fire, symbolizing his and Ireland's provincial and mundane authority – the “scullerymaid of christendom.” Second, the marshal could be a symbol of the artist who must abandon the mundane and encounter the dark chaos out of which he must create. In any case, the fire represents for Stephen in his dream the myopic security which satisfies only primary needs and must eventually be abandoned for a new fire which will satisfy a wider scope of human insecurities.

In the infirmary Stephen encounters fire for the third time. The events in this scene obliquely resound the traditionally accepted events in the Garden of Eden. Brother Michael echoes the actions of his religious namesake (referred to by Father Arnall, chapter three, as the benign angel driving Adam and Eve out of the Garden with a flaming sword): “ – You'll get your walking papers, I tell you. He bent over to rake the fire . . . He shook the poker gravely . . . ” (p. 23) Stephen also “wondered if he would die” – a thought anchored in the knowledge of the Fall. Adam and Eve's sin is traditionally associated with the flesh. By association, then, the other boy in the infirmary has the fitting name Athy, which in the riddle he asks, is associated with “a thigh.” The image Stephen often recalls of the infirmary fire is: “the fire rose and fell on the wall.” In relation to the Garden of Eden a reference to Dante's fire will clarify the significance of

this image in Stephen's mind.

In medieval legend the earthy paradise is generally situated in an inaccessible spot, often surrounded by a barrier of flame. In both Germanic and Celtic myth a wall of fire occurs. The Bible also offers a hint of it in Genesis 3:24: "And He placed at the east of the garden of Eden Cherubim, and a flaming sword which turned every way." St. John Chrysostom, Isidore, and after him many others speak of the fiery wall. Dante makes his encircling fire serve a double purpose: it obstructs . . . the road to the home of terrestrial bliss, and at the same time it constitutes the punishment of the last cornice. "Mortify therefore your members which are upon the earth" (Col. 3:5) . . . The burning path signifies the quenching of carnal desire by purification of the heart.²

Later Stephen remembers the infirmary as the place of his innocence, but the infirmary also has the role of healing the sick, of purifying. Therefore, it also implies that Stephen must leave the innocent ignorance of Ireland-Eden in order to reach the "terrestrial bliss" of his artistic ability. Yet Stephen does not sense that the fire of this innocent, ignorance – protecting primitive authority is insufficient for him until the Christmas dinner. His first thought of his first Christmas is of a "great fire banked high and red." (p. 30) From primitive times the hearth has been a form of "domestic sun," a symbol of the home. Here, specifically, it is the symbol of paternalistic authority, for Stephen's father is usually standing by the fire with his back to it. This scene is the epitome of the security guaranteed by this paternalistic authority (that is, on the primitive level, a prosperous tribe securely gathered to celebrate). Yet the night of the great fire is also the night of the great argument about Parnell and the Church among Dante, Casey, and Simon, after which Dante storms out of the house never to appear again.³

The effect on Stephen is quite different from the sense of security and good will he had anticipated at this tribal feast of the Light of the World. Instead of being convinced of the inviolable structure of authority, he is being made aware of the cracks that are beginning to appear in its structure. Stephen, who "liked to sit near him [Casey] at the fire, looking up at his dark fierce face" (p. 35), now sees Casey staring "before him out of his dark flaming eyes, repeating: ' – Away with God, I say!'" This is Stephen's first witnessing of another's conflict and revolt against authority. Casey's "flaming eyes" foreshadow the danger Stephen will encounter with the pandybat, just as the only other reference to "dark flaming eyes" (that is, the eyes of the rector when he announces the retreat in Chapter Three) forewarn Stephen of the danger of authority which can inflict eternal fire.

The fire image concludes in Chapter One in the formulation in Stephen's mind of the shock of tyrannical authority. Stephen's observance of Casey's defiance of authority sees no justification for Casey's position, and cannot until Stephen himself experiences the injustice of authority. This injustice comes in a physical way making a deep impression on even an innocent mind: "hot burning stinging tingling," "like a leaf in the fire," "pain

scalding tears,” “his crumpled burning livid hand,” “tears scalded his eyes,” “burning with shame and agony and fear.” (p. 50)

The symbolism of fire, then, reveals not only Stephen’s state of submissive docility to authority, but also the flaws which will eventually lead to the collapse of authority. The fires of paternalistic authority have become too small to fulfill his growing needs. With the sudden sting of the pandybat Stephen is jolted from his primitive security. He is aware that the fire of authority may guarantee warmth, light and protection but it does not always guarantee justice. Consequently a new insecurity has arisen in Stephen. He has learned that fire can burn him and he will not forget it. He must, therefore seek a new fire that will safely protect him.

Mistrust is a consequent reaction of Stephen to the injustice of authority, and Chapter Two shows his growing disillusionment with the dying fire of authority and his growing acceptance of the fire of self-indulgence. He learns to trust only himself.

He is angry with himself for being young and the prey of restless impulses, angry also with the change of fortune which was reshaping the world about him into a vision of squalor and insincerity. Yet his anger lent nothing to the vision. He chronicled with patience what he saw, detaching himself from it and testing its mortifying flavor in secret.” (p. 67)

The “change of fortune” particularly applies to the authority of his father. The great fire in Chapter One which his father symbolically still has his back to, has now become the parlor “fire that would not draw that evening.” His father is on the decline – they are moving, his father has enemies – and Stephen watches him “poking at the dull fire with fierce energy.” (p. 66) The father is metaphorically, also poking at the dull spirit of his son, for Stephen now sees that, “changes in what he deemed unchangeable were so many slight shocks to his boyish conception of the world” (p. 64). Stephen sees that his father is powerless to prevent these changes. Therefore the fire of Stephen’s trust is his father’s authority becomes dull.

Stephen’s disillusionment, however, goes beyond his father’s ineffectiveness and encompasses the ineffectiveness of Irish “culture”. In the following fire description one can see that he is becoming aware of the national mentality and the warped culture it caters to. In his aunt’s kitchen

A lamp with a reflector hung on the japanned wall of the fireplace and by its light his aunt was reading the evening paper (p. 67)

This complex image is more easily explained by association with Plato’s cave where men see only the shadows and reflections of true reality. The picture of “beautiful Mabel Hunter” which his aunt admires in the paper is merely a character in a pantomime, merely a broken reflection of true culture. Another reflection is that of Tennyson, the ideal poet of his classmates, and one who cannot compare with Byron whom Stephen defends “hotly”; a defence which results in an attack similar in accusation to the one endured by Prometheus who stole fire from heaven:

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- Admit.
- No.
- Admit.
- No. No.

At last after a fury of plunges he wrenched himself free. His tormentors set off . . . laughing and jeering at him, while he, torn and flushed and panting, stumbled after them half blinded with tears, clenching his fists madly and sobbing. (p. 82)

Stephen is moving away from the fire of his Irish tribe, and the tribe resents it. Stephen-Prometheus brings them the new fire of Byron, yet they attack him just as Plato warned that those who ventured out of the cave and witnessed true reality, would not be believed but attacked by those who remained in the cave. However, there is another reason for his discontent: “for being young and the prey of restless, foolish impulses.” (p. 67) The fire of his sexual awareness is being kindled within him.

In a scene veiled in darkness Stephen is sitting by the fire half-listening to the words of an old woman talking about change, while he follows “the ways of adventure that allay open in the coals, arches, and vaults and winding galleries and jagged caverns.” (p. 68) Meanwhile, “a skull appeared suspended in the sound of voices at the fire.” (p. 68) This feeble creature mistakes Stephen for Josephine. The images suggest, symbolically, Stephen’s sexual awakening. The idea of change within a labyrinth of dark vaults and jagged caverns is characteristic of the anxiety of adolescent years. The monkey is a common symbol for man’s baser desires, especially lust; and the confusion between Jim and Josephine suggests by undertone the awakening of Stephen’s sexual identity, his striving for masculinity. It is humiliating for him, imagining himself to be Napoleon (p. 63), to be mistaken for Josephine. His sexual desires are fully awake in the school play scene when, after the performance, he abandons his family “at the first lamp” (p. 86) and runs down the hill blinded by the incense of lust for his girl, until his eyes “burned no longer.” (p. 86) The light of the family no longer pacifies him; he has his own fire of self-indulgence, lust.

Stephen’s trip to Cork contributes to his growing sexual awareness. The train Stephen and Simon take to Cork is a “night Mail” trip which passes “little glimmering stations, manned by a few silent sentries, flung by the mail behind her and twinkling for a moment in the darkness like fiery grains flung backwards by a runner.” (p. 87) The train is a runner carrying the night mail; it is a messenger. Its message is Simon Dedalus’ youthful past, to his son. Ironically, the envelope of Simon Dedalus contains not merely the simple memories of his youth, but also the revelation of the vast scope of lust, which until now he has thought of as only *his* unique experience. During their visit to Cork, Mr. Cashman reveals Simon’s reputation with the girls in the old days.

. . . The women used to stand and look after him in the street.

He [Stephen] heard the sob passing loudly down his father’s throat and opened his eyes with a nervous impulse. The sunlight breaking suddenly on his sight turned

the sky and clouds into a fantastic world of sombre masses . . . Nothing moved him or spoke to him from the real world unless he heard it in an echo of the infuriated cries within him.)p. 92)

Stephen sees in his father's sob the same lust which is crying within himself. Through Cashman's reference to Stephen's great grandfather as a fierce old fire-eater, the aggressive fires of lust are projected further back into Stephen's geneology. Lust is no longer realized as Stephen's unique experience, but as the heritage of his ancestors, the heritage of man.

Finally, the "wasting fires of lust" (p. 99) drive him to wander a labyrinth of "narrow, dirty streets." In this maze of darkness a culminating fire image arises.

The yellow gas flames arose before his troubled vision against the vaporous 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. (p. 100)

The religious undertones here create the atmosphere of the holocaustal offering up of a victim.

In this chapter the fire of lust is gradually replaced by the fire of self; Stephen is no longer the victim of authority but the victim of his own lust. The authority of the father dwindles to a dull fire, and through the blinding sunlight Stephen realizes the kinship of lust between himself and his father. By this kinship of lust Stephen twists the position of authority to make it a tacit justification for his own night wanderings.

Stephen's general condition in Chapter Three progresses from remorse, to repentance, to redemption. Ironically, however, and more revealing of Stephen's condition, is the underlying progression from dissatisfaction, to fear, to a pseudo-redemption amounting to nothing more than mere submission. The symbol of fire adds to the irony involved in Stephen's progression through these stages.

The religious aura has fallen from the brothel scene and is now succeeded by a more objective description: "After early nightfall the yellow lamps would light up, here and there, in the squalid quarters of the brothels." (p. 102) By the use of the word "squalid" which means a fire trap or an ashtray (a place where people are consumed or extinguished), Joyce shows Stephen's dissatisfaction with the fire of lust. The squalid brothels only reflect the dissatisfaction that saturates his soul, which he sees as the tail of a peacock, consumed by the fires of its own pride,

going forth to experience, unfolding itself sin by sin, spreading abroad the balefire [that is, funeral pyre] of its burning stars and folding back upon itself, fading slowly, quenching its own lights and fires. (p. 103)

Stephen realizes that the internal, self-devouring fire of lust has destructive qualities similar to the external, pandybat fire of authority. His soul "lusted after its own destruction")p. 104), and "he stirred the embers of his contempt" (p. 104) for others.

However, this state of haughty depravity is jeopardized by the announcement of the

retreat by the rector with the “dark stern eyes.” “In the silence their [the eyes] dark fire kindled the dusk into a tawny glow. Stephen’s heart had withered up like a flower of the desert that feels the simoom coming from afar.” (p. 108) Being in a state of guilt rather than innocence, the sinful “bright centers of the brain extinguished one by one like lamps.” (p. 112) Again the eyes warn Stephen that he must endure the purification of a psychological pandybat. All his hours of sinning in thought and deed are capsuled in “the sootcoated packet of pictures which he had hidden in the flue of the fireplace.” (p. 115) Such a desecration of the symbol of authority will now be rectified by the “ire of God” (p. 122), the ultimate authority, which will come to Stephen through God’s minister and the fire conferences.

The conferences are an orderly exposition and illumination of adolescent fear by means of the image of fire. They strike at the farthest borders of the imagination and at the senses, both of which have been sensitively awakening in Stephen, and which are the basis of his future aesthetic birth. By emphasizing the destructive power of fire, the sermon succeeds in frustrating Stephen’s creative ability. Just as everlasting fire punishes corrupt natures, so too, ironically, the corrupt church punishes creativity.

Stephen is overwhelmed with the fear of damnation which initiates a sense of remorse. He seeks forgiveness in confession but on his way to the church

His blood began to murmur in his veins, murmuring like a sinful city summoned from its sleep to hear its doom. Little flakes of fire fell and powdery ashes fell softly, alighting on the houses of men. They stirred, waking from sleep, troubled by the heated air. (p. 142)

This description is an echo of the scriptural account of the destruction of the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah and of the scene in Canto XIV of the *Inferno* in which a plain is showered by a rain of fire. Capanaeus, who defied Jove, lies in the center of the plain along with blasphemers, sodomites, and usurers. Just as Capanaeus was captivated by his tremendous shadow on the wall of Thebes, which led to his defiance of Jove, so too Stephen captivated by the pride of his lust, defies authority. At Stephen’s temptation to leave the confession line “little fiery flakes fell and touched him at all points; shameful thoughts, shameful words, shameful acts.” (p. 142)

After his sins have been forgiven and he has received holy communion, Stephen sincerely believes that he has been redeemed – “the pale flames of the candles among the white flowers were clear and silent as his own soul.” (p. 146) But Stephen has not been redeemed; he has been tricked. His actions in the following chapter are not the actions of a redeemed person but simply the actions of one who has submitted. Authority, by substituting the fire of damnation on the psychological level in place of the fire of the pandybat on the physical level, has reasserted its fearful grip on Stephen. His regression is symbolized by his return home to the kitchen hearth (p. 146).

It is the church – through conferences, confession, and communion – which has reinstated Stephen under the yoke of authority. Therefore it is fitting that the major fire symbol of chapter four is Pentecost; that is, the occasion on which the church received

her authoritative power by the indwelling of the spirit. It is because of Stephen's pride and the spiritless state of the church that this Pentecost is corrupted and abandoned for the aesthetic pentecost of mortal beauty.

The "redemption" of Chapter Three becomes distorted under Stephen's unconscious pride which is obsessed with the scrupulous gestures of piety. The ironic position of Pentecost exemplifies this distortion. The dynamism of the fire of Pentecost is completely absent. Only the shell of a priest remains "offering up mass once a year, robed in the scarlet of the tongues of fire," to the "divine gloom and silence wherein dwelt the unseen Paraclete" (p. 149). There is no Pentecostal fire here.

Stephen's whole state is symbolized in the fact that one of his mortifications is absence from the fire. He neither loves nor hates because he lacks the warmth of fire. He is not creative because he has abandoned his smithy. He is still embedded in his pride because he has abandoned the fire of purification. Therefore Stephen is incapable of having a true Pentecost because he refuses to substitute his spirit of pride for a true religious spirit.

The tongues of fire were received by the apostles to be shared and proliferated, but the proposition of the religious life comes ironically, that is to say, it comes not as one to be shared or proliferated but as a powerful profession which would support his pride. The fire symbols in this scene together with the priest who is trying to recruit him, suggest subtle reasons for Stephen's refusal. The priest stands with his back to the light as his father stood with his back to the fireplace, symbolizing an authority which Stephen has discovered to be dangerous and destructive.

The voice of the director urging upon him the proud claims of the church and the mystery and power of the priestly office repeated itself idly in his memory. His soul was not there to hear and greet it and he knew now that the exhortation he had listened to had already fallen into an idle formal tale. (p. 162)

In coming to his decision about religious life Stephen remembers the cold gaslight in the dormitory in Clongowes which becomes, then, his lasting image of religious life (p. 161).

Sensing the deceptive Pentecost of a hollow church, Stephen returns home to the upper room of the kitchen. There, amid the crumbs of a finished eucharistic feast, with no mother or father or Christ, he sits with his brother and sister disciples by the fireplace, awaiting a new paraclete (p. 163).

Stephen's self-pentecost is in conjunction with his new adventure of entering university life. It is a pentecost of independence, not only from parents but from all authority, including God.

It seemed to him that he heard notes of fitful music leaping upwards a tone and downwards a diminished fourth, like triple-branching flames leaping fitfully, flame after flame, out of a midnight wood. It was an elfin prelude, endless and formless . . . (p. 165)

Now Stephen, like Icarus, leaps free from his father's control flying sunward "radiant and

transformed,” and at the height of his transformation his paraclete appears to him. “Her slateblue skirts were kilted boldly about her waist and dovetailed behind her. Her bosom was as a bird’s soft and slight, slight and soft as the breast of some darkplumaged dove.” (p. 171) This contrasts with the traditional white dove of the original Pentecost. His tongue of fire is not supernatural joy but the “faint flame [that] trembled on her cheek,” the “profane joy” of mortal beauty (p. 171).

Chapter Five concerns itself with Stephen’s final abandonment of the dead fires of authority, and it nurtures the fire of Stephen’s aesthetic nature. It also reveals a greater fire which Stephen is incapable of receiving just yet, because of his proud isolation from others – the fire of love.

Ireland no longer contains any fire for Stephen. Ireland is for Stephen a Davin with an imagination shaped by “the broken lights of Irish Myth,” (p. 181), or a woman in the darkness “without guile, calling the stranger to her bed.” (p. 183) Davin’s story of this woman in the darkness reminds Stephen of the women of Clane, where he has his first memories of fire. But Clane no longer represents the source of his primitive warmth and light, rather it ironically represents a source of darkness of Ireland and of his own soul “in darkness and secrecy and loneliness . . . ” (p. 183) That the fire of Ireland is out is also seen in the dean of studies’ office.

The intellectual and aesthetic life of Ireland is smothered by the grip of religious authority. The Dean of Studies is a priest who tends an “empty temple” stripped of any spiritual garments such as a Jewish “ephod.” Joyce’s reference to a “temple” and an “ephod” suggest strongly the Temple of Jerusalem in which the fire was kept and never permitted to go out (Leviticus 6:12). However during the time of Exile, the priests

took privately the fire for the altar and hid it in a valley where there was a deep pit without water, and there they kept it safe, so that the place was unknown to all men. But when many years had past, the priests sought for the fire, but . . . they found no fire but thick water. (Macabee 1:19)

The Dean has failed to keep the intellectual, religious, and creative fire of Ireland alive and has therefore failed in his duty. His maintenance of the fire has become meaningless and insignificant. He is also an exile (from England) and instead of a handful of “thick water” he has a fistful of used candlebutts. In fact, in *Stephen Hero* the priest’s name is Butt⁴ – a candlebutt already used up.

In the conversation between the Dean and Stephen, the subject of Epictetus’ lamp is discussed. The meaning of Epictetus’ lamp is that Stephen will abandon one lamp as soon as it becomes useless, for another. The Dean of Studies symbolizes the lamp of Ireland’s intellectual life and creativity – “the priest’s face which seemed like an unlit lamp or a reflector hung in a false focus” (p. 187). The lamp of Ireland is out and Stephen must seek a new fire elsewhere. He identifies himself more with the burned heretic Bruno of Nolan who was an exile, then with the “garish lamps” of the national theatre or the “softly lit drawing room of the hotel” where Dublin’s patricians gathered.

However, this chapter also shows the growth of a new fire, Stephen's aesthetic intuition, what earlier I have called the fire of Stephen's aesthetic nature. His moments of aesthetic inspiration come to him early one morning and culminate in the writing of a poem (pp. 217-224). I shall not try to explicate it in full here, except to point out that the fire images in the first three tercets do coincide with interpretations made of fire before:

Are you not weary of ardent ways,
Lure of the fallen seraphim?
Tell no more of enchanted days.

Your eyes have set man's heart ablaze
And you have had your will of him.
Are you not weary of ardent ways?

Above the flame the smoke of praise
Goes up from ocean rim to rim.
Tell no more of enchanted days.

The "fallen seraphim" refers either to the rebellious angels falling from heaven with their leader Lucifer, or Icarus falling with his wings aflame into the ocean. In either case there is reference to a fallen state which parallels Stephen's fallen state. It is the result of the passion engendered by the "eyes which have set men's hearts ablaze." This "heart ablaze," unlike the print of the Sacred Heart in his girl's apartment which symbolizes a love eternally consumed in the creative love of others, is consumed in the destructive self-love of pride and lust. Therefore, Stephen has not only fallen out of Ireland-Eden mentioned in connection with the infirmary fire, but he has unknowingly fallen into his own pride.

Not only do the fire images of Stephen's morning inspiration indicate a fallen state but they also indicate an apocalyptic state: "Its rays burned up the world, consumed the hearts of men and angels: the rays from the rose that was her wilful heart." (p. 218) The apocalyptic imagery completes the scriptural cycle from the creation and fall in the garden of Ireland-Eden to the destruction of the world which has grown out from it, preparing the way for the new creation of aesthetic beauty.

The fallen condition indicated by the poem implies that Stephen has passed through that fiery wall which surrounds and protects the Eden mentioned in relation to the infirmary fire. However, in a moment when inspiration fails him, he does not pass through the wall into life but shrinks behind it:

The full morning light had come . . . he knew that all around him life was about to awaken in common noises, hoarse voices, sleepy prayers. Shrinking from that life he turned toward the wall . . . staring at the great overblown scarlet flowers of the tattered wallpaper. He tried to warm his perishing joy in their scarlet glow . . . (p. 221)

He hesitates by the wall fearing life. He is suffering from "egocentricity that excludes

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charity.”⁵ He is incapable of experiencing the fire of love which his girl is associated with – symbolized by the print of “the Sacred Heart above the untenanted sideboard” in her apartment, which confounds him. His friend Cranly who steals Stephen’s girl from him does possess the fire of love. In fact, Cranly’s characteristic word is “flaming” which may find its explanation in Cranly’s prototype Byrnes whom Joyce called “His Intensity.”⁶ Stephen’s mother’s prayer that he learn “what the heart is and what it feels” speaks more wisdom than Stephen’s concluding invocation to life: “forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race.” This call upon the old artificer is ironic since Stephen’s only possession is his pride which prohibits him from experiencing the purer fire of love.

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¹ James Joyce, *A Portrait of The Artist As A Young Man* (New York: The Viking Press, 1964), p. 18. All future references to *A Portrait* will be to the Viking text.

² Dante Alighieri, *La Divina Commedia*, edited by C. Grandgent (New York: Heath and Company, 1933), p. 570.

³ Robert Andreach, *Studies In Structure* (New York, Fordham University Press, 1964), p. 51. Mr. Andreach gives a detailed analysis of significance of each of the characters involved in the argument.

⁴ James Joyce, *Stephen Hero* (New York: New Directions Books, 1963), p. 28.

⁵ Thomas Connolly, *Joyce’s Portrait: Criticisms and Critiques* (New York, Appleton – Century – Crofts, 1962), p. 179.

⁶ Richard Ellmann, *James Joyce* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1959), p. 120.

