

**Forging the Uncreated Conscience of a Race:  
The Creation of Individual Identity in  
Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and  
Rivera's . . . *And the Earth Did Not Devour Him***

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**ABSTRACT**

How do the Irish and Chicano protagonists in James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1917) and Tomás Rivera's . . . *Y No Se Lo Tragó La Tierra/ . . . And the Earth Did Not Devour Him* (1971) rework their shared experiences into meaningful individual ones? I will argue that the remembering mind allows Joyce's Stephen Dedalus and Rivera's anonymous boy to reimagine the historical forces that make them. By remembering the past and expressing it in their own language, Stephen and the boy rematerialize their experiences into something tangible that they can control. Both novels thus characterize the mind as a source of agency, from which memories and the individual self emerge. However, each author offers a vastly different portrayal of the mind's ability to remember. While Joyce grants Stephen considerable power over the past and language, Rivera denies the boy that power when he confronts experiences of oppression. The boy compensates for this inability, however, by fusing his memories and his narrative with the memories and oral narratives of the migrant farm workers. Although the boy incorporates his community's experiences into his own experience, he nonetheless creates his own identity. Ultimately, Rivera refashions Joyce's stream of consciousness technique, to show that it is possible to forge an individual identity from a collective one.

**Introduction**

In James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Stephen Dedalus fails to fit the profile of the typical Irishman. At one point, his friend questions whether Stephen is Irish at all. In response to this accusation, Stephen declares, "This race and this country and this life produced me. I shall express myself as I am" (220). In the first sentence, "race" and "country" perform the action of "producing" Stephen. He acknowledges that these historical and cultural forces determine him. However, in the second sentence, Stephen is the agent performing the action of expressing. By the end of the line, he recognizes that he is imbued with the agency necessary to forge a unique personal identity. While Stephen's response debunks his friend's accusations, it nonetheless raises an important question: How does someone like him go from being the product of social forces to producing his own individual identity?

I will examine this problem by comparing two novels that depict individuals shaped by the social forces of race and country, Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916) and Tomás Rivera's . . . *Y No Se Lo Tragó La Tierra/ . . . And the Earth Did Not Devour Him* (1971). In *Portrait*, Stephen is formed by his Irish upbringing. He attends Jesuit school, lives in a poor neighborhood of Dublin and becomes aware of his country's struggle against the British. In *Tierra*, an anonymous boy is similarly shaped by his Mexican

American background. He is raised Catholic, lives among migrant farm workers and witnesses the marginalization of his community within American society. To explain how Stephen and the boy go from being the products of a particular historical milieu to producing their own individual identity, I will argue that memory allows each protagonist to exercise agency by interpreting the past. By reimagining their socio-historical experiences through memories, both Stephen and the boy take control of the forces that once controlled them. In both novels, each protagonist forges a unique identity through an individual interpretation of the past.

*Products of History: The Formation of Irish and Chicano Identity*

Both Joyce and Rivera employ the stream of consciousness narrative in the beginning of each novel to demonstrate how the material world shapes the mind. As an infant, Stephen hears his father's "Baby Tuckoo" story and sees his aunt Dante holding two brushes in "her press," which is her closet. The impressionable boy immediately becomes aware of their colors: "the brush with the maroon velvet back was for Michael Davitt and the brush with the green velvet back was for Parnell" (4). The images representing these Irish leaders, color Stephen's mind with green and maroon hues. In "The German Ideology," Karl Marx notes how social conditions shape an individual's consciousness in the same manner that these colors shape Stephen's. He says, "From the start the "spirit" is afflicted with the curse of being "burdened" with matter, which here makes its appearance in the form of agitated layers of air, sounds... Consciousness is, therefore, from the very beginning a social product, and remains so as long as men exist at all" (Marx, 158). Both the omniscient narrator and Dante's reference to Irish historical figures in the opening of *Portrait* begin to form Stephen's narrative as well as his consciousness.

In *Tierra*, childhood experiences prove formative as well. The novel is comprised of loosely related short stories and vignettes describing the struggles of Mexican American migrant farm workers during the 1950's. However, the first story to appear, "The Lost Year," which functions as an introduction to both the anonymous protagonist and the novel, shows that these experiences reside in the mind of one individual boy. The omniscient narrator presents a boy who has difficulty recalling the previous year:

That year was lost to him. At times he tried to remember and, just about when he thought everything was clearing up some, he would be at a loss for words. (83)

In contrast to Stephen, the boy seems to be disturbingly unaware of both his present and his past. But the concluding lines of "The Lost Year" indicate that the narrative will also reflect the experiences that he was conscious of: "Then he started thinking about how he never thought and this was when his mind would go blank [...] But before falling asleep he saw and heard many things . . ." (83). In the time that he was awake and conscious of his surroundings, the boy apparently absorbs the images and sounds of some experiences. The ellipses at the end of the sentence suggest that the continuing narrative (indeed the rest of the novel) will reveal how the sounds and images of the previous year live in the boy's fragmented mind. Although his mind may not be as awake or alert as Stephen's, the boy is nonetheless produced by the outside world in the same manner as his Irish counterpart.

Like Joyce, Stephen's experiences are distinctly Irish. As mentioned above, he learns at an early age that Dante's green and maroon brushes represent Parnell and Davitt, respectively. From the time that he is an infant to the time that he is a student at Clongowes, Stephen, not surprisingly, exhibits sensitivity toward green and maroon. In a later scene, an older Stephen continues to appreciate these Irish hues. When coming across a picture of the world in his geography book, Stephen sees maroon clouds in the middle of the green earth and thinks, "that was like the two brushes in Dante's press, the brush with the green velvet back for Parnell and the brush with the maroon velvet back for Michael Davitt" (12). The repetition of this line suggests that he is using his previous experiences (Dante's brushes in the press) and the hues associated with those experiences to understand his present geography lesson.

Since he already has an idea of what green and maroon represent, Stephen is forced to see this lesson in terms of Parnell and Davitt. Because his mind has been bombarded with recurring names, colors and arguments concerning Parnell and Davitt, he also cannot help but wonder which political leader to side with. Consequently, the culmination of these events limits his political alternatives. Stephen is not only formed by individual experiences but by historical experiences over which he has no control.

Similarly, the experiences held inside the boy's consciousness arise from Rivera's time in history. In "It's That It Hurts," the boy becomes educated about the racism present in a predominantly white school. In the story, the boy recalls when a white student begins to harass him. In his first-person narration, the boy illustrates how his encounter with racism infiltrates his mind. First, he sees the white boy make "a gesture with his finger," subsequently leaving this offensive image in his head. Later he hears the same student say "Hey Mex...I don't like Mexicans because they steal. You hear me?" (93). When the bully physically assaults the boy, the experience of humiliation takes on an added texture. The boy explains the sensation of the attack in his own words, "I just felt a real hard blow on my ear and I heard something like when you put a conch to your ear at the beach" (94). Similar to Stephen's own lesson on Parnell and Davitt, the boy's experience manages to invoke a few of his senses, leaving him with a powerful mental imprint. When the teacher then separates him from the class and places him in a space where "they could see [him] better," (93) the boy has no choice but to think of himself as different. Overall, this encounter with racism demonstrates that the boy's experiences also have a special hue to them, that of oppression and powerlessness.

Stephen and the boy are not the only people who come across these historical circumstances. Both Joyce and Rivera show that Stephen and the boy's individual experiences are actually collective. Stephen, for example, realizes during Christmas dinner that both his father and Dante are also preoccupied with Irish politics. Rivera includes vignettes about migrant farm workers in *Tierra* to demonstrate how some of the boy's individual experiences are similar to the experiences of other Mexican Americans. Both Joyce and Rivera demonstrate how historical forces not only infiltrate the minds of their protagonists, but also simultaneously create Stephen and the boy's ethnic identity.

#### *Producers of History: The Making of the Individual*

Stephen and the boy are not mere replicas of their circumstances. In the following section, I will argue that both protagonists take hold of the forces that produce them by recalling the past. Their remembering mind grants them the power to reimagine their experiences into new ones, and thus forge a new identity from them.

In *Tierra*, the boy remembers the previous year in order to escape his current alienation. As noted in "The Lost Year," the boy has difficulty perceiving his surroundings, his name, and consequently himself. For these reasons, the boy decides to take a journey into the past. Remembering then becomes a process of recuperating all things lost, including his identity. Although the boy inhabits this state of confusion, the narrator also shows that the boy is at least conscious of his state since "he became aware that he was always thinking and thinking" (83). Because of this awareness, the boy then "*tried* to remember" and "*tried* to figure out when that time he had come to call 'year' had started" (83). The repetition of the word "*tried*" showcases his one ability—remembering. Rivera seems to suggest that the remembering mind is the only source of agency that the boy has available in his present state of alienation and confusion.

Stephen also remembers the past in order to challenge the historical forces that threaten him. For example, Father Arnall's hell-fire speech controls Stephen by instilling fear. Stephen almost becomes a replica of his Irish-Catholic experiences when he ends his visits with the prostitutes and considers joining the Priesthood. But Stephen uses the same remembering mind to stop the forces of race and country from ultimately controlling him:

Some instinct, waking at these memories, stronger than education or piety, quickened within him at every near approach to that life, an instinct subtle and hostile, and armed him against acquiescence. The chill and order of the life repelled him. (174)

The passage shows that Stephen has a force of his own—"instinct." This instinct, the mind's ability to imagine, stops Stephen from acquiescing to his influential history. When he envisions a dull life in the priesthood, he makes an individual interpretation of his past that ultimately allows him to reject that very life. The power of imagination proves to be stronger than any influential force that the exterior world may throw at him. By this point, Stephen emerges as the prototypical modernist hero since he uses his own mind to challenge his current alienation. As Paul Smith explains, this individual is "understood to be the source and agent of conscious action or meaning which is consistent with it" (Smith, xxxiii-xxxiv). Although the remembering mind first places the weight of history on Stephen, it nonetheless gives him the agency to create a personal world from it.

At this point, it is important to discuss the difference between Stephen and the boy's memory. The ellipses scattered throughout *Tierra* often leave a sentence unfinished, demonstrating how the boy's mind only recuperates fragments of the lost year. Rivera shows less confidence in the individual mind since there are a number of characters in the novel that either go crazy or fail to remember. Indeed, the boy displays the fragmentation and loss of the postmodern subject. According to Hogue, "the postmodern subject is decentered, has many subjective positions, and is also disconnected from past and future" (Hogue, 168). Considering that the events that live inside his head either humiliation, discrimination or other marginalizing experiences the boy has trouble recuperating the whole year precisely because the year was filled with images and sounds of oppression.

Unlike the boy, Stephen can depend on his powerful mind alone to forge his individual identity. His ability to interpret the past easily allows him to imagine a mythological world different, though not completely separated, from his socio-economic reality. Stephen has this extraordinary vision when walking along the Dublin seashore. Out of nowhere, he begins to hear "a voice from beyond the world" calling, "Come along, Dedalus! Bous Stephanoumenos Bous Stephaneforos!" (182). This voice sheds new light on his name. By reimagining his name, Stephen realizes that he is more than the historical "Stephen Dedalus" from Ireland; he is also the great mythical artificer Daedalus who can fashion wings to escape a man-made labyrinth. However, Stephen does not completely divorce himself from history since he creates this new identity from a name that pre-exists him. Only an epiphany allows him to escape history for a brief moment. This occurs when he sees a girl gazing out to sea who has a strange likeness to a beautiful bird. This figure of beauty, an image that is not conditioned by time, frees him from the constraints of his past and subsequently sends his soul in flight. After this grandiose vision, he decides to forge his individual identity as an artist. By the end of the novel, the omniscient narrator fails to describe Stephen's thoughts. Instead, Stephen provides a first person account of his own thoughts in a diary, further showing that he is the artificer of both his stream of consciousness narrative and identity.

As Stephen continues to forge his identity by leaving Ireland, his individual interpretations and life as an artist will subsequently influence Irish history. His second to last journal entry reveals how his declaration of will does not completely remove him from history: "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" (276). When uncovering his individual conception of the world, Stephen creates a new set of values, beliefs, and ethics about his Irish experiences. By producing a new conscience for himself, he also produces an "uncreated conscience," a new morality, for his politically paralyzed Irish people.

#### *Forging the Uncreated Conscience of a Race in Tierra*

Although the boy's condition displays the fragmentation of a postmodern subject, he nonetheless desires to find an identity as Joyce's modernist hero. Unlike Stephen who leaves his country, Rivera's protagonist embraces his community in his approach toward self-definition.

While most of the stories and vignettes in *Tierra* tend to show the migrant farm worker's powerlessness to change their oppressive circumstances, "A Silvery Night" exhibits the boy's ability to challenge the socio-economic forces that shape him. In this story, the boy disregards his many years of Catholic upbringing (in the same manner that Stephen ignores Father Arnall's hell-fire words) when he calls forth the devil. Before he goes out to the woods to summon the ominous figure, the boy suddenly remembers a neighbor's warning about the devil: "No, nobody should fool with the devil. If you do, as they say, you give up your soul. Some die of fright, others don't" (104). Rather than allowing this memory to re-instill fear, he lets his innate curiosity lead him into the woods. After he calls out his name, the boy does not encounter the image that he was seeking but instead learns something that he never knew: there is no devil. This new experience not only challenges everything that he has been taught before, but opens up new possibilities. By the end of the story he concludes, "There is no devil, there is nothing. The only thing that had been present in the woods was his own voice" (106). This revelation not only enables him to completely break free from his haunting memory but from Catholic ideology. While the experience undermines any notion of the devil, it nevertheless reaffirms the boy's existence. Now that the forces of religion no longer control him, he begins to notice his voice as well as his ability to challenge history.

The stream of consciousness narrative illustrates how his mind can challenge history. In the novel's last story, "Under the House," the reader learns that the boy has been thinking about the experiences captured by the novel. Consequently, he has been using his community's memories and narratives as a means to remember the lost year. In the italicized section of the story, the boy's consciousness retells the stories of the past using the consciousness of other alienated individuals. The racism he faces in "It's That It Hurts," for example, appears in this line: "*Look, I don't mind playing with you but some old ladies told mama that Mexicans steal and now mama says not to bring you anymore*" (149). His mind also juxtaposes the images of the barbershop scene with those of the night he called the devil: "*These sonofabitches are gonna cut your hair, I'll see to that, if I have to bust their noses. . . There is no devil, there isn't*" (150). Even Doña María's claustrophobic experience in the department store reappears in the narrative: ". . . *Mom nearly lost her mind. She always started crying whenever she talked with anyone about what happened to her downtown*" (151). These three lines show that the boy creates his own unique memory from his given memories. In other words, he creates a new experience from his shared experiences. The boy is now the artificer of his stream of consciousness narrative. By recovering the lost year and arranging it in his own way, his consciousness is not a mere byproduct of his material circumstances. Instead, it reflects the boy's own interpretation of the historical forces that shape him. By reimagining the past, the boy manages to create a new consciousness from the experiences documented in the various stories and vignettes.

In the last half of this story, the boy then proceeds to create his own identity from his Chicano one. After remembering the lost year, he emerges from underneath the house. He rejoins the community with a new consciousness of his circumstances and with a new sense of self:

He had made a discovery. To discover and rediscover and piece things together. This to this, that to that, all with all. That was it. That was everything. He was thrilled. When he got home he went straight to the tree that was in the yard. He climbed it. He saw a palm tree on the horizon. He imagined someone perched on top, gazing across at him. He even raised one arm and waved it back and forth so that the other could see that he knew he was there. (152)

It appears that the boy had the same agenda as Stephen all along: to recall his shared experiences, to imagine them as his own, and in the process to begin to see himself as an individual. He relates his stories with his community's stories, juxtaposes his narrative with the words of others, and in effect produces his individual conception of the world. In his new vision, not only does he see an idyllic setting (which includes a palm tree), but also imagines someone looking at him. For the first time in the novel someone affirms his individual existence. Finally, he feels that someone "knew that he was there." By coming to a critical understanding about his individual alienation, he not only produces a new set of values for himself, he also creates an uncreated conscience of his race.

## **Conclusion**

Although Joyce and Rivera offer two different constructions of personal identity, it is important to consider each author's portrayal of the individual. With *Portrait*, Joyce suggests that the individual has the agency to overcome historically conditioned experiences. With *Tierra*, however, Rivera implies that particularly oppressive experiences take a toll on the psyche. Here, the boy shows us that the marginalized individual does not always have the agency to stop his current alienation. Rivera captures what Louis Mendoza calls "the modernist desire and the postmodern subalternity that characterize the vast majority of Mexican American's lives" (Mendoza, 186). Ultimately, Rivera refashions Joyce's stream of consciousness technique to show how the *collective* is instrumental to forging an *individual* identity.

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