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Stephen's Villanelle:
From Passive to Active Creation

by DORIS T. WIGHT

Stephen's villanelle in the fourth chapter of A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, like the character Stephen himself, has evoked from critics a wide range of response. The battle over how to evaluate both the Villanelle of the Temptress and its creator, the artist as a young man, began when Joyce's irony in A Portrait began to be truly discovered. Positions were taken, sides were drawn up, as people pondered this kind of polarizing question: Is Stephen's villanelle an exquisitely-wrought piece of art intended by Joyce to illustrate convincingly—as do Stephen's aesthetic theories—the genius of the youth, or does Joyce mean to exemplify via a schoolboyish, outdated form of poetry the bad art that can result from an immature, overly romantic artist's loss of control and distance from his subject? If the villanelle is designed to be a receptacle for reader mockery, so also surely must be the overly dramatic diary entries at the conclusion of A Portrait, such as “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...” But where does the irony end? Is Joyce willing to undermine totally in readers' minds the entire idea of Stephen's calling, of the genuineness of his vocation, making the young man an unredeemable fool? The polarized controversy on how to regard both Stephen and the villanelle as specimen of Stephen's artistic promise continues. However, yet another interpretation of the poem and its function in Stephen's künstlerroman will be offered here.

1. In 1961 in The Rhetoric of Fiction (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1961) Wayne Booth pressed the question of Stephen's poetic ability, referring back to Stephen Hero, which described Stephen as having "brought forth some pages of sorry verse," and Booth asked if this ironic concept of Stephen as artistically inept has been transferred to A Portrait unchanged. As early as 1955 Hugh Kenner in Dublin's Joyce (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961) had presented this new, ironic view of Stephen and had made withering reference to the villanelle as "Frenchified verses." Robert Scholes, however, did not see A Portrait that way. "Despite his bitterness," argued Scholes, "Stephen comes, through the composition of the poem, to an understanding of her [E. C.'s] innocence, an equilibrium, a stasis, in which his new understanding and pity balance his old desire and bitterness... There is no hint of mockery in Joyce's reverent attitude toward the creative process" ("Stephen Dedalus, Poet or Esthete?" PMLA, 89 [Sept. 1964], 468-89). Scholes now headed the defenders of Stephen and the villanelle against Booth and Kenner, who saw Stephen and his poem as objects for mockery. Evidence inside and outside the text from ever-growing accumulations of Joycean material seemed to favor these ironists; but isn't it possible merely that irony itself was in fashion? At any rate, Edward Brandebur, stressing Freudian aspects, joined the ironists in 1964 in The Celtic Cross. But also in 1964 Scholes' Defenders of Stephen as fallible-but-still-sacred creator received reinforcement, this from Maurice Beebe, who saw Stephen caught in the old bind of the artist forced to choose between art and life in Ivory Towers and Sacred Founts. In 1975 Charles Rossman declared himself with the ironists in James Joyce Quarterly, taking the position that Stephen's villanelle functions as an outraged cry of protest against the flesh but that it falls far short of marking
My interpretation contends the following: that the Villanelle of the Temptress functions both ironically and seriously, but primarily seriously, as a pivot and even a jewel in the work as a whole; that it repeats the insight derived earlier from the bird-girl, but that it carries Stephen's vision forward into active practice and that this is its reason for being. I hold that when Stephen commences the poem he still is a passive soul prone to swoon away in ardent bliss over women and words, wallowing in the enchantment they can provide, but by the time Stephen finishes, and precisely through the very process of its construction, Stephen has changed profoundly. The young man has, in fact, undergone a needed passage from passive to active creation and has become a conscious creator able to play the vigorous part needed if he is to live successfully the life of a mature artist.

I therefore agree with those who respect the villanelle as art, finding its complex imagery rich and beautiful, its rhythms impeccable, its rhymes logical and satisfying, and the final quatrains, particularly the clinching final line, masterful. I suspect that Joyce—the author of the beautiful if underappreciated poems of *Chamber Music*—himself in his heart-within-the-heart admired the Villanelle of the Temptress which he had, tellingly I feel, saved from the destruction of other early work when going through a vigorous weeding-out of failures. However—and this is a strong however—like others, I agree that there is much irony in *A Portrait*; that use of irony is one of Joyce's main artistic devices; and that Joyce's villanelle is presented straight, as a piece of valid art, but also with tongue in cheek, with amusement at its depiction of the body-mind dilemma all humans face. It seems highly probable that Stephen's masturbation goes along with the completion of his villanelle. Ironic and comical as such an act as masturbation can be, with its usual connotation of juvenility in one's sexual situation, still within the context of *A Portrait* masturbation functions not only as a humorous but also as a serious and even victorious act—one that completes the journey of Stephen's soul through means of a concrete work of creation from passive swooner to active participator in life's physical side, that "reality of experience."

**Before** examining in detail exactly what the controversial villanelle signifies, one should remember Stephen's state of mind at the point of its composition. He has just had the epiphanic vision of the bird-girl, freeing him from entrapment in the delusion of the need for repentance through mortification of the senses. Was not the bird-girl his own soul, his muse,
but also human existence, the two in creative fusion? What then still remains as the crucial step in development that Stephen must undergo to complete his transformation from impotent to potent creator? Is that crucial step perhaps Stephen's own vision of the creator, his holding back from the vision of a male creator and envisioning too strongly a female creator as model—a Freudian clinging perhaps to the mother, rather than the "Old father, old artificer," to whom he will finally turn decisively in the final words of *A Portrait* with his plea, "stand me now and ever in good stead"?

Richard Ellmann speaks in this area of thought in his biography of Joyce when he discusses Joyce's vision of the creator as not male but female, considering the fertilizing power as well as difficulties which this stance of Joyce's made for him—as well, of course, for his character Stephen. If, as Ellmann says, *A Portrait* is "the gestation of a soul," then the problem of artistic maturity, of Stephen's necessary travel from a feminine/passive to a masculine/active position can be seen. Ellmann presents suggestively his vision of Joyce's concept of the soul's gestation and its competitive father and mother poles (brackets mine):

The book begins with Stephen's father and, just before the ending, it depicts the hero's severance from his mother. From the start the soul is surrounded by [female] liquids, urine, slime, seawater, amniotic tides. . . . The atmosphere of biological struggle is necessarily dark and melancholy until the [male] light of life is glimpsed. (p. 307)

Ellmann recounts the journey of development of Stephen's soul through the earlier chapters. In chapter five Stephen's acted-upon, female soul must at last come to grips with its vocation and its necessity to act, to leave the constraints of its own passive life and dare the active hazards of exile; but first it must undergo development toward action, toward confidence in and a will to mastery of its artistic vocation. This is where the structure of *A Portrait* has been heading. We are at last approaching the area of the *künstlerroman* wherein the perfect piece of the puzzle will be Stephen's Villanelle of the Temptress. First, however, Stephen's relations with women should be brought out more clearly.

Stephen had worshipped the Blessed Virgin, making a fetish of her purity and of his own. He had worshipped his own mother, and for him to have become a celibate priest would have pleased her greatly; for him to leave the church, however, was to insult that adored mother, to wound her and himself. For Stephen to deny his religion and his mother's pressures on him by seeking out a prostitute was a tremendous act of defiance. The rebellion expressed here, however, lost some of its value because in the actual experience Stephen found himself *passive* and *wordless*:

Her round arms held him firmly to her . . . his lips parted though they would not speak. . . . He closed his eyes, surrendering himself to her, body and mind, conscious of nothing
in the world but her softly parting lips. They pressed upon his brain as upon his lips as though they were the vehicle of a vague speech. (p. 101)

This *wordlessness* is of crucial significance. Stephen could not rise above the experience with the prostitute, he repeated it over and over, and this left him prey to such guilt and fear as he suffered in the retreat, and it condemned him to artistic puerility. The sixteen-year-old had to get a new view of physical sex if he were to leave boyhood and become a man and an artist—a mature artist, not a Little Chandler. His passivity in sex therefore, though it fills him with delight, is a real problem.

Besides the Blessed Virgin, the mother and the prostitute, E. C.—who figures directly in the villanelle—must be discussed. Before the night during which the dream that gives rise to the villanelle occurs, Stephen has just seen E. C. (Emma) with her companions, their umbrellas raised against a few raindrops, their skirts held “demurely,” innocently. Stephen is struck with remorse that he may have been unfair in judging Emma as a cunning temptress who flirts with priests wantonly and is hypocritical with Stephen. Now he realizes that her life may be “simple and strange as a bird’s life,” that her heart may be “simple and wilful as a bird’s heart” (216). Stephen here links E. C. with the bird-girl who closed chapter four.

Now E. C. merges with Stephen’s muse, she who had elicited from his soul a cry of blasphemously sacred joy, “Heavenly God!” Note the stance of reaction, not action, he had had towards bird-girl, who soon merges with E. C.; and note especially the emphasis again on Stephen’s speechlessness:

Her image had 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. (p. 172)

In that epiphany Stephen walks on and on, feeling heaven and earth mingled; and emphasis on gender continues, implicitly maleness in the heavenly bodies and their processes, femaleness as the earth becomes “Mother Earth,” the active female birthing and nurturing principle:

He felt above him the vast indifferent dome and the calm processes of the heavenly bodies; and the earth beneath him, the earth that had borne him, had taken him to her breast.

Stephen falls asleep, his soul “swooning into some new world,” and the reader is given an overture to the imagery which will be used in the villanelle section and others before and after. Stephen’s soul is still being described in its passive rapture:

Glimmering and trembling ... a breaking light, an opening flower, it spread in endless succession to itself, breaking in full crimson and unfolding and fading to palest rose, leaf by leaf and wave by wave of light, flooding all the heavens with its soft flushes, every flush deeper than other.

Stephen wakes. He sighs. He has been acted upon by visions, by insight, but his experience has been passive. He has the idea now of sex-life-art union, but he has not yet acted upon his vision. Symbolic action, Stephen’s becoming a true artist, must await his experience of the
villanelle, which initially will repeat the recalled experience but will have a different ending.

Towards dawn he awoke. O what sweet music! His soul was all dewy wet. Over his limbs in sleep pale cool waves of light had passed. He lay still, as if his soul lay amid cool waters, conscious of faint sweet music. (p. 217)

Thus the villanelle section opens. That Stephen has awakened from a wet dream is not the most important thing to note here perhaps; rather, it is that Stephen is in a passive relation to his love experience, just as he was with E. C. when in their youthful flirtation he could not grab hold of her and kiss her although he sensed that she too desired that. The description of Stephen's passive soul-swoon continues.

His mind was waking slowly to a tremulous morning knowledge, a morning inspiration. A spirit filled him, pure as the purest water, sweet as dew, moving as music. But how faintly it inbreathed, how passionlessly, as if the seraphim themselves were breathing upon him! (p. 217)

Stephen’s mind is following his body’s experience, making the leap from physical adventure to a sensation of knowledge, of aesthetic joy. Still he is passive. Angels breathe upon him; he does not breathe upon them. It is not Stephen but the prostitute who must kiss, must initiate: he can only open his own lips and wait.

His soul was waking slowly, fearing to awake wholly. It was that windless hour of dawn when madness wakes and strange plants open to the light and the moth flies forth silently. (p. 217)

Stephen is a strange plant open to the light that has fallen upon him, but the moth flies forth silently. Words do not issue. No kiss answers kiss. An enchantment of the heart! The night had been enchanted. In a dream or vision he had known the ecstasy of seraphic life. Was it an instant of enchantment only or long hours of days and years and ages? (p. 217)

The phrase “enchantment of the heart” refers back to the discussion on aesthetics Stephen has had so recently with Lynch in which he spoke of the “luminous silent stasis of esthetic pleasure” derived from apprehending in the aesthetic image its integritas, consonantia, and claritas. A link is made here between art and sexual joy, the feeling of knowledge one derives from both. Stephen the lover and Stephen the artist are joined here, and the two identities will rise or fall together.

In the next paragraph the imagery is that of Stephen’s epiphany upon discovering the bird-girl, his muse. The imagination is Stephen’s own. He is female, his own muse, fertilized by the instant of inspiration just as his own limbs were moistened in his sleep by his own emission, exudation born of dreams.

The instant of inspiration seemed now to be reflected from all sides at once from a multitude of cloudy circumstance of what had happened or of what might have happened.
flashed forth like a point of light and now from cloud on cloud of vague circumstance confused form was veiling softly its afterglow. O! In the virgin womb of the imagination the word was made flesh. Gabriel the seraph had come to the virgin's chamber. An afterglow deepened within his spirit, whence the white flame had passed, deepening to a rose and ardent light. That rose and ardent light was her strange wilful heart, strange that no man had known or would know, wilful from before the beginning of the world: and lured by that ardent rose-like glow the choirs of the seraphim were falling from heaven. (p. 217)

Stephen's imagination is what has been visited by inspiration, but the inspiration has been E. C., and one is minded of Flaubert's outburst concerning his creation of another Emma, "C'est moi!" since here Stephen is both himself and his beloved, bird-girl and E. C. as muses, and the strange wilful heart referred to is his own creative, receptive soul, female as the ardent roselike glow that causes the choirs of seraphim to fall from heaven itself. Here is utter confusion of identity, particularly sexual identity, and one dares not compound the confusion further by adding in yet another ardent, burning heart, the Sacred Heart of Jesus, which will be mentioned shortly in this section as being pictured on the wall at E. C.'s house where Stephen visits. This heart would be another male one. Male and female, passive and active person, lover and beloved are a mêlée from which the first stanza of the Villanelle of the Temptress emerges.

Are you not weary of ardent ways,  
Lure of the fallen seraphim?  
Tell no more of enchanted days. (p. 217)

The narrator of A Portrait tells us clearly who has written these lines. Stephen himself, of course, his mind. "The verses passed from his mind to his lips." To whom, however, is the first stanza addressed? Who is the you of the first line? Since Stephen has awakened from a dream of sexual intercourse after being preoccupied during the dream-day, the obvious answer is E. C., but the first paragraph of this section describes Stephen's soul all dewy wet, so it too must have been the lure of the fallen impregnating seraphim. Stephen's mind is not only addressing the living human female, therefore, but it also addresses the female principle, the creative principle as Stephen views it, in his own soul. and his mind warns the virgin womb of Stephen's imagination, as well as E. C., to tell no more of enchanted days.

It is from darkness, from Stephen's unconsciousness, that this first stanza has emerged; and the roselike glow from E. C.'s wilful heart and Stephen's female-creative unconscious sends out the rays that are to constitute the villanelle's rhyme scheme. The second stanza of the villanelle like the first "comes" to Stephen without his having to act in any way to give it birth.

Your eyes have set man's heart ablaze  
And you have had your will of him.  
Are you not weary of ardent ways? (p. 218)

This stanza too is addressed to E. C.'s wilful heart, now pictured as
devouring, as using, as overpowering worshiping man who is set afire in his adoration; and the third stanza describes this condition of man as being burned and rising in smoke to praise woman.

Above the flame the smoke of praise
Goes up from ocean rim to rim.
Tell no more of enchanted days. (p. 218)

There is a change here, however. The first two stanzas, addressed primarily to E. C. and to Stephen's own female-creative spirit, scolded lightly the temptress, but now the mind has turned away and is observing more objectively the situation, the damage and destruction that is being caused by this excess of praise and of impassioned devotion. Here neither E. C. nor Stephen's soul is addressed, but some fictitious other person, some objective listener, who is told the situation. The reader of A Portrait, in short, is now told that the whole scene on earth is flame and smoke. And now the line “Tell no more of enchanted days” seems almost to be, as well, Stephen's mind warning himself to stop telling about days of swooning bliss in its creative productions since the toll in flame and destruction, surely metaphors for personal pain, is too great.

Whatever the cause, the “heart's cry is broken” after that third stanza emerges, and the poet who had ideas flowing in of themselves apparently is suddenly deserted by his muse and feels desperate.

The rhythm died out at once; the cry of his heart was broken. His lips began to murmur the first verses over and over; then went on stumbling through half verses, stammering and baffled; then stopped. The heart's cry was broken. (p. 218)

Reality has entered in. A dull daylight is spreading itself outside the window, “covering the roselight in his heart,” and Stephen panics.

Fearing to lose all, he raised himself suddenly on his elbow to look for paper and pencil. There was neither on the table; only the soupplate he had eaten the rice from for supper. (p. 218)

Detail after detail of the sordidness of Stephen’s room is now given. After that the construction of the villanelle is definitely suspended, for instead, scene after scene involving E. C. is described: E. C. when Stephen visited her and played the piano for her underneath the print of the Sacred Heart; E. C. dancing at the carnival ball in virginal white with her dress a little lifted; E. C. and Stephen in conversation in which Stephen tells her, “I was born to be a monk”; E. C.’s surrogate Father Moran and Stephen in conversation from which Stephen leaves in disdain; E. C. being snubbed by Stephen outside the library; and finally E. C.’s counterparts in all the girls who tempt and attract and enrage Stephen. The low point seems to have been reached in Stephen's disdain for E. C., but from that very low point Stephen’s secret understanding of and identification with E. C.’s guilty innocence suddenly claims acknowledgement.

He had left the classroom in disdain that was not wholly sincere, feeling that perhaps the secret of her race lay behind those dark eyes. . . . He had told himself bitterly as he walked
through the streets that 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. (pp. 220-21)

Stephen realizes that part of his anger with E. C. is jealousy of Father Moran, that "priested peasant," to whom he feels superior, himself a truer priest, an artist, "a priest of eternal imagination," capable of transmuting the daily bread of experience into the radiant body of everlasting life. With this claim to superiority over E. C.'s poorer priest, Stephen is freed to admit once again his despairing love for her, all men's despairing love for their temptresses. The next two stanzas of the villanelle appear, again not addressed to E. C. but to the general audience addressed in stanza three, for Stephen is narrating his painful plight again, pleading for understanding. The "our" now refers to all men in love and particularly to priests of eternal imagination like himself; the "you" is probably addressing the self, that soul too prone to swoon in praise of woman.

Our broken cries and mournful lays
Rise in one eucharistic hymn.
Are you not weary of ardent ways?

While sacrificing hands upraise
The chalice flowing to the brim,
Tell no more of enchanted days. (p. 221)

The villanelle is still unfinished, and the hardest part of all remains: tying everything together in the final quatrain. Reality in the form of daily experience, "common noises, hoarse voices, sleepy prayers," all threaten to destroy the artist's mood. Stephen can no longer expect that stanzas will flow up from the unconscious. This is no time for swooning. This is the time, rather, for a priest of eternal imagination to prove himself worthy of the vocation for which he longs. Stephen does what he can in this extremity. He makes a cowl of the blanket, thereby making himself a monk as well as making himself E. C., his muse and temptress (for in several references E. C. was wearing a cowl) and he stares at the "great overblown scarlet flowers of the tattered wallpaper," trying to imagine a "roseway from where he lay upwards to heaven all strewn with scarlet flowers," an obvious allusion for a Freudian scholar to the female vagina. It is at first a disheartening attempt, for Stephen at that point is "Weary! Weary! He too was weary of ardent ways" (p. 222).

The outcome seems doubtful, but one should perhaps not have been taken in by Stephen's apparent weakness too soon, nor think that because the picture of poor Stephen huddling under his blanket staring at the ugly wallpaper in his attempt to gain inspiration is humorous, Joyce is trying to make an unmitigated fool of his young hero. Not at all. We are allowed to laugh, but we are also expected to sympathize and ultimately even to admire. It was so with the little boy who found the amazing courage to brave the rector in his complaint against the injustice of Father Dolan. It was so with the young adolescent who refused to yield his assessment of
Byron as a greater writer than Tennyson although it meant being bullied by superior numbers. It was so with the physically driven young man who ended up trembling, agonized, but awakened from a slumber of centuries in the red light district of Dublin. We laugh at Stephen but we believe in him. We would help him if we could, out of shared humanity. It is not we, however, at this point who arrive to help Stephen. Like some goddess out of Homer, it is his muse, E. C. herself, who appears, the temptress of his villanelle.

She appears to him now in her innocent allure, and a glow of desire is rekindled in Stephen as he conjures up—with intent this time—his temptress. Now he does not call her mincing and flirting, tongue-tied in confusion; instead, he summons her now naked and yielding, odorous and lavish limbed, a vision for the first time of a real live woman whom he can love in a physical way without her being of necessity a fallen woman, a prostitute. At last Stephen can kiss instead of wishing to be kissed. And with acceptance of his masculine role comes power over speech as well. “The liquid letters of speech, symbols of the element of mystery, flowed forth over his brain.” Now the soul, the creative unconscious, does not swoon away into darkness but remains awake, active, consciously creating, maturing into the soul of a real artist at last. The reality outside the window, mundane and ugly as it is, is accepted, as is the physical act of masturbation. The quatrain, culmination of the villanelle, is written, addressed to E. C. and to Stephen’s own creative imagination which is bidden to tell no more henceforth of enchanted days but of the reality of experience. The vision of the bird-girl is fulfilled.

And still you hold our longing gaze
With languorous look and lavish limb!
Are you not weary of ardent ways?
Tell no more of enchanted days. (pp. 223-24)

The young man’s passage from passive, overly romantic lover to active one is complete. The dreamer has yielded to the more animalistic, even more brutish, sexual being who finds relief from normal, healthy sexual instincts through self-stimulation if need be. The temptress is not the frigid Blessed Virgin now but a loving, responding, even crudely “odorous,” smelly, real human being in Stephen’s mind. The young man no longer insists that babies be brought by storks or sprout under cabbage plants but admits that they result from human sweating sexuality. From here to the end of the kunstlerroman Stephen will cover great distances in his development, renouncing religion, asserting himself against his mother’s pressure on his conscience, rejecting Cranly’s possible offers of male love, saying no to marriage with sweet Rosie O’Grady, facing up to loneliness and even hellfire if he is wrong about the church’s validity.
Exile from his country and real acceptance of his vocation is now not im-
possible but inevitable.

The miracle is that Joyce has done this in *A Portrait* as he later will in
*Ulysses*, reaching spiritual heights of vision in and through the comedy of
Leopold and Molly Bloom's carnality, through exaggeration and humor.
Stephen's writing of his villanelle is funny, but wonderfully sound and
convincing. The poem's artistic function in a portrait of an artist as a
young man has been fulfilled. Stephen can now go forth into exile and the
artist's search.

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