

**Portraits Worth Thousands of Words: Artistry Amid Religious Community in the
Künstlerromane of James Joyce and Chaim Potok**

by

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Thesis

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PROLOGUE

James Joyce and Chaim Potok, though adherents to vastly different religious and cultural traditions across time and space, practice similar traditions in literary form. Among their prolific repertoires, both writers have derived literary acclaim from novels that can each be characterized as a *Künstlerroman*—the German terminology that encapsulates the literary form commonly known as the “artist’s novel.” Potok’s *My Name is Asher Lev* (1972) and its predecessor, Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916) approach such issues of artistic development through seemingly diametrically opposed religious angles: devout Brooklyn-based Hasidic Judaism and pious Dublin-steeped Roman Catholicism.¹

And yet, their pairing makes sense. Joyce’s *Portrait* is considered the quintessential *Künstlerroman* of the Western tradition, hailed for its literary qualities and contributions to literature’s modernist tradition. *Portrait* fuels the myth of the artist in the popular consciousness through a story that puts the mythic artist (protagonist Stephen Dedalus) on an inevitable trajectory of solitariness and disavowal of community. More than fifty years after Joyce published *Portrait*, Potok was inspired by this *Künstlerroman* antecedent to weave a tale that subtly subverts the triumphal solitariness that the artist seems predestined to seek out. Potok’s work of popular literary fiction makes accessible to the secular masses a story of an obscure, cloistered community by underscoring its simultaneously quotidian and epic nature through universally applicable moral issues.

¹ The pages that follow use the following nomenclature to refer to the novels in shorthand: Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* is denoted by “*Portrait*,” and *My Name is Asher Lev* is denoted by “*Asher Lev*.” Moreover, the German plural form of *Bildungsroman* is “*Bildungsromane*” and of *Künstlerroman* is “*Künstlerromane*.”

Unlike Stephen, however, Potok's protagonist Asher Lev finds himself steeped in a religious community which he has no desire to leave. The dual ties of obligation and guilt fuel Asher's attachment to the Hasidic community in which he is so steeped. For both young artists, their artistic pursuits are inextricable from their formative entrenchment in religious community. They each develop an aesthetic sensibility that is particular to, and part and parcel of, their religious worldviews. Religion inspires their artistic subject matter and yet fetters them to a society whose enveloping traditions risk stifling their creative production. Ultimately, both Asher and Stephen make decisions that lead to the inevitable conclusion that they must leave their homes and strike out for Paris, the mecca of creative freedom. Although both Daedalian figures fly too close to the sun in their heated confrontations with their respective communities, only Asher chooses to retain his religious practice in his quest for artistic autonomy. In this way, the solitary—and even solipsistic—self-purgatory demanded by Joyce's myth of the artist is ultimately subverted by Potok's *Asher Lev*.

In this literary analysis, I aim to dissect how Potok and Joyce channel their characters' grappling with conceptions of duty through the prism of religion and its associated politics and negotiations. I use this seemingly unlikely novelistic pairing as a method to throw each *Künstlerroman* into sharper relief while highlighting how these protagonists' philosophies on responsibility are informed by the complex, often fraught social networks that they inhabit. Crucially, the burgeoning artists' religious socialization and their aesthetic sensibilities are mutually constitutive, and the novels are mutually illuminating. Both foundational novels also deploy a sequel in order to further develop the protagonists whose personal and artistic growth are so closely documented in the

anterior novels. And, fundamentally, both are texts about texts, novelistic works of art that are themselves commentaries on art and aesthetic values. The *Künstlerroman* form thereby empowers the authors to write characters whose artistic pursuits are the gateway to surmounting weighty religious burdens.

This thesis argues across its three chapters that although *My Name is Asher Lev* and *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* share the same *Künstlerroman* designation, Potok innovates upon Joyce's model in order to provide an alternative perspective on the cultivation of individuality from within religious community. Each novel is a case study of the relationship that the individual negotiates with his community, his family, and himself. The stories stage such confrontations through the interconnected dynamics of socialized, devout religious practice and the cultivation of unique artistic sensibilities. Ultimately, both Stephen Dedalus and Asher Lev pursue artistic paths that push them toward exile from their home communities to Paris. Their flights are internally- and externally-imposed to varying degrees, but the young artists share a view of their exile that more accurately takes on the connotations of exodus—an urgent journey to freedom. Their respective escapes from the strictures of Catholic Ireland and Hasidic Brooklyn, however, have dramatically different outcomes. Whereas Stephen casts off his Catholic faith and ties to his community and family, the social and historical context of Asher Lev's Hasidic Jewish upbringing empowers him to hold fast to his religious practice and ties to his community despite his expulsion. Yet, despite their differing views on religious observance and communal obligation, for both young men, their artistic points of view are inextricably linked to their religious upbringings and socialization. Thus, Potok's reinterpretation of Joyce's archetypal *Künstlerroman* provides a case study of what

happens when the *Künstlerroman* crosses cultural borders. In paying homage to Joyce's model, Potok's story renders a subtle critique of the *Künstlerroman* form, transcending Stephen Dedalus's religious limitations through the figure of an unwaveringly religious Asher Lev.

Chapter One of this thesis provides the literary history of the *Künstlerroman* and biographical context for the dominant religious and literary influences on James Joyce and Chaim Potok. It thereby historicizes the authors' relationship to each other. The chapter contends that the authors' own religious upbringings and departures from their communities to Paris are heavily mirrored in their protagonists. The authors' distinct attitudes towards community directly contribute to their protagonists' divergent outcomes.

Chapter Two illustrates the inseparability of the artists' art from their religious worldviews over the course of their development and *bildung* (education). Their maturation throughout their kaleidoscopic childhoods—peppered with parallel moments of portentous confession, inscription, and defacement—lends a distinctly religious flavor to their aesthetic eye. Ironically, the novels' two religious communities, settings that are both hostile to alternatives to religious devotion, are settings that also provide the aesthetic material for Stephen and Asher and cultivate their subsequent self-affirming moments of artistry.

Chapter Three discusses the nature of artistic exile in these *Künstlerromane* by examining the aftermath of critical moments of profound artistic production and aesthetic experience by Asher Lev and Stephen Dedalus. The fallout from Asher's professional

artistry, articulation of his aesthetic outlook, and climactic crucifixion paintings is exile. Yet, Asher remains committed to his religious practice and sense of responsibility to his Jewish community in spite of his controversial choices. In contrast, Stephen's evolution across his Catholic school retreat, articulation of his aesthetic philosophy, and diary entries decisively culminates in his turning away from both community and religious practice. The exile that ensues for both characters takes on the attributes of exodus and retreat (respectively) towards the artistic freedom that the young men ultimately achieve, but the *Künstlerromane* present different accounts of the religious and communal costs of such freedom.

Finally, the Coda explores another shared dimension of the two novels: the existence of their sequels. Joyce's *Ulysses* and Potok's *The Gift of Asher Lev* provide windows into the aftermath of the protagonists' exiles when they are each summoned home from Paris due to family deaths. At these future points along the path of the artists' development, Stephen's relationship with Catholicism is (perhaps predictably) far more complicated than is Asher's with Judaism. Drawing parallels from a more contemporary perspective, the Israeli hit television show "Shtisel" provides another account of religious artistry that vindicates Potok's triumphal conviction that one need not abandon one's faith and community in the pursuit of artistic dreams. "Shtisel" compounds the effect of Potok's popular fiction by affirming that not only are art and religion compatible, but also that religion can actually provide the foundational inspiration and aesthetic material for artistic creation.

CHAPTER ONE

My Name is Zwischenmensch: Portraits of James Joyce and Chaim Potok

The Modern (and Modernist) *Künstlerroman*

A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man and *My Name is Asher Lev* are striking for both their content and their form. In particular, each novel is a *Bildungsroman* and a *Künstlerroman*, adhering to both definitions and occupying a unique niche at their point of intersection. Translated from German, *bildung* refers to a German romanticist pedagogical notion of “education,” and *roman* refers to “novel.” The composite noun, *Bildungsroman*, therefore denotes a novel that focuses on the moral and psychological education of the protagonist—abstracted to mean a “novel of development.”

The concept of *bildung* was first discussed in Friedrich von Blackenburg’s “Essay on the Novel” (1774), followed by the term’s coinage in Karl von Morgenstern’s lectures on the “Essence” and “History” of the novel (1820) and Wolfgang von Goethe’s exploration of the concept in “Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship” (1824) (Boes 648). The term came into popular usage through Wilhelm Dilthey’s *Poetry and Experience* (1906), which synthesizes Goethe’s work to characterize the *Bildungsroman* as a work in which “a regulated development within the life of the individual is observed, each of its stages has its own intrinsic value and is at the same time the basis for a higher stage. The dissonances and conflicts of life appear as the necessary growth points through which the individual must pass on his way to maturity and harmony” (Swales 3). In popular literary theory, the *Bildungsroman* can refer to both a story that tracks a character’s development from childhood to adulthood, and the genre that constitutes such stories of maturation and

“education.” Literary historian Franco Moretti notes the progression of the *Bildungsroman* from the “classical *Bildungsroman*” of Goethe and Jane Austen (characterized by closure) to the novels of Stendhal and Pushkin (which culminate in a rupture) to the work of Balzac (left open-ended) (Ginsburg 82). Other notable *Bildungsromane* include *Père Goriot* by Honoré de Balzac (1835), *The Mill on the Floss* by George Eliot (1860), *Great Expectations* by Charles Dickens (1861), novellas *Tonio Kröger* and *Death in Venice* by Thomas Mann (1903 and 1912 respectively), *Sons and Lovers* by D. H. Lawrence (1913), and *Call it Sleep* by Henry Roth (1934).²

The *Künstlerroman* springs from a similar tradition of literary critique but deviates from the *Bildungsroman* through its focus on the development of the *künstler* or “artist.” Maiwandi explains that the *Künstlerroman* is a variation of the *Bildungsroman* that “focuses on the development of an artistic consciousness from adolescence into adulthood. Oftentimes, these budding artists find themselves in families and societies that either don’t understand them or are openly hostile to them” (Maiwandi 1). Whereas a *Bildungsroman* protagonist often “integrates into prevailing social norms,” the endings of *Künstlerromane* are often “ambivalent” and feature the artist figure rejecting integration into society (Maiwandi 2). Thus, the two integral characteristics of the latter genre are the evolution of a young artist figure as the novel’s central consciousness and that character’s ultimate decision to renounce the conventions and institutions of society.

² Thank you to Brown University Professor of English Paul Armstrong for curating this list of titles in order to inform this thesis project. Thank you also to Brown University Associate Professor of English Tamar Katz for suggesting Roth’s *Call it Sleep* as a promising avenue for further *Bildungsroman* study in a Jewish context.

Roberta Seret and Evy Varsamopoulou add further color to the distinction between the two genres. Seret characterizes the *Künstlerroman* as an autobiographical *Bildungsroman* that privileges “the voyage into creativity” and the artist’s societal alienation (Seret 137). In contrast, Varsamopoulou posits that the *Künstlerroman* artist’s alienation, either self-imposed or societally-imposed, propels him or her to seek the sublime (Varsamopoulou 12). Such texts’ intersubjectivity and treatment of death and love as facets of the sublime are integral to the *Künstlerroman* classification. Moreover, Caterson characterizes James Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916) as decidedly both a *Bildungsroman* and a *Künstlerroman*. Caterson describes the novel’s unique contributions to these dual strands of individualistic and artistic development as “[inaugurating] a process by which the protagonist seeks confirmation of the intuition that alienation and suffering are the means by which the artist can achieve a state of consciousness deeper than that available to the mass, or even most writers” (Caterson 92). Potok’s *My Name is Asher Lev* adheres to this same dual characterization through its tracking of the maturation of Hasidic artistic prodigy Asher Lev. Furthermore, at the end of their respective stories, Joyce’s Stephen Dedalus and Potok’s Asher Lev both face exile as a result of their ostracization from their stubbornly insular communities. Both Stephen’s Dublin Catholicism and Asher’s Brooklyn Hasidism are stifling, but the conflicted young men ultimately honor their sense of personal responsibility to their innate artistry by disentangling themselves from their communities’ prescriptive moral and religious decrees.

Thus, the artist is so fitting and compelling a figure on which to focus a *Bildungsroman* because his or her artistic development provides fertile ground for the

author to stage the unfolding conditions of the protagonist's concurrent artistic and moral development. The sub-genre of the *Künstlerroman* renders ever more potent the isolation experienced by a young protagonist by compounding these growing pains with the sense of alienation that is often inherent in artistry. The protagonist's process of artistic discovery thereby serves as the conduit for the author to sketch the developing, complex relationship between an individual—typified by the artist figure—and his or her community.

A Tale of Two *Künstlerromane*: Joyce and Potok in Dialogue

The pairing of Joyce's *Portrait* with Potok's *Asher Lev* is logical due to their inherent similarities in structure, style, and form. However, the relationship between Potok and Joyce is more than just coincidental similarities in literary genre—it can also be historicized. Indeed, Potok took great inspiration specifically from Joyce and his *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Although Catholic Dublin was a foreign, even exotic world for Bronx-born, immigrant-raised Potok, *Portrait* enthralled him both because of its literary greatness and because its themes of solitary artistry in a cloistered religious world spoke to him on a personal level. Such ideas would go on to directly inform his writing *My Name is Asher Lev*.

Author and Rabbi Chaim Potok grew up in a sheltered Orthodox world, raised with the expectation that he would grow up to become a Talmudic scholar. However, powerful early brushes with art and with Western, secular literature set Potok on a path towards pursuing a literary career. As a child raised in the Depression-era Bronx by a Hasidic family, young Potok harbored artistic aspirations, and started taking drawing

lessons at his yeshiva when he was ten years old before moving on to cartooning, watercolor, and oils. However, his childhood foray into the world of oils and turpentine was shut down by his family. This prohibition was not only because of its perceived impracticality by the traditional Jewish world, which prioritized Torah study and prayer over so-called “frivolous” pursuits, but also because it caused the family apartment to smell of chemicals. Potok thus assuaged his disappointment by covertly turning to Western secular literature. In his interviews, Potok spoke effusively about his first encounter with the novel *Brideshead Revisited*, published in 1945 by English writer Evelyn Waugh. The book’s focus on the faith and personalities of an upper-class British Catholic family was delightfully foreign to Potok, and he described being thrust into this literary world as nothing short of life-changing. The experience enabled him to articulate the philosophy which went on to govern much of his writing:

I’m writing about people and events that were of particular concern to me, and to others like me, as we grew up and began to make our way into this world. My hope is that if I write about these people and events honestly enough, with as much control and intensity of focus as I can bring to bear upon them, that my very small and very particular world will open up and others will be caught up in it, just as I was once caught up in the very small and very particular world of *Brideshead Revisited* by Evelyn Waugh. (Potok, *Confronting Modernity*, 173)

The Waugh novel was the gateway for Potok to make another formative literary connection: James Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Potok had great appreciation for the centrality of religious thought in this text, and was also taken with Stephen Dedalus’s artistic aspirations. In an interview following his death in 2002, Potok’s widow Adena Potok reflected that Chaim “felt himself identifying with the rebellious Catholic heroes of *Brideshead Revisited* and *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young*

Man. He was becoming suspicious of the thinking that kept the works of Milton Steinberg out of the college library. . . Did he have to leave the world of Jewish learning to pursue his dream? On the other hand, all the contemporary Jewish writers dismissed Jewish tradition and religion. Was that the model for his work? He would create a new model!” (Adena Potok, *Confronting Modernity*, 144).³ Chaim committed to writing stories, a creative enterprise that though was not as reviled as the fine arts, was “somewhere in the basement” in the “edifice of things Jewish” (Chaim Potok, *Confronting Modernity*, 164). Adena Potok also stated that Chaim continued to wonder what could have been had he continued painting. He was fascinated by painting and was well-acquainted with the Western artistic canon and critical scholarship. Adena reflected that

... he realized that the syntax of Western art presents the Crucifixion as the ultimate language of solitary suffering. And what would happen if he, an Orthodox Jew, had continued on this road, in painting? He would have had to come up against the Crucifixion, because every painter worth his salt has done a crucifixion, has done a Madonna and Child, etc. It's the syntax of Western art. What circumstance would allow an Orthodox Jew to paint it? It was just in his head, rattling around, and eventually, the story of Asher Lev began to form. (Devir, *Confronting Modernity*, 164)

The paintings of Spanish artist Pablo Picasso were another key influence on Potok's ideation of *My Name is Asher Lev*. Potok was intrigued by Picasso's ability to render a horrific event into art that would draw audiences. Potok was particularly fascinated by Picasso's *Guernica*, which captures the tragedy of the bombing of the Spanish Basque town of Guernica by the Nazis at the behest of the Spanish Nationalists.

³ Milton Steinberg was a prominent American rabbi and theologian of the Conservative Jewish movement. Conservatism was (and often continues to be) viewed by Orthodox groups as antithetical to traditional Jewish observance.

“Artists, to Potok, possessed the power to create metaphoric visions of reality,” writes Daniel Walden (Walden, *Confronting Modernity*, 130). *My Name is Asher Lev* was therefore the result of Potok’s inspiration by his creative predecessors and his desire to dissect the relationship between the religious individual and secular art. It is perhaps then unsurprising that “For Potok, the kind of Jew he writes about resonates more strongly with the kind of Catholic Joyce was writing about than with a different type of Jew” (McClymond 12).

Potok wrote prolifically about the twentieth-century Jewish American experience. His novels stage the nested tensions between the religious and the secular, as well as between the individual and his community—oppositions that he calls the “core-to-core paradox” (Walden, “Orthodoxy and Art,” 152). Potok’s writing deals extensively with this clash between tradition and modernity in the lives of young Jews who experience a sense of beholdenment to their communities and families in addition to themselves. Scholar Daniel Walden writes that “Potok was a major voice in American literature because he was the first Jewish American novelist to open up the Jewish experience to a mass audience, to make that world familiar and accessible as the outside world increasingly became willing to acknowledge that Jews are a multiethnic, multiracial, and multireligious people” (Walden, *Confronting Modernity*, xi). Potok thus engaged the dialectic among secular non-Jewish, secular Jewish, and religious Jewish life in his widely read novels. Potok first achieved acclaim through his *New York Times* best-selling novel *The Chosen* (1967), which was a finalist for the 1968 National Book Award and was followed by its companion *The Promise* (1969) (Katz, “Some Reflections”). In addition to *My Name is Asher Lev* (1972) and its sequel *The Gift of Asher Lev* (1990),

Potok's oeuvre also includes *In the Beginning* (1975), *Wanderings: Chaim Potok's Story of the Jews* (1978), *The Book of Lights* (1981), *Davita's Harp* (1985), and *I am the Clay* (1992).

My Name is Asher Lev in particular emblematically casts the themes of Potok's earlier novels into sharp relief while staging the conditions for ethical questions of Jewish duty. Regarding *My Name is Asher Lev*, Potok said during an interview that "Asher Lev typifies what might happen to a religious Jew who wants to enter the mainstream of Western art. Remaining observant is a crucial element in all of my books" (Walden, *Confronting Modernity*, xv). In his novel, Potok constructs a microcosmic world that showcases the macrocosmic dynamics between individual versus communal identity that can arise in a cloistered religious setting. What differentiates Potok's writing from that of other acclaimed Jewish literary contemporaries (notably Philip Roth, Saul Bellow, and Bernard Malamud) is Potok's resistance to the position that turning away from religious observance is the solution to resolving these tensions. Instead, the Jews that Potok writes about are different from those of his contemporaries because his characters experience no "irreparable breaks" with their communities—Potok "writes with the understanding that there are multiple Judaisms in midcentury America" (McClymond 12).

Potok's unique Hasidic upbringing in the Depression-era Bronx enabled him to articulate the relationship between his own Jewish "subculture" and the "umbrella culture" of the Western secular world around him. He therefore came to identify as a *Zwischenmensch*—Yiddish for a "between person" (Walden, "Zwischenmensch," 19). Despite Potok's frequent exclusion from lists of canonized Jewish-American authors due to the perceived relative lack of "literariness" of his novels, his literary fiction is crucial

to contextualizing Jewish-American life and literature in the midcentury period. His unique ability to engage massive, diverse audiences of various ages and backgrounds, despite the obscurity of his subject matter, reflects his powerful ability to connect with readers through universal experiences and moral teachings.

James Joyce, too, was a *Zwischenmensch*. Joyce is best known for his critically acclaimed contributions to modernist fiction: *Dubliners* (1914), *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1962), *Ulysses* (1922), and *Finnegans Wake* (1939). *Portrait* is, in many ways, a semi-autobiographical story; the narrative arc of Joyce's life closely mirrors that of Stephen Dedalus. Joyce was raised in Dublin in the 1880s and attended primary school at Clongowes Wood College, a Jesuit boarding school. Soon, his father's financial situation deteriorated (like that of Simon Dedalus, Stephen's father). Joyce went on to enroll in Belvedere College, where he excelled academically but began grappling with his Roman Catholic faith. Biographer Richard Ellmann writes that "As his faith in Catholicism tottered, a counter-process began: his faith in art, which is written by and about people with faults, grew great" (Ellman 50). Joyce attended University College, Dublin, where he enjoyed literary pursuits while becoming increasingly disillusioned with the Church.

He then decided to leave Dublin for Paris in December 1902, with a vague aim of studying medicine that ultimately devolved into literary pursuits. He had the freedom in Paris to do what he could not in Dublin. However, he returned home to Dublin in April 1903 because of his mother's death, a biographical event that he shares with Stephen Dedalus in *Ulysses*. Nonetheless, Joyce ultimately spent most of his adult life (the next thirty or so years) outside of Ireland, with additional stints abroad with his family in

Rome, Zurich, and Trieste. Indeed, “Over the course of his time abroad, Joyce amply demonstrated the ambivalence—oscillating between rancor and nostalgia—felt by many exiles, balancing criticisms with outbursts of sentimental longing and national pride” (Gillespie 20). While he had no interest in returning to Ireland, Joyce remained fascinated by the rhythms of Dublin life.

A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man is a manifestation of these conflicting forces, and is the final form of earlier iterations of the story. Joyce had written an essay called “A Portrait of the Artist” that was rejected from the Irish journal *Dana*. In 1904, he then set about writing *Stephen Hero*, a projected 63-chapter rendition of Stephen Dedalus’s story, before condensing the 25 chapters that he was able to write into the five-chapter *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* in 1907 (Gillespie 33). With the help of modernist poet Ezra Pound, Joyce’s novel was published in serial form in the English literary magazine *The Egoist* in 1914 and 1915. It was then published in book form in 1916 by an American publisher.

Joyce and Potok were thus steeped in communities and norms that were inherently religious and which fundamentally informed their worldviews, and in turn, their writing. Legal scholar Robert Cover’s theory of “Nomos and Narrative” aptly describes this relationship among narratives, the creation of legal codes, and the normative universes that we all inhabit. He coins the term *nomos* (Greek for “the spirit of law”) to refer to such a normative universe which “is held together by the force of interpretive commitments” that “determine what law means and what law shall be” (Cover, “Nomos and Narrative,” 7). In turn, Cover argues, a legal tradition is inherent to our complex normative world—or worlds, in the case of such cloistered religious

communities as Potok's Hasidic Crown Heights and Joyce's Catholic Dublin. As applied to these novelistic contexts, Cover's theories of both secular and religious law can be understood most capaciously as not only Hasidic and Catholic religious laws, but also as the social governance of these respective communities. Indeed, Cover writes that "the very imposition of a normative force upon a state of affairs, real or imagined, is the act of creating narrative," and the act's *jurisgenesis* (creation of legal meaning) "takes place always through an essentially cultured medium," which makes it *paideic* (world-building) (Cover, "Nomos and Narrative," 12).

Cover's theory germanely encapsulates the dynamics at play in the insular, constrictive religious worlds of both Joyce and Potok. He goes on to elucidate this religious application by supplying his own examinations of both Jewish and Christian life in the United States. Normative commitments instantiated by legal religious texts give rise to "communit[ies] of common obligation," he says of both Christian and Jewish lives. "We constantly create and maintain a world of right and wrong, of lawful and unlawful, of valid and void" (Cover, "Nomos and Narrative," 4). In so doing, he contends, we engender and habituate practices of displacement and exclusion. According to Cover, "Religious communities have a special jurisprudence of exile and martyrdom" (Cover, "Nomos and Narrative," 51). Indeed, the self- and community-mediated religious and artistic exiles of protagonists Stephen Dedalus and Asher Lev are mirror images of their authors' own flights from their home communities. Thus, Cover evokes the fundamentally legal dimension of the bonds of reciprocity forged by observant religious community.

For Asher and Stephen, their normative universes are circumscribed by religion and communal obligation, and yet are illuminated by aesthetic expression that is inextricable from those same restrictive religious forces. At first glance, the spheres of art and religion do not appear necessarily diametrically opposed. The worlds of Hasidism and Catholicism are made recognizable by their iconography, a set of aesthetics including sounds, symbols, and images that engenders immediate identification of and with the religious group. And yet, as both Potok and Joyce make clear, these same societies construct obstacles to the production of art from within. For burgeoning artists Asher Lev and Stephen Dedalus, to fulfill their particular artistic pursuits is to defy the religiously- and socially-imposed strictures of their communities and risk isolation, rejection, and ultimately exile.

Hewing to his namesake from Greek mythology—the mythological inventor, architect, and sculptor Daedalus—Stephen Dedalus has deep-seated artistic inclinations. Through the conduit of Joyce’s strategic narration, it becomes clear that Stephen holds an instinct for linguistic craftsmanship from a very young age. His evolving ability to discern the poignant aesthetic features of the Dublin and Dubliners in his orbit becomes emblematic of his innate artistic dreams. If Stephen is the wordsmith of the novelistic pairing, then Asher is the visual artist. What Asher bumps up against through his painting is a cluster of cultural and *halakhic* (Jewish legal codes of conduct) barriers to fulfilling his potential in the fine arts. Religiously, the Torah’s Fourth and Fifth Commandments forbid the creation and worship of graven images. Translated from Hebrew, they read “You shall not make for yourself a sculptured image, or any likeness of what is in the heavens above, or on the earth below, or in the waters under the earth” and “You shall

not bow down to them, nor serve them; for I your God am an impassioned God, visiting the guilt of the parents upon the children, upon the third and upon the fourth generations of those who reject Me” (Exodus 20:4-5). Ever monotheistic, Judaism forbids iconography whose worship can be construed as idolatry. According to Jewish law, such imagery undermines the oneness of God.

Furthermore, and perhaps an even more dominant barrier as expressed in Potok’s novel, Asher’s cloistered Ladover community has no place or tolerance for a Jewish artist who paints non-Jewish subject matter.⁴ In fact, the Ladover enclave has no place for an artist at all; such work deviates from the important work of prayer, study of Jewish texts, and serving as emissaries to Jewish enclaves worldwide. Paradoxically, Ladover Hasidism is both insular and expansive, both traditional and modern. The Ladover movement (named for the Russian shtetl of Ladov) is Potok’s fictitious proxy for the Chabad-Lubavitch Hasidic sect. Today, the Chabad-Lubavitch movement is headquartered in Crown Heights, Brooklyn, where Potok’s Ladover community is also based. The movement is an Orthodox Jewish sect that emphasizes global outreach by sending envoys to cultivate observant Jewish communities worldwide. The movement reveres the late Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, as its spiritual leader and leader of Jewish reconstruction in the wake of the Holocaust (Chabad.org, “About”). He is likely the figure who is analogized by the Rebbe in Potok’s novel. As described sardonically by Asher Lev from his adult vantage point, “the [Ladover] movement prided itself, announced to all, that it was both profoundly traditional and part

⁴ In particular, in the cultural and social context of the mid-century United States, the secular and the Christian were one and the same. The “secular” therefore has a Christian-leaning religious bias for Potok.

of the contemporary world” (*Asher Lev* 79). Asher’s brooding, restless childhood extends through to his adulthood as he reluctantly but necessarily wages war against the Ladover hierarchy of duty—the conventional, socio-religious expectation of the individual’s stratified relationship with his community, his family, and himself.

Asher’s inability to turn away from his art, coupled with his progressive foray into controversial non-Jewish subject matter, pushes him increasingly closer to a point of no return. When Asher progresses past his controversial depictions of nudity to paint his culminating crucifixion images of his mother, he hurtles knowingly towards the edge of the precipice. By simultaneously coopting and subverting this most Christian of aesthetic frameworks in order to lay bare his deeply private world, Asher allows his artistic momentum to carry him towards both artistic fulfillment and exile. This expulsion from his community is therefore both reactionarily compelled out by his community and self-imposed.

Ultimately, both Asher and Stephen choose flight to Paris over artistic and spiritual stagnation in their home communities. And yet, neither artist completely rejects his religion. Both young men are so deeply ensconced in their religious culture and ethical constructs that their religion is just as profound a component of their identity as their artistry. The two attributes—one a framework for moral “sight” and one a framework for aesthetic “sight”—are complexly intertwined. The artists’ primacy of artistic pursuits, which are in conflict with their strict religious upbringings, continues to signify the complicated relationship between art and religion. As artistic works themselves, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and *My Name is Asher Lev* are

indicative of art that is profoundly informed by religion and pushes beyond the boundaries constructed by religious community.

Stephen Dedalus's obligation to himself takes precedence over his ties to the Catholic Church, his family, and Dublin's Catholic community. As he "fl[ies] by those nets" that both constrain and guide his artistic journey, he strikes out against religion writ large (*Portrait* 179). In contrast, in the Jewish model posed by Potok, religion and community prevail. In both novels, the artist's yearning for freedom of self-expression ultimately leads to escape rather than exile, but is mediated by varying degrees of religious and communal obligation. The novels therefore provide particular insights into what happens when art threatens to subsume religion and how that journey of artistic development unfolds for a mythic artist figure made concrete and—above all else—deeply religious. The pairing of these two novels therefore illustrates that the *Künstlerroman* as an archetypal form can be transferable across cultural contexts, but that these cultural contexts can lead to outcomes that are untraditional for the prototypical *Künstlerroman* protagonist. Joyce's *Portrait* is, after all, just one ("a") single portrayal of the *Künstlerroman* hero. Potok crafts a vastly different picture that is worth just as many words.

CHAPTER TWO

Seeing is Believing: Aesthetic Vision Amid Religious Community

James Joyce adopts a modernist approach to the *Künstlerroman* form by probing and rendering the developing consciousness of protagonist Stephen Dedalus, painting his development from childhood to adolescence to adulthood. Joyce's emphasis on capturing this evolution reveals and distills the overlay among Stephen's religious and artistic identities, and how their potent combination dictates his ethics of care and duty. Stephen's identity is deeply embedded in his socialization in a Dublin steeped in Catholicism. Yet, paradoxically, the development of his aesthetic sensibilities provides him the language with which to articulate his qualms about Catholicism. Stephen's burgeoning artistry provides the impetus for his escape from Dublin. His Catholicism, however, confers the connotations of self-exile onto his flight. Art and religion, therefore, both tether Stephen to and repel him from Dublin, the hub of his social networks and responsibilities.

Like Joyce, Potok constructs a religious ecosystem that provides Asher Lev ample occasions to hone his artistic eye and craft. The relationships that each young artist forges with his community, however, are fundamentally different. Asher's paintings openly flout the expectations and conventions of ultra-Orthodox society, yet his sense of guilt for violating such strictures reveals the strength of his sense of obligation and duty to his community. In contrast, Stephen feels no such ties to his home city and family. His reckoning with his Catholic faith and any guilt he feels over Catholic transgressions are largely self-interested; they have very little to do with his familial and parish relations.

These two *Künstlerromane* thus present accounts of how an artist's *bildung* can diverge between very specific Catholic and Jewish contexts.

Aesthetic Overtures and Confession

The two novels' opening sequences portend different outcomes to the stories that follow. The opening sequence of Joyce's *Portrait* inserts the reader into a narrative world crafted in accordance with Joyce's imperative to capture the evolution of a young person's maturing consciousness. Before the reader arrives at the opening passage of the novel, Joyce enriches the seminal text with an additional piece of literary richness: he includes an epigraph that sets the tone for the novel to come. "*Et ignotas animum dimittit in artes,*" the quotation from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* reads. Translated, it denotes, "And he sets his mind to unknown arts." Already, Joyce signals to the reader that Stephen's story will be grounded in his own interiority, dedicated to unraveling the mysteries of his consciousness and aesthetic worldview. Following this epigraphical preamble, Chapter I formally opens with the following line:

Once upon a time and a very good time it was there was a moocow coming down along the road and this moocow that was coming down along the road met a nicens little boy named baby tuckoo....

His father told him that story: his father looked at him through a glass: he had a hairy face.

He was baby tuckoo. The moocow came down the road where Betty Byrne lived: she sold lemon platt. (*Portrait* 5)

The classic fairy tale opening line, "Once upon a time," initiates the reader to the intra-textual children's story told to young Stephen. It also serves the dual function of inducing a meta-textual quality in the novel itself. Both the novel and the children's story

adopt timeless, mystical modes via this initial story-within-a-story framing. The phrase primes the reader to expect for the novel to be a text about texts, a work of art that itself encompasses forms of artistic expression. Following these timeless inaugural words, the phrase “and a very good time it was” suggests editorialization on the part of the speaker. But this interjection raises the question of to whom this narrative voice belongs. Its past tense inflection imparts a tone of confirmation, of having lived through this childhood epoch (the story and/or the childhood itself) and now verifying the “goodness” of the period. This would suggest that an adult Stephen is recounting the moocow story from within the framework of a novel that has begun to situate itself as a memoir. This editorialization could also be provided by Stephen’s father, since the text confirms that he is the originator of the story. However, another option remains: that it is Stephen the child who earnestly impresses upon the reader that his earliest years were “a very good time.” In fact, the moocow tale unfolds in the infantile language that a child would use to tell a story. By the same token, the childvoice could also be used by an adult telling a story to a child (Stephen’s father to Stephen). The story trails off in ellipses; its teller (whomever he may be) knows how it ends. Perhaps he feels that the reader does, too. Or that its ending is inconsequential, and that the part told has already served its function in the meta-narrative of *Portrait*.

Then, the narrative voice utters, “He was baby tuckoo.” This is a moment of identification, in which the previously unidentified “he” names himself as a subject of the fairy tale. It becomes evident here that “he” is Stephen, and that this early moment of artistic expression finds its basis in an earnest, whimsical, escapist desire. This declarative statement by the young boy is the factor that resolves the disorientation

invoked by the layered narrative voices of the previous sentences. From this point forward, possible narrators are limited to the Stephens young and old. Stephen's pronouncement of himself as "baby tuckoo" indicates his dual interpellation of himself onto the story's artistic subject and the story's artistic subject onto himself. This is also a decisive moment of genesis from which all education and development will spring in the *Künstlerroman* to come.

Following the "baby tuckoo" declaration, the young boy shares another moment of artistic affinity, as Joyce relays the lyrics of a favorite song from Stephen's childhood:

O, the wild rose blossoms
On the little green place.

He sang that song. That was his song.

O, the green wothe botheth. (*Portrait* 5)

This is another instance of an art form—this time a song—encapsulated within the meta-text provided by the novelistic telling. However, young Stephen commits a "Bloomism" of sorts, a malapropism conflating the lyrics of the song.⁵ Here, he misquotes the sentimental Irish song titled "Lily Dale," in which the second line actually reads "On the little green grave" (Kelleher, "The Perceptions"). John V. Kelleher suggests that this is a benign substitution which neutralizes the grimness of the original lyric for the sake of the child. Beyond this error, Stephen commits an additional slip of the tongue by conflating the song's colors and objects, resulting in a green rose—"the

⁵ James Joyce's later work *Ulysses* picks up where *Portrait* leaves off. In *Ulysses*, protagonist Leopold Bloom often commits malapropisms that simultaneously endear him to the reader and betray his own ignorance. These bumbles are often delightfully clever puns and Easter eggs planted by Joyce for both his own amusement and that of the reader. Joyce scholarship coins these blunders—unintentional by Bloom but intentional by Joyce—"Bloomisms."

green wotheth botheth,” he lisps. This is an early political moment in both the novel and in the course of Stephen’s life. Kelleher points out that the comingling of red and green becomes a motif throughout the book. The persistent aesthetic distinction resurfaces in the same childhood scene:

Dante had two brushes in her press. The brush with the maroon velvet back was for Michael Davitt and the brush with the green velvet back was for Parnell. Dante gave him a cachou every time he brought her a piece of tissue paper. (*Portrait* 5)

Here, with childlike simplicity, Stephen essentializes the complicated and contentious politics that infiltrate his household. By attributing colors to political parties, Stephen demonstrates that even at this young age, he makes sense of a very fraught and abstruse adult world by applying an aesthetic framework to the Dublin in miniature that he knows. The “Lily Dale” song is therefore an early moment of Stephen’s appreciation for the inherent aesthetic value of the world around him, heralding the resurfacing of motifs of roses and political colors to come.

The novel’s introductory sequence concludes with Dante incanting the following poem:

Pull out his eyes,
Apologise,
Apologise,
Pull out his eyes.

Apologise,
Pull out his eyes,
Pull out his eyes,
Apologise. (*Portrait* 6-7)

This is a jarringly dark note for the *Künstlerroman*’s introductory sequence to end on. Hans Walter Gabler draws a parallel here to Proverbs 30:17, an Old Testament verse

that reads “The eye that mocketh at his father, and despiseth to obey his mother, the ravens of the valley shall pick it out, and the young eagles shall eat it” (Gabler 167). This imagery also bears an acute similarity to various incidents in Greek mythology, a structural parallel that appears justified given Joyce’s blatant nod to the Greeks through his appellation of Stephen Dedalus. One example is the Oedipus myth, in which the Greek king gouges his own eyes out (an act called “self-enucleation”) upon realizing that he murdered his father and married his mother (Pappas, “No Myth”). Greek mythological eye-gouging also occurs when Oenopion stabs out Orion’s eyes after Orion rapes Oenopion’s daughter; and when Odysseus secures his escape from the cyclops by stabbing his eye in *The Odyssey*. Blinding, therefore, is historically and mythologically constructed as the act of ultimate penance.

For Joyce to capture this moment, in which Stephen associates blindness with sin, apology, and punishment, suggests the formative nature of this scene. The threat of such blindness actually accentuates Stephen’s visual acuity. Gesturing at blindness during this formative scene sets the stage for an Irish Catholic Dublin that is itself blind—and that threatens to occlude Stephen’s aesthetic acumen. Stephen, the artist for whom sensory experience is so crucial, will go on to contort himself under Catholic strictures of guilt and repentance by attempting to deny himself this aesthetic perception. The admonition for Stephen to repent—“Apologise”—has the last word in this passage. Such a prophecy portends moral transgression in the pages ahead.

Thus, in this opening sequence, Joyce emulates the internal childvoice of protagonist Stephen Dedalus. Joyce achieves simultaneity of narrative time past and present through his inconclusive layering of narrative voices. He also initiates the reader

to young Stephen's keen aesthetic perceptiveness and tendency to interpellate himself onto the artistic subjects that he encounters. In doing so, Joyce lays the groundwork for a *Bildungsroman* that quickly becomes recognizable as a *Künstlerroman* as he initiates the reader to the aesthetic perceptions of Stephen as a young boy. However, this narrative development is coupled with the irony of an adult Joyce self-reflexively and inorganically crafting Stephen's childvoice. As Patrick O'Neill wryly notes, in this opening passage, Stephen is "a very young man indeed" (O'Neill 124).

In Potok's *My Name is Asher Lev*, the *Künstlerroman* form is also integral to the development of Asher Lev not just as an artist, but as a member of his ultra-religious community. As the novel tracks Asher's maturation from a child into an adolescent and ultimately into a young adult, it also develops Asher's emerging articulation of his aesthetic, religious, and moral philosophies. Just as for Stephen Dedalus, these perceptions of the world inform and develop in tandem with one another. In fact, the *Künstlerroman* form itself is the conduit for Potok's exploration of the relationship between Asher Lev's overlapping identities as a son, as a Jew, and as an artist. The text reveals that Asher's aesthetic sensibilities, and therefore his prioritization of his artistic imperative over the Ladover communal imperative, are a direct attempt to defy the strict tenets of responsibility imposed by his upbringing. Potok's literary rendering of Asher's "education" in the disciplines of art, religion, and personhood reinforces this idea.

Paradoxically, the consciousness of child prodigy Asher Lev is articulated by adult Asher Lev, the critically acclaimed artist. Asher endows his childhood self with words, but those words cannot be extricated from his narrative voice as an adult

interlocutor. By disclosing the story's retrospective nature, Potok establishes this conundrum from the very onset of the novel:

My name is Asher Lev, *the* Asher Lev, about whom you have read in newspapers and magazines, about whom you talk so much at your dinner affairs and cocktail parties, the notorious and legendary Lev of the *Brooklyn Crucifixion*.

I am an observant Jew. Yes, of course observant Jews do not paint crucifixions. As a matter of fact, observant Jews do not paint at all—in the way that I am painting. So strong words are being written and spoken about me, myths are being generated: I am a traitor, an apostate, a self-hater, an inflicter of shame upon my family, my friends, my people; also, I am a mocker of ideas sacred to Christians, a blasphemous manipulator of modes and forms revered by Gentiles for two thousand years.

Well, I am none of those things. And yet, in all honesty, I confess that my accusers are not altogether wrong: I am indeed, in some way, all those things.

The fact is that gossip, rumors, mythmaking, and news stories are not appropriate vehicles for the communication of nuances of truth, those subtle tonalities that are often the truly crucial element in a causal chain. So it is time for the defense, for a long session in demythology. But I will not apologize. It is absurd to apologize for a mystery. (*Asher Lev* 3)

This overture heralds a genesis by signaling that the novel to follow is, in effect, a re-telling of a child artist's development. Rather than narrate the story directly from the perspective of the child in question, Potok adds an additional layer of remove: the novel is narrated by the adult version of the child, a separate figure altogether. Asher's *Künstlerroman*, a genesis story of quotidian yet exemplary proportions, is doubled by the jaded perspective of an adult Asher, who presumably recounts his blossoming artistry from the retrospective perspective of his Paris exile. This tertiary rendering of a child's consciousness (Potok writing adult Asher writing child Asher—a retelling of a retelling) therefore distorts the authenticity of the "first person narration" of Asher the child. Like

Joyce in *Portrait*, Potok lays bare the duality inherent to memoirs and retrospective narration, but does not fully attempt Joyce's imitation of the language of a child.

This opening passage also adopts a defensive, retrospective posture. It reads as a confession—an affidavit of sorts—by an adult Asher seeking to justify his decision-making. Yet this is a different form than the Catholic mode of confession that Stephen Dedalus undergoes. Whereas Stephen subjects himself to a cycle of anguished guilt and repentance defined by a penitent attempt at stultifying his artistry, Asher here writes from a place of disquieted triumph. He admits to transgression, yet also justifies and defends the methods he deployed during his evolving artistic education. This opening sequence foregrounds the moral disposition of Asher Lev as his artistry evolves in the *Künstlerroman* to follow. Potok makes the curious choice to put Asher Lev on trial at the beginning of the novel, thereby challenging the reader to read Asher's childhood as morally untainted, despite Asher's summative self-identification as “a traitor, an apostate, a self-hater, an inflicter of shame.” The double temporal structure of this confession therefore imbues this passage with a sense that the story is beginning at its end. In doing so, Potok marks the artistic-religious dialectic as a deterministic element of Asher's life and stages the novel as a trial through which this question is explored. The passage's multi-layered narrative distance from the events themselves imparts a lucidity that suggests an adult Asher Lev's role as a retrospective narrative interlocutor. The “demythology” at which he hints also plays a paramount role in the development of this *Künstlerroman* that is ultimately quite divergent from the model established by Joyce in *Portrait*.

Potok then transitions from this defensive preamble to a retrospective retelling of Asher's nascent artistry. A series of vignettes evokes Asher's synesthetic mode of seeing the world, even during his earliest years. The reader's view into this gestational period is framed (literally and figuratively) by the window in the Lev family's apartment. It is a core site of sight. The living-room window provides the backdrop and prism through which key developments unfold: Asher's impassioned paintings of "his" street below the window; the Lev family's fraught discussions of their future; and the physical frame within which Asher's *Brooklyn Crucifixion* paintings come to life. It is a battleground and a resting place, a site of inspiration and of violence.

Kaleidoscopic Childhoods and Sensory Mortification in *Portrait*

Jumping backward in time from the Asher's "present" moment of writing the novel's overture, Asher describes his nascent years in a kaleidoscopic manner: "I grew up encrusted with lead and spectrumed with crayons. My dearest companions were Eberhard and Crayola. Washing for meals was a cosmic enterprise," an adult Asher reflects (*Asher Lev* 6). During these scattered vignettes of nascent artistry, Asher describes in simple, potent language how he feels color and shape both emotionally and tactilely. When sketching his affable uncle Yitchok, young Asher noted that "He always wore dark-blue suits, but I made his suit light blue because he did not feel dark blue to me" (*Asher Lev* 30). Moreover, during Asher's sixth year of life, his mother Rivkeh takes ill after the death of her beloved brother Yaakov. Asher seeks to translate her skeletal state of depression to paper, but has trouble capturing the likeness before experimenting with cigarette ash to add shadow and dimension to the portrait. He describes the evasiveness of the image in tactile terms: "The drawing felt incomplete. It bothered me to have it

incomplete. I closed my eyes and looked at the drawing inside myself, went over its contours inside myself, and it was incomplete” (*Asher Lev* 34).

Another early synesthetic moment arrives when Asher attempts to portray Siberia, the desolate land where Stalin had imprisoned Jewish stationery store owner Yudel Krinsky before he was smuggled into the United States by Asher’s father. Young Asher innocently asks the family’s brusque housekeeper, Mrs. Rackover, the following question: “What color is the feeling cold? ... And the feeling dark” (*Asher Lev* 40). He is met with dismissal by Mrs. Rackover. Nonetheless, the savant quality of the question leaves the reader wondering alongside Asher about the translation of sensory perception to a two-dimensional medium. At the zenith of his mother’s depressive episode, Asher turns to aesthetic contemplation to alleviate his anguish. “I remember that night very clearly, the texture of its darkness, the echoing resonance of its sounds.... I would learn to draw my feelings of ice and darkness and a street crying. There was nothing I could not do” (*Asher Lev* 49). Here, the subjunctive use of “would” takes on a dual meaning. One reading suggests that Asher is self-soothing, reassuring himself that he will one day attain mastery over elusive artistic techniques in a ploy to distract himself from his mother’s disturbing emotional state. However, Asher is also engaging in a retelling; an adult Asher informs the reader that indeed, he would go on to perfect these skills. A young Asher thus makes sense of his bounded, intimate Jewish world by employing a unique mode of perception that accords primacy to the aesthetic qualities of this world.

Asher becomes fully cognizant of his unique capacity for synesthesia during his adolescence. This episode occurs during a tense period when Asher refuses to move to Vienna with his parents on a mission for the Rebbe, away from his street and his art:

I looked at my father and saw lines and planes I had never seen before. I could feel with my eyes.... I could feel lines and points and planes. I could feel texture and color. I saw the Shabbos candles on the table glowing gold and red. I saw my mother small and warm and silken in a lovely Shabbos dress of pale blue and white... I felt myself flooded with the shapes and textures of the world around me. I closed my eyes. But I could still see that way inside my head. I was seeing with another pair of eyes that had suddenly come awake. (*Asher Lev* 108)

In this passage, Asher articulates his keen awareness of his aesthetic normative universe, which he finds inseparable from his Jewish normative universe. Asher's world is distinct from that of his parents because his is prismatic: The world he experiences is dictated not just by Jewish law and bonds of obligation, but also by an aesthetic framework that encapsulates the former elements. The inability of his father, Aryeh Lev, to grasp this concept, ultimately leads Asher to attribute "aesthetic blindness" to Aryeh—eyes that do not see the world through this same artistic-religious prism (*Asher Lev* 304).

Furthermore, one of Stephen's earliest and most traumatic memories from primary school at Catholic Clongowes College is of being pushed into a cesspool by a schoolmate:

It would be nice to lie on the hearthrug before the fire, leaning his head upon his hands... He shivered as if he had cold slimy water next to his skin. That was mean of Wells to shoulder him into the square ditch because he would not swop his little snuffbox for Wells's seasoned hacking chestnut, the conqueror of forty. How cold and slimy the water had been! A fellow had once seen a big rat jump plop into the scum. He shivered and longed to cry. It would be so nice to be at home. Mother was sitting at the fire with Dante waiting for Brigid to bring in the tea. She had her feet on the fender and her jewelly slippers were so hot and they had such a lovely warm smell! ... And when Dante made that noise after dinner and then put her hand up to her mouth: that was heartburn. (*Portrait* 8-9)

The injustice of the act is not what lingers with him. Instead, it is the disturbing sensory experience that came from it. For Stephen, the memory is so stark precisely

because of the aesthetic discomfort of the water's coldness and slime. The dichotomy between his initial imagining of warmth and the subconscious remembrance of the ditch's chill is what summons the ill-suppressed memory at all. Stephen illustrates that he is prone to slippages of his consciousness; mercurial sensory experiences amalgamate into wisps of memory by association. Indeed, the traumatic ditch memory flows seamlessly into a photorealistic depiction of the sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and feel of his Dublin home.⁶ Furthermore, this symbolic "baptism by cesspool" is an early indication of the corrosive effect of religion on Stephen's life. The trauma inflicted by this memory is compounded by Stephen's acute aesthetic sensibility.

Thus, Stephen's childhood is characterized by snippets of sensory information, parsed as Stephen's wide-eyed intake of the Catholic Dublin that surrounds him. However, Joyce preserves Stephen's childvoice by using present tense narration that relays an unadulterated account of Stephen's aesthetic experiences. Of course, the narration is unadulterated to the extent that only an adult James Joyce, rather than an adult Stephen, unveils Stephen's consciousness for the reader. This imitation of child-like language is not how the child perceives the world, but rather is an adult's simulation of a child's vantage point. This narrative style thereby reveals the presence of the novel's implied author, who tacitly asserts his own perspective when relating the events of Stephen's life.

⁶ Of course, Stephen also takes note of the world's beauty in addition to its horrors. The following lovely passage reflects Stephen's wandering, associative process of perception: "Lavender and cream and pink roses were beautiful to think of. Perhaps a wild rose might be like those colours: and he remembered the song about the wild rose blossoms on the little green place. But you could not have a green rose. But perhaps somewhere in the world you could" (*Portrait* 10). These last two lines are a direct reference to the "green wothe botheth" line from the overture sequence—but through indirect association.

Portrait tracks the dual courses of Stephen's life: his acute, aesthetically-focused sensory perception of the world and his ever-deepening Catholic piety. It becomes particularly apparent in Chapter IV that these two developmental paths are tightly interwoven. As Stephen emerges from his purgatory, soul-cleansing confession in Chapter III, he catapults into a relentless cycle of sin and penitence, guilt and absolution. For him to be fully disciplined under his precepts of Catholic devotion, he attempts to mute his sensual perception of the world. In doing so, he seeks to dim his own artistry, thereby tacitly identifying his internal narrative's sensual descriptiveness as both a source of and result of sin. However, this attempt at sensory mortification instead has the opposite effect. In his narration of Stephen's extreme behavior, Joyce draws out the irony of Stephen's inconsistency. In his attempts to starve himself of beauty and subject himself to aesthetic discomfort, religious privation instead heightens Stephen's artistic awareness and compels his lascivious desire for sensory enrichment. In this way, Joyce points to the futility of Stephen's attempt at corporeal abstention and provides a critique of the Catholic Church as one of Dublin's most dominant entrapping forces.

At the onset of Chapter IV, Joyce reveals to the reader that Stephen has reached new heights of religious fervor. The novel begins with his wide-eyed, obedient childhood appreciation for religious ritual (Chapter I) before seeing Stephen later commit acts of sexual sin with a prostitute (Chapter II). Joyce then explicates Stephen's existential guilt and agony on the brink of moral collapse (Chapter III). Chapter IV introduces a new Stephen, a bleak, rigid figure who throws himself into Catholic piety in the wake of the fervent confession that he undertakes in the prior chapter. Joyce narrates that Stephen's so-called spiritual cleansing has spurred him to adopt extreme practices of religious

austerity. This is a critical juncture for Stephen: until this point, he has been characterized dominantly by his amplified sensory perception of the world. Indeed, this keenly descriptive intake of external stimuli is the factor that most acutely identifies Stephen as an artist thus far. Now, Stephen seeks to deny himself of this aesthetic pleasure through ascetic religious self-flagellation, as exemplified via the following key line: “Each of his senses was brought under a rigorous discipline” (*Portrait* 131). Stephen drives himself through an undulating cycle of stringent abstention and “supererogation” (*Portrait* 128), flinging himself from extremes of withholding himself to giving of himself, all while refraining from partaking in the world’s aesthetic pleasures. This sensory abstention is in many ways the ultimate form of self-censure for Stephen. He sets out to accomplish the following forms of “discipline”:

In order to mortify the sense of sight he made it his rule to walk in the street with downcast eyes, glancing neither to right nor left and never behind him. His eyes shunned every encounter with the eyes of women.... To mortify his hearing he exerted no control over his voice which was then breaking, neither sang nor whistled, and made no attempt to flee from noises which caused him painful nervous irritation.... To mortify his smell was more difficult as he found in himself no instinctive repugnance to bad odours whether they were the odours of the outdoor world, such as those of dung or tar, or the odours of his own person among which he had made many curious comparisons and experiments. He found in the end that the only odour against which his sense of smell revolted was a certain stale fishy stink like that of longstanding urine; and whenever it was possible he subjected himself to this unpleasant odour. To mortify the taste he practised strict habits at table, observed to the letter all the fasts of the church and sought by distraction to divert his mind from the savours of different foods. But it was to the mortification of touch he brought the most assiduous ingenuity of inventiveness... (*Portrait* 131)

This passage ultimately serves to highlight the inefficacy of and the paradox inherent to this strategy. Stephen equates sensory abstention with corporeal abstention,

which reveals that Stephen views sensory intake, reflection, and enjoyment as gateways to sexual sin. This linkage is not intuitive; for the average reader, probing the five senses is necessary but not sufficient for a sexual act. The above passage thereby calls attention to Stephen's close association between corporeal and aesthetic pleasure, and between the sensory and the sensual. Crucially, the text also reveals that Stephen's so-called best efforts at sensory suppression are all for naught. Firstly, it is physically impossible for able-bodied Stephen to move through the world without responding to external stimuli. Additionally, the very fact of a narrative that explicates Stephen's methodically rigorous plan for sensory abstention necessitates the description of Stephen's sensory experiences, even during this period of penitent discipline.

The scene is laden with the irony of Stephen's ability to derive aesthetic pleasure even through the mortification of sin. In fact, his attempts to wrangle his five engender heightened aesthetic sensitivity. Interestingly, the examples listed in the above excerpt can be grouped into two categories: sight, taste, and touch as acts of abstention, and sound and smell as acts of penitence through discomfiting exposure. Joyce's treatment of "odour" is an illustrative example of Stephen's curious attention to sensory detail despite his mandate to bring his senses under "rigorous discipline." Joyce spends an inordinate amount of time developing Stephen's meticulous, scientific approach to heightening rather than subduing his sense of smell. Joyce identifies odour as the sense most difficult to subdue, not because it provides the most temptation, but because Stephen does not naturally have a strong olfactory sense. In the narrative that follows, Joyce employs an almost jocular approach to conveying Stephen's solemn, self-important attempt to punish himself through odour. Stephen adopts an air of superiority to other penitent sinners

because of his indifference to “the odours of the outdoor world” and “the odours of his own person among which he had made curious comparisons and experiments.” The lengths to which Stephen has gone to mortify his sense of smell invite many questions. Joyce therefore makes clear his subtly comedic intentions with the passage through Stephen’s conspicuously overwrought description—the artist doth protest too much.

In addition, Joyce continues to make light of Stephen’s egotism by elaborating that the only odour “against which his sense of smell revolted” is the smell of stale urine. For Joyce to write that Stephen “subjected himself” to this smell “whenever it was possible” invites levity to the vignette. The reader shudders (ironically) to imagine the trials Stephen has undertaken to frequently ensconce himself in the “stale fishy stink.” More likely than not, Stephen experiences the odour as often as the average person; his act of “penance” is hollow and self-aggrandizing. He believes that through such subjugation, “every thought, word and deed, every instance of consciousness could be made to revibrate radiantly in heaven” (*Portrait* 129), but the reader realizes the extent of Stephen’s delusional self-sublimation. Though Stephen marvels that “he could, by a single act of consent, in a moment of thought, undo all that he had done,” the reader (alongside Joyce) knows that Stephen has not actually accomplished all that much (*Portrait* 133). If he had actually achieved sensory abstinence, Stephen’s experience here would be less aesthetically gluttonous than earlier scenes of his acute aesthetic gorging, such as his experience with the prostitute. Ironically, however, Stephen’s self-flagellation results in further (and perhaps even greater) indulgence in sensory stimuli.

In fact, Stephen’s so-called sensory mortification rings ever hollower through the aesthetic pleasure that he perversely derives from these acts. Stephen’s extreme

stultification of his sense of touch ironically exemplifies his acute attention to describing the same sensory experience that he claims to mute. Joyce's detailed narration reveals not only Stephen's perverse enjoyment of the sensory experiences themselves, but also the pleasure that he derives from the aesthetic and literary dimensions of articulating the acts. In the same passage, for instance, Joyce narrates the following: "But it was to the mortification of touch he brought the most assiduous ingenuity of inventiveness. He never consciously changed his position in bed, sat in the most uncomfortable positions, suffered patiently every itch and pain, ... left part of his neck and face undried so that air might sting them and, whenever he was not saying his beads, carried his arms stiffly at his sides like a runner and never in his pockets or clasped behind him" (*Portrait* 131). Joyce's third-person reporting of Stephen's painstaking acts of penitence is simultaneous with Stephen's internal, autobiographical narration of these tactile experiences. In particular, the phrase "the most assiduous ingenuity of inventiveness" calls attention to Stephen's extreme austerity through exaggerated, redundant description.

This passage illustrates the futility of Stephen's dual sensory abstention and subjection as forms of self-punishment. Instead, he actually derives pride from his machinations and aesthetic pleasure from his suffering. In contrast, Judaism does not ascribe to a conception of penance and repentance akin to that of Catholicism. Asher Lev therefore does not engage in similar practices of sensory abstention because his *nomos* does not require him to.

Inscription, Defacement, and Self-Instantiation

Over the narrative arc of each *Künstlerroman*, Stephen Dedalus and Asher Lev affirm their individuality. They break away from the anonymizing forces of their respective religious communities and prepare themselves to confront the expectations of their families and congregations. In the process, they poignantly each demand their own-naming, a process by which they achieve recognition of their individuality by internal and external affirmation of their selfhood.

Following Stephen's aesthetic genesis in Chapter I, Joyce continues to track salient developments in Stephen's religious maturation by overlaying critical moments of his concurrent aesthetic maturation. In both Stephen's early school days and later moments of adult self-actualization, Stephen associates acts of artistic creation—even his own—with a creationist God. One critical scene comes in Chapter I during Joyce's exposition of Stephen's academic career. Here, a young Stephen sits in study hall at Clongowes College, his Catholic boarding school whose religious edicts are deeply impressed upon him during these formative years. He opens his geography book to study, but his mind drifts from geography to contemplation of the vastness of the universe and his place in it. He then writes the following inscription on the flyleaf:

Stephen Dedalus
 Class of Elements
 Clongowes Wood College
 Sallins
 County Kildare
 Ireland
 Europe
 The World
 The Universe (*Portrait* 13)

Although the geography book's flyleaf is nothing more than a blank endpaper, Stephen instinctively recognizes this empty page as a blank canvas. Through his ensuing act of creating an emendation to the book, Stephen inscribes himself in the world. He writes himself into the known world bounded by the pages of the textbook, and also into the universe that extends well beyond the confines of the pages. Indeed, his inscription builds a world that radiates from the particular (the individual) to the general (the universe and beyond). It also firmly roots Stephen himself as the focal point of this universe. However, Joyce's rendering of Stephen's consciousness goes on to directly implicate religion in his understanding of his place in the cosmos:

What was after the universe? Nothing. But was there anything round the universe to show where it stopped before the nothing place began? It could not be a wall but there could be a thin thin line there all round everything. It was very big to think about everything and everywhere. Only God could do that. He tried to think what a big thought that must be but he could only think of God. (*Portrait* 13)

This is an extremely visual representation of the existential schematic. Beyond simply envisioning the "thin thin line," which is itself an artistic representation of an abstract idea, Stephen is also able to articulate this transcendental concept clearly and poetically despite his young age. In addition, there is a tension here between Stephen's affirmation of himself as the individual around which the world revolves and his religious humility in crediting the vastness of the universe to a higher power. This tension between the religious and the artistic continues when Stephen commits an act of literary judgment, which further instantiates the flyleaf scene as a formative moment in the arc of the *Künstlerroman*. Poking fun at young Stephen's serious contemplation of the universe,

Stephen's classmate had penned the following satirical poem in the geography book on the page opposite Stephen's inscription:

Stephen Dedalus is my name,
Ireland is my nation.
Clongowes is my dwellingplace
And heaven my expectation. (*Portrait* 13)

Stephen then makes a curious choice: "He read the verses backwards but then they were not poetry" (*Portrait* 13). This reversal suggests an existential trajectory not towards heaven, but instead towards Stephen Dedalus himself. He then applies this same test to the "verses" that he himself penned on the flyleaf. The concluding line of this "poem," too, reads "Stephen Dedalus." His choice to read both compositions from bottom to top is not intuitive. It speaks to his desire to seek poetry and literary meaning in these seemingly innocuous inscriptions. It also points heavily to Stephen's innate instinct for applying an artistic search for meaning to the world around him.

By inverting these verses, Stephen applies a macrocosmic vision of a universe that is organized from the general to the particular. This hierarchy again suggests the primacy of the individual over God. However, Stephen then muses that the verses read backwards "were not poetry" (*Portrait* 13). He does not say why. It is feasible that he believes that reversing the latter, satirical poem inverts its rhyme scheme. It is also possible that reversing the poem validates the primacy of the individual in a way that is blasphemous and at odds with his Catholic upbringing. However, Stephen goes on to muse that "God was God's name just as his name was Stephen" (*Portrait* 13). Here, Stephen subconsciously equates himself with God, endowing God with Stephen-like traits and himself with God-like traits. This positioning further suggests that Stephen's

act of creation has God-like properties. Stephen thus vacillates between affirming the power of God as Creator and the power of the individual's potential for acts of artistic creation. This juxtaposition between Stephen's act of creation via the flyleaf inscription and his invocation of the deific act of Creation thereby plays out an early moment of the dialectic between Stephen's innate aesthetic and religious sensibilities.

This early exercise in poetic judgment is a defining moment of the *Künstlerroman* that maps Stephen's artistic development. Stephen can only articulate his sense of his place in the universe through existing religious frameworks. The flyleaf vignette therefore enables Joyce to convey Stephen's emerging view of the juxtaposition not just between himself and the world, but also between himself and his community—a philosophy coming ever more clearly into focus. By situating Stephen as a global citizen, Joyce signals Stephen's innate affinity for the world beyond Dublin's Catholic confines. However, it also introduces a blasphemous undercurrent, signaling values that are at odds with traditional Catholic notions. Thus, Stephen's self-inscription marks an early moment of self-expression as well as self-affirmation that portends religious tension.

In the flyleaf scene, Stephen does not explicitly decry the poetic reversal as either blasphemous or literarily incorrect. Rather than define poetry positively (by what it is), he instead gestures at its definition negatively (defining it by what it is not). This early encounter with poetry is mirrored in a Chapter II scene, during Stephen's adolescence. His peers Heron, Boland, and Nash, who Stephen describes as "idlers" and "dunces," bully Stephen regarding his literary preferences. When pressed to identify the "greatest poet," Stephen comes to the staunch defense of Byron. The boys ridicule his choice, claiming that Byron was "only a poet for uneducated people" and "a heretic and immoral

too” (*Portrait* 71). ““I don’t care what he was,’ cried Stephen hotly” in response (*Portrait* 71). Stephen then refuses to back down from his aesthetic position:

—Admit that Byron was no good.
 —No.
 —Admit.
 —No.
 —Admit.
 —No. No. (*Portrait* 72)

The formulation of this exchange hearkens back to the aforementioned “Apologise” refrain of the novel’s opening passage and is yet another example of the book’s recurring appeals to Catholic themes of confession and penance. Scholar J. I. M. Stewart writes that “The whole *Portrait* is an apologia: at the same time its cardinal assertion is that Stephen will *not* apologize; rather he awaits the eagles” (Stewart 16). The eagles, in this scene, are his peers and tormentors. Stephen awaits their ridicule and violence with dual attitudes of martyrdom and resistance.

In fact, the boys also hound Stephen for the episode that occurs directly prior to the Byron defense scene, in which Stephen narrowly avoids being disciplined for a heretic sentiment that he expressed in an essay about “the Creator and the soul.” The teacher reprimands Stephen’s blasphemy in writing the line “*without a possibility of ever approaching nearer.*” Stephen quickly corrects the line to read “*without a possibility of ever reaching.*” He knows that he will appease his Catholic teacher by regurgitating doctrine surrounding the divinity of God, the Creator. Here, Stephen ironically expresses his understanding of Catholicism’s paradoxical concept of God: accessible yet unreachable, approachable yet asymptotical. Stephen’s quick save succeeds in mollifying his teacher (“O... Ah! *ever reaching.* That’s another story,” Mr. Tate responds) (*Portrait*

70). However, the episode induces his peers to chide Stephen for this blasphemous chink in his armor of piety.

For Stephen to refuse to back down from his ardent position on Byron's "heretic" poetry, despite the emotional and physical punishment that his peers dole out, suggests that his morality has become to be shaped more by loyalty to his aesthetic principles than by adherence to ethical religious teachings. In fact, Stephen's support of Byron is rooted in the contrast he draws between Byron and Lord Tennyson (his peers' choice for top poet). "Tennyson a poet!" Stephen bursts out. "Why, he's only a rhymester!" (*Portrait* 71). Like during the earlier flyleaf scene, Stephen formulates an aesthetic judgment about what constitutes bad poetry—in this case, Tennyson's "rhymester" tendencies. Despite the passage of years between the flyleaf poetry scene and this Byron defense exchange, Stephen continues to articulate his aesthetic philosophy negatively, defining good art by contrasting it with what it is not. These moments of aesthetic clarity also arise in opposition to Catholic doctrine, affirming Stephen's blasphemous prioritization of artistic creation over God's creation.

Later in Chapter II, Stephen encounters another profound moment of inscription that takes on darker overtones. When Stephen accompanies his father, Simon Dedalus, to his old stomping grounds at Queen's College, Cork, they visit the anatomy theatre where Simon had once studied.⁷ There, Stephen makes a discovery:

On the desk he read the word *Fœtus* cut several times in the dark stained wood. The sudden legend startled his blood: he seemed to feel the absent

⁷ Queen's College, Cork is also "the scene of John Joyce's unsuccessful effort to become doctor," according to Ellmann. The *fœtus* scene is therefore emblematic of the autobiographical nature of Joyce's narration, as Simon Dedalus mirrors the shortcomings of Joyce's own father. See Richard Ellmann, *James Joyce*, Oxford University Press, 1982, 37.

students of the college about him and to shrink from their company. A vision of their life, which his father's words had been powerless to evoke, sprang up before him out of the word cut in the desk. A broadshouldered student with a moustache was cutting in the letters with a jackknife, seriously. Other students stood or sat near him laughing at his handiwork. One jogged his elbow. The big student turned on him, frowning. He was dressed in loose grey clothes and had tan boots.

Stephen's name was called. He hurried down the steps of the theatre so as to be as far away from the vision as he could be and, peering closely at his father's initials, hid his flushed face. (*Portrait* 78)

The inscribed word "Fœtus" is imbued with a sense of violence. In Stephen's imagination, the etching comes into existence by being carved into the wood with a jackknife wielded by an ill-tempered, physically menacing student. The surgical precision of this inscription of a biological term connotes an act of defacement—even vandalism. Moreover, while this is a scene of craftsmanship, it is also a scene of haunting, of "monstrous reveries" (*Portrait* 79). There is a generational discourse here between Stephen's projection of the ghosts of students past, Stephen's present reality, and the potentiality of new life suggested by the word "Fœtus," since under traditional Catholic ideology, a Fœtus is synonymous with life. Stephen is disturbed both by his own ability to conjure fictitious tableaux and by the inscription's conflation of life and violence. Furthermore, there is something lurid and profane about a Fœtus etching, an act of vandalism from a generation ago, at this site of male education. Joyce "makes the word concentrate Stephen's sense of puberty, in which sex is reproachful, irresistible" (Ellmann 37). The anatomy theatre becomes a site of enlightenment for the adolescent Stephen and introduces him to form of defacement that diverges from his formerly innocent understanding of inscription from the earlier flyleaf scene. In this Fœtus scene,

Stephen therefore reckons with his powerful ability of fabulation while also confronting a sobering transition to adulthood.

Like Asher Lev, Stephen Dedalus self-actualizes the prophecy of his name. His namesake is the Greek mythical figure of Daedalus, the inventor commissioned by King Minos to design an inescapable labyrinth for the Minotaur. Daedalus and his son Icarus were imprisoned in the labyrinth by the king, but Daedalus devised two pairs of wings so that they might escape. Icarus did not heed his father's warnings and flew close to the sun, which destroyed his wings and plunged him to his death. Daedalus, however, escaped. Scholar Velma F. Grant notes the aptness of Stephen Dedalus's name: "the mythical Daedalus' name, search, vocation, and the labyrinth, as well as his escape and exile, acquire significance in any comparative association between Daedalus, the inventive artist, and Stephen Dedalus, Joyce's developing artist. For Joyce, in chronicling Stephen's spiritual evolution as an artist, presents him as virtually trapped in the nets of a restrictive environment, a labyrinth, from which he must successfully disentangle himself before he can gain the insights necessary for the creation of literary art" (Grant 411). In addition to its symbolic overtones, Stephen's surname garners attention because it is distinctly un-Irish. His classmates remark upon it throughout his childhood: Nasty Roche meanly quips, "What kind of a name is that?" (*Portrait* 6) and Athy comments, "You have a queer name, Dedalus" (*Portrait* 21) during two formative primary school memories. Therefore, Joyce ascribes Stephen with a symbolic name that predestines him to be adrift from Dublin society, both through his artistry and his innate aloofness from Ireland.

For Asher Lev, too, instances of inscription and self-affirmation are profoundly impactful nodes along his path of artistic development. However, they signal a reorientation towards faith rather than a rejection of it. One day at his yeshiva, adolescent Asher unconsciously draws in his *Chumash* (a book in which the Torah is printed). This would be an act of defilement on its own, but it is even more reviled because Asher draws the Rebbe as a sinister figure—a being from the *Sitra Achra* (the Other Side). His classmates jeer, “You defiled a holy book! Asher Lev, you desecrated the Name of God! You defiled a Chumash!” (*Asher Lev* 123). This is perhaps the first instance in the novel in which Asher realizes that his gift (and lack of control over it) can cause harm. He is filled with remorse over his unthinking act, and fearfully intuits that such artistic destruction will be the catalyst for his exile:

So I’ll go to Vienna. I can draw in Vienna, too. I’ll draw the cafes and the strange streets. I’ll learn the language. What is so terrible about going to Vienna? I felt myself trembling. I love this street. Yes. I don’t want to go into exile. But I’ll draw another street. Streets are all the same. Oh, they’re not. They’re not the same. (*Asher Lev* 126)

Implicitly, Asher, like Stephen, feels that “exile” is a state of both freedom and punishment. Asher considers exile is an appropriate consequence for this religious transgression, yet also knows that it will afford him the freedom to uninhibitedly pursue his art. This signals Asher’s deep-seated piety in spite of the direction his art might lead him. His destructive act of inscription literally enables him to write himself into a holy book. But though the act is perceived as blasphemous, it ultimately strengthens Asher’s religious resolve rather than pushing him away from Judaism.

In addition, Asher Lev reaffirms his identity throughout the story through repeated variations on the following utterance: “My name is Asher Lev.” This is a clear grammatical inversion of Stephen’s flyleaf proclamation, “Stephen Dedalus is my name.” Asher’s affirmative utterances of his name instantiate the young artist as an individual who transcends the homogenizing threat of Hasidic community. The eponymous title of Potok’s novel is a recapitulation of important moments throughout Asher’s identity-affirming *bildung*. In fact, the novel’s opening sentence (“My name is Asher Lev, the Asher Lev, about whom you have read in newspapers and magazines, about whom you talk so much at your dinner affairs and cocktail parties, the notorious and legendary Lev of the *Brooklyn Crucifixion*”) maps directly onto its title. Literature of high repute has long utilized such a declarative introductory template. In fact, Potok’s opening line is akin to the famed opening words of Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick*: “Call me Ishmael.” It is also analogous to the overture of Charles Dickens’s *Great Expectations*: “My father’s family name being Pirrip, and my Christian name Philip, my infant tongue could make of both names nothing longer or more explicit than Pip. So, I called myself Pip, and came to be called Pip.” Each of these utterances declaratively instruct the reader to identify the narrative voice with its subject, which takes on agency both by naming itself and by being named.

In Potok’s novel, the titular protagonist is perhaps inappropriately named: Asher Lev translates from Hebrew to “happy” or “blessed” “heart,” but Asher Lev is anything but those things. His heart is torn asunder by his clashing worlds of Ladover Hasidism and artistry. His art—decried by his community for its radical appreciation of aesthetics beyond the Jewish—cannot be described as fully secular, for it is heavily informed by the

aesthetic worldview engendered by his particular Jewish upbringing. Yet the religious subject matter of his most controversial of representations—his portrayals of his parents’ suffering through the framework of crucifixion—implodes traditional Hasidic responsibility networks.

As discussed previously, the novel opens with this retrospective moment of self-identification, from a post-crucifixion vantage point. But along the chronology of the *Künstlerroman*, the young artist’s first instance of self-affirmation occurs when he reaches the age of six. His uncle Yitchok peers at young Asher’s drawings and likens his genius to that of the only mainstream Jewish artist that the Hasidic world knows to reference:

“A regular Chagall,” my uncle said.

I turned in my chair and looked up at him.

“No,” I said. “My name is Asher Lev.”

The two of them stared at me for a moment. My father’s mouth dropped open a little. My uncle laughed softly.

“This is six years old?” he said. “Good night, Asher.” (*Asher Lev* 31)

The utter self-assuredness with which Asher makes this distinction provides an early glimpse of his strong sense of self. It also signals his sense of individuality and the import he places on distinguishing himself from other Jews, as well as from other artists.

Additionally, Potok is very particular in how he scripts Asher’s reply: Asher is far from regular. Asher knows from this young age that he is exceptional, and his childlike, uninhibited reply makes explicit this previously tacit acknowledgement. And even later, when Jacob Kahn brings Asher to apprentice with him over the summer in Provincetown, Massachusetts, Asher—unprompted—quietly and matter-of-factly states the following: “I

am going to be an artist. I am going to be a great artist” (*Asher Lev* 265). Jacob affirms his conviction: “You have been an artist for a long time, Asher Lev.” The repetition of his name by the mentor who believes in him most reinforces the transcendent, spectral, and mythic dimensions accorded to the archetypal artist.

Biblical significance adds to the poignance of the name that Potok bestows upon his protagonist. Scholar S. Lillian Kremer notes that in the Old Testament, Asher was the eighth of twelve sons fathered by the Jewish patriarch Jacob, and that he was the child who received his father’s blessing for prosperity and happiness (Kremer 50). Furthermore, before the Jewish forefather Moses passed away, he blessed the biblical Asher with the following words: “Most blessed of sons be Asher; May he be the favorite of his brothers, May he dip his foot in oil” (Deuteronomy 33:24). The protagonist family’s last name, “Lev,” refers to the Levite class of Jews, which was the tribe that descended from Jacob’s third son, Levi. They were historically responsible for assisting priests in the Temple, thereby performing a holy and elevated function in society. In contrast to his appellation’s historical legacy, Asher Lev is his parents’ only child, and a somber, morose child at that. Asher’s chosen artistic vocation is treated with disdain by his community; to them, such a path can be neither holy nor lucrative. However, in spite of the face value irony of attributing such a weighty name to a young man who so defies the expectation of that name, perhaps Potok’s choice is strategic. In the novel’s sequel, *The Gift of Asher Lev*, Asher has achieved acclaim and wealth from his career as an artist, and also comes into an important role adjacent to the clergy: both his father and his young son become heirs to the Ladover rabbinical dynasty. In this sense, then, the name Asher Lev is as much a self-fulfilling prophecy as the name Stephen Dedalus.

Furthermore, like Potok's novel, the title of Joyce's novel, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, bears significance and warrants close examination. Joyce's use of the leading word "A" implies both generalization and particularization. The story of Stephen Dedalus is archetypal for all artists, yet Joyce alerts the reader to the significance of this specific portrait of an artist, one of epic proportions. Additionally, the term "Portrait" begs the question of the identity of its artist. Here, Joyce is self-referential in alluding to his own authorly role in crafting the *Künstlerroman*, but he also allows for the possibility of Stephan Dedalus himself as the author of his own story. Next in the title, the word "the" comes in conversation with the word "a." It emphasizes the specificity of the Dedalus case, with a nod to Stephen's solipsistic sense of grandeur. By extension, Joyce as artist takes on the same properties. Next, the phrase "as a" suggests a transient, transitional state, implying that an additional portrait may be necessary to encapsulate stages of the artist's life beyond young manhood. And lastly, the title raises the oxymoronic idea of being a "Young Man." This is the central question of any *Bildungsroman*: What does it really mean to come of age?

Potok clearly pays homage to Joyce's *Portrait* with *My Name is Asher Lev*. Yet by generalizing Joyce's story, Potok actually creates a very precise application of the *Künstlerroman* model—one that diverges from its predecessor. In many ways, the *Künstlerroman* form, as popularized by Joyce, is not generalizable across cultural contexts because Potok makes clear that an American Hasidic context leads to a different outcome than Joyce's Irish Catholic context. Both *Künstlerromane* are, in essence, portraits of artists as young men. But in a sense, Chaim Potok rewrites James Joyce's *Künstlerroman* model by making it uniquely Jewish. Revision and even defacement,

then, can be creative forces of innovation. Moments of inscription in both *Portrait* and *Asher Lev* are therefore simultaneously acts of creation and destruction. The boys' realization of this duality empowers them to confront both their artistic sensibility and ongoing maturation along the trajectory of their *Künstlerroman*.

Thus, for both Stephen Dedalus and Asher Lev, their nascent artistry and sources of aesthetic inspiration hinge upon their socialization within devout religious communities. The moral codes inherent to these particular enclaves foster a unique mode of "sight" that imbues the artists with the ability to embark on artistic paths that diverge from their religious communities but are nonetheless grounded in religion. The young artists chafe against the societal barriers that inhibit their artistic fulfillment as the novel draws ever nearer to its schism-threatening climax. They come to discover that their home communities are inhospitable towards their artistic inclinations and aspirations. Along this *Künstlerroman*-mediated journey of self-discovery, both fledgling artists experience great internal and interpersonal tumult. This tension acts as an individuating force and empowers them to push past the communal *nomos* of their respective religions in order to act on their artistic potential.

CHAPTER THREE

Flying by Nets: The Artist's Production and Destruction, Exodus and Retreat

In his 1904 essay “A Portrait of the Artist” (from which *Portrait* would spring decades later), James Joyce wrote about the state of modernity:

Our world, again, recognises its acquaintance chiefly by the characters of beard and inches and is, for the most part, estranged from those of its members who seek through some art, by some process of the mind as yet untabulated, to liberate from the personalised lumps of matter that which is their individuating rhythm, the first or formal relation of their parts. (Joyce 211)

This “individuating rhythm,” says literary modernism scholar Tobias Boes, suggests a novelistic hero whose temporal sequences—both cyclical and progressive—are at odds with those of the world. The artist figure, then, liberates himself from the discordant drumbeat of society through a process of distinguishing and orchestrating his own “individuating rhythm.” For Boes, *Portrait* is therefore “neither a eulogy to lost possibility, nor does it quietly resign itself to the triumphal march of history. Instead, it offers a celebration of life in a colonial society caught between tradition and modernity in all its confusing, contradictory, and sometimes also disheartening complexity, filtered through the mind of an individual desperately trying to compose his ‘individuating rhythm’ amidst a polyrhythmic tapestry” (Boes 773). So, too, can *Asher Lev* be described.

Both novels culminate in stunning, existential confrontations between individual and community, son and parents, and artist and religious congregation. As the *Künstlerromane* reach their conclusions, both Stephen and Asher formulate rejections of their respective societies. However, this “individuating rhythm” looks very different

across their cultural and societal contexts. Whereas Stephen ultimately turns away from both Dublin and Catholicism entirely, Asher is compelled to abandon only Brooklyn—not his Jewish faith, observance, and theology. The entwined tethers of communally-mediated responsibility and guilt bind Asher to his people, even after his exodus to Paris. In contrast, Stephen makes a cleaner break from Dublin to Paris. He leaves behind the religion that bound him and stifled his creativity for so long, while also casting off his former Catholic practices of aesthetic self-deprivation. Any guilt (limited though it may be) that he feels for leaving behind his family, peers, and the Church does not bear the intergenerational weight of Asher’s sense of Jewish responsibility.

These ideas will be explored by first providing a socio-cultural overview of the factors contributing to the cultural *nomoi* of the communities in which Stephen and Asher are steeped. I find that Asher maintains an unambiguous connection with his Jewish observance, whereas Stephen’s relationship with Catholicism is far more ambivalent. He is a misbeliever rather than a disbeliever, a nuance astutely refined by Roy Gottfried. Next, I examine moments of self-affirmation and self-individuation that undergird the protagonists’ individuation despite the anonymizing pressures of community. I then analyze the climax of each novel—Asher’s crucifixion paintings and Stephen’s articulation of his aesthetic philosophy—to illustrate how these acts are creative yet destructive, and catalyze each artist’s self-exile. Finally, I study the attitude of each artist and author towards exile, and come to the conclusion that their flight from their home communities can be more aptly considered an “exodus,” with the Catholic connotations of “retreat” layered upon Stephen’s departure.

Socio-Cultural Frameworks for the Community, the Family, and the Self in *Portrait* and *Asher Lev*

These diverging notions of communal obligation likely take root in the distinct social-cultural underpinnings of the novels' respective settings. Hasidism is an Orthodox Jewish sect that has a concentrated enclave of followers in Brooklyn, New York, where the action of *Asher Lev* takes place. Asher Lev's community identifies more so as American Jews than as Jewish Americans; they ascribe great value to their Jewish identity as members of a global Jewish diaspora. In contrast, Irish Catholicism confers a different type of identity upon Stephen's community: Dubliners are both Irish and Roman Catholic, a particular brand of Catholicism that is bound up with Irish nationalism. These differing historical notions of peoplehood, diaspora, and oppression in turn impact the relationship between the novels' protagonists and their respective communities.

In many ways, Potok puts a Jewish spin on Joyce's uniquely Irish Catholic novel. Stephen's exile is inherently tied not only to religion, but also to the land of Ireland itself, whereas Asher's concept of religious peoplehood transcends geography. What Stephen Dedalus feels that he owes (or does not owe) to Ireland itself therefore informs his attitudes toward its people and religious practices. For Joyce, and therefore Stephen, his "personal experience of exile was shot through with ambivalence about his native Ireland, an ambivalence that expresses itself in both his life and his work as hostility and sentimentality in equal measure" (Knowles ix). Irish nationalism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was cultivated in opposition to English colonization. Joyce sets *Portrait* in the last decades of the nineteenth century, the height of the Irish independence movement and political unrest. The Irish political arena at that time was

dominated by the figures of Irish Nationalist Charles Stewart Parnell of the Home Rule movement and Michael Davitt of the Land Reform movement, who both repudiated and was repudiated by Parnell. These political titans feature prominently in the political discourse of the adult characters during Stephen's formative childhood.

Joyce felt that "irremediable social, cultural, and creative conditions compelled him to leave," and he imbued Stephen with this same disposition (Gillespie 20). The specter of Irish nationalism resonates with Stephen's community in a way that might parallel the way in which the memory of the Holocaust overshadows the lives of Ladover Hasidim. However, while Irish Catholicism is indeed diasporic and steeped in ideology regarding peoplehood, it does not confer upon its adherents a moral imperative for continuity in the same way that Judaism does. In Potok's work, Ladover ideas of Jewish community are shaped by religious concepts of peoplehood, memory, and trauma. For example, at the very opening of *My Name is Asher Lev*, a very young Asher has already internalized a core tractate from the Babylonian Talmud that is exhorted by the community swirling around him (Sanhedrin 37a:14): "Any man who has caused a single Jewish soul to perish, the Torah considers it as if he had caused a whole world to perish; and any man who has saved a Jewish soul, it is as if he had saved a whole world" (*Asher Lev* 11). The fact that this passage comes from a Talmudic tractate that addresses questions of jurisdiction, criminal law, and punishment bears significance. The Ladovers' close adherence to its principles signals that the prioritization of Jewish life is a divinely just act in the eyes of God. In Asher's world, Jewish community is propagated globally by the concept of *kiruv*, or outreach ("bringing close" in Hebrew), and knows no geographic bounds. This ethos is particularly dominant in the Lev family because Asher's

father, Aryeh Lev, is selected by the Crown Heights enclave's Rebbe as a special envoy to Eastern and Central Europe. His role is to facilitate Jews' flight from Communist persecution and build Ladover yeshivas to educate present and future generations of the Rebbe's followers.⁸

For Aryeh, then, the stakes are incredibly high: the obligation to save Jewish life is heavily informed by an intergenerational vantage point. Reflecting gravely upon the Russian Communist Party's persecution of Jews, Aryeh comments that "to kill a human being is to kill also the children and children's children that might have come from him down through all the generations" (*Asher Lev* 58). In the wake of the Holocaust, in which more than six million Jews were killed under Adolf Hitler's Nazi regime, Jewish life is precious because it is itself Jewry-sustaining.⁹ Therefore, preserving Jewish life in the present is essential for the existence of Jews in the future. Aryeh murmurs to his young son, "Asher, we have to make passageways to our people in Russia. We have a responsibility to them" (*Asher Lev* 110). This sentiment paints global Ladover Jewry as a holistic network steeped in kinship-mediated responsibility, rather than as a fragmentary, disjointed series of outposts. The Crown Heights Ladover community is thus simultaneously a discrete unit and a meta-community that spans the world over. Asher spends his childhood observing his father's relentless travel and efforts to bring persecuted Jews safely to the United States and elsewhere in Europe. However, this becomes a dual source of friction in the Lev family: Asher refuses to leave New York to

⁸ Aryeh works tirelessly towards this mission in *My Name is Asher Lev*. He is honored for his life's work twenty years later in the sequel *The Gift of Asher Lev* (1990).

⁹ This sentiment is robust in Potok's *The Chosen* as well: "There is only one Jewry left now in the world. It is here, in America. We have a terrible responsibility. We must replace the treasures we have lost ... If we do not rebuild Jewry in America, we will die as a people" (*The Chosen* 192).

join his father in Europe, and Aryeh cannot understand Asher's artistic imperative to create art at home. These conflicts put Asher's mother, Rivkeh Lev, in a precarious and seemingly impossible position between the two.

Moreover, familial responsibility is a core component of the Ladover worldview, and Asher's subversion of this norm heightens Rivkeh's untenable position. In the Ladover community, present expectation is rooted in dynastic, intergenerational expectation. It is undergirded by the assumption of the family unit's responsibility to raise its children to continue this communal imperative into the next generation. The creation of the family is also a post-Holocaust healing process, and it takes on restorative and regenerative significance. Reproduction is perfectly aligned with the Ladover agenda because the specter of the Holocaust supports the continued need to propagate the Ladover community. To them, replenishing the Jewish world after six million deaths is obligatory; the eradication of global Jewry is unfathomable. Such reproductive means of rebuilding community and ensuring the continued existence of Judaism in general (and Hasidism in particular) is therefore essential for the continuity of Jewish life. The Jewish family is a communal and survival-inducing enterprise. It sustains Jewish life by design.

The novel's status as a *Künstlerroman* enables Potok to stage and enact such pressure-laden expectations. He imposes these pressures onto a young boy who is born with a prodigious gift and whose generational trauma ironically primes him to adapt his outlook to break the mold rather than conform in a traditional manner. Familial relationships and sense of duty to family, especially to one's parents, are prescribed and disciplined by pathways of shame and guilt, spurred by hauntings of Jewish extermination past, present, and future. The myth of community entraps and ensnares

Asher Lev, and his mother's suffering provides the inspiration for his culminating and most honest works of art. He directly confronts these ideas of lineage and Judaism-sustaining responsibility as his artistry pushes him to question traditional pathways of responsibility.

Asher's sense of personal responsibility to the pursuit of his own artistry can be examined within the framework of legal conceptions of the duty owed to one's community. In his 1987 essay titled "Obligation: A Jewish Jurisprudence of the Social Order," legal scholar Robert Cover espouses the following: "Indeed, to be one who acts out of obligation is the closest thing there is to a Jewish definition of completion as a person within the community" (Cover, "Obligation," 67). That Asher Lev turns away from his duty to his parents and larger community because of his artistry-driven intellectual questioning initially seems at odds with Cover. It appears that Cover understands Jewish individuals as fulfilled or "completed" only through their relationship to a broader community. Any semblance of Jewish individuality remains relative to the community, rather than absolute and on its own terms. However, Cover critiques this concept by introducing a radical formulation of Jewish obligation that is far more closely aligned with that of Asher Lev.

Cover writes that "The principal word in Jewish law, which occupies a place equivalent in evocative force to the American legal system's 'rights', is the word 'mitzvah' which literally means commandment but has a general meaning closer to 'incumbent obligation'" (Cover, "Obligation," 65). Cover's view is that a historical understanding of *mitzvot* (plural form of *mitzvah*) is the imperative for the individual to realize the rights of others. However, this view of community-mediated rights begets an

obligation of reciprocity. The duties of *mitzvot*, fulfilled through observance of Jewish law, are thus reciprocal with the privilege of rights. In other words, Cover frames responsibility as a just, mutually beneficial, transactional network: people act on their sense of responsibility to the larger communities of which they are members, and thereby expect to be recipients of others' acts of communal responsibility. Thus, if rights stem from obligation, then beholdenment should beget entitlement. However, this modern vantage point is not adopted by Asher's community, which gives priority to the needs of the community over the needs of the individual. Nonetheless, in the pursuit of his art, Asher adopts a perspective akin to that of Cover. The Jewish *nomos* that restricts Asher Lev paradoxically empowers him to strike out from the community.

For example, during Asher's adolescence, his mother attempts to talk him down from his steadfast refusal to move with his parents to Vienna in pursuit of the Ladover mission. In the exchange, both Asher and his mother evoke the terminology and ethos of responsibility, but Asher radically transmutes his mandate of responsibility from the communal to the individual. "Asher," she says, "We have to make passageways to our people in Vienna. We have a responsibility to them" (*Asher Lev* 110). Asher responds with the following utterly unfiltered retort, which leaves his mother at a loss for words: "I'm also a Jewish life, Mama. I'm also precious in the eyes of the Ribbono Shel Olom... Does someone have a responsibility to me?" (*Asher Lev* 111). Here, Asher challenges the unequal distribution of expectation of care in the Ladover community and voices a demand for a reciprocity of care. Asher's reclamation of the idea of responsibility is a radical recognition of the fallacies he believes are inherent to the Ladover ethos. Rivkeh is stunned into a silence that indicates that she cannot find fault with the query, thereby

tacitly affirming her agreement with Asher. This is perhaps because she, too, has wondered whether she is owed anything by the community for which her family labors (and suffers) so tirelessly. Thus, this scene's inversion of the term "responsibility" evokes the community's muted critique of the injustice inherent to one-way responsibility pathways.

Asher Lev, Maternal Suffering, and the "Brooklyn Crucifixions"

My Name is Asher Lev hinges upon Asher's choice to commit an irreversible offense to his community by pursuing his calling to become a professional artist, and also by following through on an especially controversial artistic vision. Asher, observant Jew, renders his mother's suffering through the Christian, "goyish" (non-Jewish, in Yiddish) crucifixion model "because there was no aesthetic mold in his own religious tradition into which he could pour a painting of ultimate anguish and torment" (*Asher Lev* 330). The suffering of Rivkeh Lev is manifold: she grieves the tragic death of her brother; her husband and son are at odds with one another; and Asher pursues a highly unconventional path fraught with the risk of rejection by their religious society, one that she herself struggles to understand. Over the course of the novel, Rivkeh finds herself torn between her duties to carry on her brother's work for the Ladover movement, to support her husband in his own Ladover mission and disapproval of Asher's art, and her desire for her only child to find happiness and fulfillment. These multifaceted responsibilities are compounded by Hasidic notions of the mother's nurturing, domestic role in the family unit.

Despite his conviction that his loved ones and community will admonish his artistic motivation and heretical depictions, Asher nonetheless chooses to create the crucifixions to satisfy his artistic vision. Of course, he does not make lightly this decision that he knows will lead to irreparable harm. It eats away at him through torturous, protracted internal enactments of his father's certain inability to understand both the art and Asher himself.

“Papa, listen. I felt Mama’s lonely torment. I wanted to paint Mama’s torment. I wanted it to be a painting, a great painting, because I love painting as you love traveling... There is nothing in the Jewish tradition that could have served me as an aesthetic mold for such a painting. I had to go to—I had to use a—Do you understand, Papa? Why are you looking at me like that, Papa? It isn’t the *sitra achra*, Papa. It’s your son. There was no other way, no other aesthetic mold—He would not begin to understand. He would hear the word “crucifixion.” He would see the crucifix looming monstrously before his eyes. He would see rivers of Jewish blood. He would—Rebbe, help me.” (*Asher Lev* 352)

By following his compulsion to create the painting and not blocking its display in the art gallery, Asher knowingly stages the conditions for his deepest fears to play out. The “aesthetic blindness” that he discerns in his father is also manifested above as aesthetic *deafness* (*Asher Lev* 304). His frustration with his family’s inability to understand his art is underpinned by deep-seated resentment of their inability to understand *him*—Asher Lev, son and artist. Armed with the knowledge of the irreversible damage that his creation of the crucifixions will unleash, Asher walks directly into exile that is an inexorable consequence of his moral crime against the Ladover community. The affront to his own family, in particular, is unforgivable under the religious ethics system that flows from the community to the family unit. Asher’s primacy of artistic truth and completion of his aesthetic vision over the religious and ethical principle of *Kibbud*

Av Va-Em, the commandment to honor one's parents, signals Asher's irreversible decision to prioritize his agency as an individual distinct from both the Ladover and Lev family conglomerates. Asher strikes out from the conventional Hasidic philosophy that the whole (the communal group) is greater than the sum of its parts (the individuals who comprise community). Asher clearly foresees the consequences that will ensue from his artistic defiance of Ladover tradition.

In the above passage, Asher slides from “go to” to “use a,” casting about for the correct words to articulate his artistic decision-making. This movement towards “use” implies a transactional or instrumental approach to realizing his artistic aspirations. It also suggests that Christianity actually has “use value” for him.¹⁰ Asher does not wish to cause harm—or rather, he wishes for a reality in which his community (and especially his father) shares his aesthetic acuity. The question that Asher encounters is whether acting upon a responsibility to oneself necessitates *moral* blindness. For him, the answer is yes, because the bounds of the Hasidic world are morally constructed, as conferred by religion. Indeed, Asher and his father have the following exchange in the weeks leading up to the exhibition:

“Asher, if you had a choice between aesthetic blindness and moral blindness, which would you choose?”

I said nothing.

“I’m warning you now, Asher. One day you’ll hurt someone with this kind of attitude. And then you’ll be doing the work of the *sitra achra*.” (*Asher Lev* 305)

¹⁰ This terminology was supplied by Brown University Associate Professor of English Ravit Reichman.

Aesthetically robust though it may be, by painting his mother's crucifixions, Asher adopts moral blindness, as his father defines it, in pursuit of his art. By acting on his artistic fixation, he willfully prioritizes his individual wants and needs. While it may first appear that Asher's choice is grounded in a well-informed disregard for the paintings' repercussions, it becomes evident instead that his *regard* for the consequences is what causes Asher's self-torture. The crucifixions are therefore both morally and aesthetically significant because Asher articulates a *personal* moral code that accommodates his art and his responsibility to family and religion, in spite of the inevitable fallout. Ultimately, Asher's *Brooklyn Crucifixions* catalyze Asher and his father to confront the crucial question of whether Asher's artistic and Hasidic life can connect and even coexist. Potok depicts Asher's *Brooklyn Crucifixion II* (a more "honest" variation of his earlier attempt) and renders the artist's consciousness during the creative process as follows:

With charcoal, I drew the frame of the living-room window of our Brooklyn apartment. I drew the strip of wood that divided the window and the slanting bottom of the Venetian blind a few inches from the top of the window. On top—not behind this time, but on top—of the window I drew my mother in her housecoat, with her arms extended along the horizontal of the blind, her wrists tied to it with the cords of the blind, her legs tied at the ankles to the vertical of the inner frame with another section of the cord of the blind. I arched her body and twisted her head. I drew my father standing to her right, dressed in a hat and coat and carrying an attaché case. I drew myself to her left, dressed in paint-spattered clothes and a fisherman's cap and holding a palette and a long spearlike brush.... I split my mother's head into balanced segments, one looking at me, one looking at my father, one looking upward. The torment, the tearing anguish I felt in her, I put into her mouth, into the twisting curve of her head, the arching of her slight body, the clenching of her small fists, the taut downward pointing of her thin legs. (*Asher Lev* 329)

Asher's living-room window significantly becomes the literal and figurative frame for the novel's powerful culminating act of creation. It is from this vantage point that he consecrates the paintings: "For all the pain you suffered, my mama. For all the torment of your past and future years, my mama. For all the anguish this picture of pain will cause you. For the unspeakable mystery that brings good fathers and sons into the world and lets a mother watch them teat at each other's throats.... for the love I have for you... for all these I created this painting—an observant Jew working on a crucifixion because there was no aesthetic mold in his own religious tradition into which he could pour a painting of ultimate anguish and torment" (*Asher Lev* 330). Paradoxically, *Brooklyn Crucifixion I* and *Brooklyn Crucifixion II* thereby represent Asher's effort to honor his mother's sacrifices in a way that his father and community have not; he does so through the deployment of a Christian motif that his community will perceive as the highest form of dishonor. Daniel Walden elaborates on Potok's relationship with the concept of crucifixion:

The fact is that an artist deals in images, and the Jewish tradition, embodied in the second commandment, was against image making, because image making was part of ancient worship. All through the Middle Ages and into the Renaissance, Jewish law saw Christianity as essentially an idolatrous civilization. As a result there were no Jewish motifs in Western art, except for a few introduced by Rembrandt and a few others. In the modern period, Christianity was replaced by secular humanism, all of the Christological elements became attenuated, and the Crucifixion, as a salvationist motif, became a motif for suffering and lost its salvationist tonality. But, he felt, in using this the artist was not violating Jewish law; what he was violating was an aesthetic line, for in the eyes of the Jews, the Orthodox Jew especially, the Crucifixion immediately triggers images of Jewish blood and the deicide charge. (Walden, "Zwischenmensch," 130)

In this way, Asher acts on Potok's own philosophy surrounding the co-optation of religious aesthetic frames. In fact, according to interviews with the author's widow Adena, Chaim actually painted a facsimile of one of the crucifixions in order to see for himself how they would "take shape on canvas," but he ultimately "left [them] to the imagination of the reader" (Walden, "Potok's Asher Lev," 152). As an aside, however, it is important to note the work of a Jewish artist who likely had an outsized influence on Potok's vision of a Jewish crucifixion: Marc Chagall.

Born Moishe Segal in Hasidic Vitebsk, Belarus, Chagall was a French early modernist painter and proudly showcased Jewish subject matter in his prolific oeuvre. His work would have already been in circulation for several decades by the time of Asher Lev's childhood in the late 1940s and early 1950s, and certainly during Potok's adulthood. Crucially, Chagall's 1938 painting *White Crucifixion* (Figure 1) depicts the crucifixion of Christ through a Jewish lens, and was the first in a series of similar compositions. The Art Institute of Chicago explains how Chagall emphasizes Christ's Jewish identity through Jewish iconography, while also depicting (and lambasting) Communist and Nazi persecution of the Jews. "By linking the martyred Jesus with the persecuted Jews and the Crucifixion with contemporary events, Chagall's painting passionately identifies the Nazis with Christ's tormentors and warns of the moral implications of their actions" (Art Institute of Chicago, "White Crucifixion").

Asher's crucifixion paintings clearly gesture at Chagall's *White Crucifixion* as a model: in his *Brooklyn Crucifixions*, he depicts his mother as the Christ figure, and himself and his father as two of the figures in the foreground of Chagall's painting. In Asher's work, there is even a parallel between Chagall's figure in deep blue and Asher's

father, “standing to her right, dressed in a hat and coat and carrying an attaché case,” as well as between Chagall’s figure in green and Asher himself, “to her left, dressed in paint-spattered clothes and a fisherman’s cap and holding a palette and long spearlike brush.” The iconographic substitutions between Chagall’s Torah and Aryeh Lev’s attaché case and between Chagall’s rucksack and Asher Lev’s palette are both emblematic and striking.



Figure 1. *White Crucifixion*, Marc Chagall (1938)

For Ladover Hasidim like the Lev family, however, Chagall does not figure as a Jewish artist who could have set a precedent for Asher’s entry into the art world. This is because Chagall was largely a secular Jew. In fact, when Rivkeh tells Asher that painting is a practice reserved for “*goyim*” (non-Jews), Asher replies by proffering the example of

Chagall. But his mother cuts him off: “Religious Jews, Asher. Torah Jews. Such Jews don’t draw and paint” (*Asher Lev* 171). Therefore, for the internal logic of the novel to be consistent, Potok bases Asher’s crucifixions on the premise that there is no alternative aesthetic frame within Judaism through which he can represent his mother’s abjection. Potok thus puts his own spin on this existing notion of a Jewish crucifixion. He deviates from Chagall’s representation of Jesus Christ’s Jewishness to substituting his mother for Jesus, telling a different Jewish story altogether. However, even the critical reaction to Asher Lev’s crucifixions can only be expressed through a non-Jewish aesthetic framework.

In sharp contrast to all that the gallery opening night gravely portends for Asher, Potok stages the gallery showing such that the non-Jewish attendees display utter irreverence for the crucifixions. Their reactions to the crucifixions demonstrate the irony of Asher’s grasping at Christian aesthetic forms:

Who’s the woman? Christ, look at the agony on her face. Christ, he’s good. Ah, Mr. Lev, a pleasure, an honor. What marvelous paintings. Splendid show, Lev. Splendid. (*Asher Lev* 359)

Asher makes the flawed assumption that the art world possesses his own degree of aesthetic acuity. However, by utilizing the expletive “Christ,” the secular, goyish art community itself demonstrates its use of secularized Christian frameworks through which to articulate artistic commentary. Such language fundamentally flattens and cheapens the paintings’ moral and aesthetic significance and enormity. By uttering the declarative “Christ,” the onlookers invoke an expletive through which to channel their shallow surprise and appreciation for the Lev’s unexpected aesthetic choice. This scene is also

likely a tongue-in-cheek moment for Potok, whose repetition of the remarks “Christ” and “Splendid” ridicules the partygoers’ ostentatious affect.

The spectators’ reaction to the crucifixions can, ironically, only be expressed through an irreverent, secularized subversion of the invocation of Christ’s name. Perhaps this drives home Asher’s conviction that such abjection can only be articulated through a Christian aesthetic form. But the art world makes such a transcendent form vulgar by wielding the Christ incantation in an acutely secular, colloquial, and banal mode. Furthermore, the transgression of the expletive can perhaps be best appreciated by the Jewish audience—his parents—provided by Asher Lev. The effect on Asher is that such commentary deflates both the paintings’ artistic brilliance and their enormous ramifications for Asher’s life. The Christ utterances also confirm his father’s suspicions that such art flies in the face of fundamental Jewish values. There is no equivalent to the “Christ” interjection in Hassidic parlance. The closest possible counterpart (as expressed through the language of the novel) is the invocation of “*Ribbono Shel Olom*” (“Master of the Universe”), invoked frequently by Asher and his community during moral appeals to God’s wisdom and divine plan. “*Adonai*,” “*Elohim*,” and “*Hashem*” are among the many Jewish stand-ins for God’s secret and unknowable divine name (Cohn-Sherbok, “Names of God”). But these appellations gesture at divinity and connote love, respect, and deference.

In contrast, the goyish invocation of Christ profanes His divine name through its association with Asher’s exploitation of the crucifixion aesthetic. The luster of the paintings’ Jewishness recedes as the secular, Christian-socialized viewers profane them. At the same time, Asher’s Jewish crucifixions create the potential for blaspheming

against both Judaism and Christianity. Indeed, guests utter with irreverence: “Damn good, those crucifixions” (*Asher Lev* 359). Perhaps ironically, Asher’s Hasidic tradition does not provide the language or cultural vocabulary to interpret a Christian representation of Jewish suffering. Through his very perversion of Jewish and Christian aesthetic forms, he invites his paintings to both be viewed as profane and to be profaned by the “Christ” invocation. By boldly crossing the boundaries of his community, Asher invites the gallery attendees to make his family the object of the goyish gaze. He thus facilitates the transfiguring of his sacred art and valued relationships into spectacle.

The passage’s unusual formatting as a monolithic block of narrative text reflects Asher’s mounting anxiety. The gallery attendees’ insipid, ingratiating comments provide a steady stream of background noise as Potok sets the scene. Such shallow murmuring is propelled and encouraged by Anna Schaeffer, Asher’s calculating (and very wealthy) art dealer and proprietor. In contrast to dialogue presented in the rest of the novel, the comments made by Anna and the art critic guests in this scene are not set off by quotation marks. Rather, they run together without delineation, creating an uninterrupted stream of sound that becomes noise. The layering of vapid external voices creates a droning effect that threatens to drown out Asher’s own voice and overload his sensory perception of a moment of already-intense anxiety. Anna’s words seem performative and inconsequential as they fade to un-quoted ambient noise: “By all means, look around. Yes. And try the smorgasbord. It is splendid. Do you want another coffee, Asher? You are being a very good boy” (*Asher Lev* 358). Anna infantilizes Asher through such demeaning language. And indeed, she does assume a position of authority over his art and his livelihood,

exercising immense control over his future prospects and standing to profit greatly from his talent.

The steady stream of her authoritative condescension in this chapter is part and parcel of the game often played to gain standing in the art world. Anna's self-assurance that the situation is well in hand, from a managerial and financial perspective, is culturally insensitive. Her ignorance of the moral weight of the gallery showing for Asher and his community is apparent as Asher's senses of impending doom and lack of control grow. Furthermore, adult Asher's infantilization during this precarious moment highlights the contrast between his commitment to personal and artistic fulfillment and his yearning for his family's approval. Additionally, during this scene, Anna's ability to manipulate the artifice of the art world invokes Jacob Kahn's previous warning to Asher about the perils of "artistic whoring."

This framing invokes the epigraph at the very opening of the novel: Potok chose a quotation by artist Pablo Picasso, one of his formative influences in his creative pursuit. The epigraph reads, "Art is a lie, which makes us realize the truth," a statement that Picasso wrote in 1923 in a letter to Mexican artist Marius de Zayas (Picasso, "Statement to Marius de Zayas"). Potok's selection of this statement suggests that he intended its argument—that moral certitude lies behind art's smoke screen—to foreground the novel. It further indicates that this culminating gallery scene lays bare the treacherous ground that Asher must navigate if he is to maintain his moral rectitude. Potok thus presents the gallery in a way that is reminiscent of a brothel, in which Asher willingly but reluctantly transacts his bodily and soulful artistic production for voyeurism, wealth, and acclaim. This sordid environment further erodes the sanctity of the rendering of Rivkeh Lev's

suffering. It is a place where an act of love is transfigured into a profane commodification. Asher is thereby trapped in a self-inflicted web of crude debasement, for his family perceives only the violations of their privacy and morals. And they cannot be reasonably expected to perceive anything otherwise. In this charged scene, Asher enacts his own form of aesthetic blindness—undiscerning of the human cost and perpetuation of suffering caused by his paintings.

Asher Lev's Belief, Exile, and Exodus

In spite of Asher's decision to proceed with creating the crucifixion paintings and cast off his communal obligations, he ultimately does not turn away from his *religious* obligations. Asher makes it clear that while he will engage in untraditional and even secular artistic practices, he will never go so far as to abandon his religious observance. For example, Asher spends his summers with Jacob Kahn in Cape Cod, Massachusetts during his late adolescence. There, he becomes an object of fascination in Provincetown's secular art world for his Hasidic appearance rather than for his talent. In particular, he becomes self-conscious about his *payot*, the sidecurls worn by observant Jewish men. Retrospectively, Asher narrates how one summer, he "returned with paintings and a tan and without [his] sidecurls." His father's reaction to this omission is perhaps counterintuitive:

My father said nothing to me about the sidecurls. In a curious way, he seemed almost relieved. He himself wore sidecurls because his father had worn them. He had never made much of an issue about them with me. Now he seemed relieved by my tacit indication that the sidecurls were as far as I intended to go, for I had retained my beard and the ritual fringes beneath my shirt. (*Asher Lev* 299)

Asher's family has no doubt of his continued adherence to religious practice. In fact, throughout the novel and in the sequel to come, Asher keeps strict standards of *kashrut* (Jewish dietary rules), engages in daily ritual prayer, and otherwise remains highly engaged with Jewish observance. This passage illustrates that what Asher's community is more worried about are Asher's moral leanings and the risk that Asher allows his art to obfuscate the prioritization of his Jewish peoplehood and respect for traditional Hasidic precepts. However, Asher comes to understand art in distinctly religious terms and tacitly co-opts the religious sensibility in which he has been steeped. Asher views art as a tradition. Jacob Kahn impresses upon Asher the weight of the commitment he is making to his art: "This is not a toy. This is not a child scrawling on a wall. This is a tradition; it is a religion, Asher Lev. You are entering a religion called painting" (*Asher Lev* 213). And Asher internalizes the spiritual nature of his artistic tradition: he defines art for his father as "a person's private vision expressed in aesthetic forms" (*Asher Lev* 303). For Asher, this artistic tradition is not mutually exclusive with Jewish tradition; rather, the two are mutually constitutive—in a way that is not the case for Stephen Dedalus.

Additionally, Asher reads a book titled *The Art Spirit* which dictates that "every great artist is a man who has freed himself from his family, his nation, his race. Every man who has shown the world the way to beauty, to true culture, has been a rebel, a 'universal' without patriotism, without home, who has found his people everywhere" (*Asher Lev* 203).¹¹ Yet Asher expresses his misgivings with this idea when he tells his

¹¹ While not explicitly cited by Potok, this book is likely an overt reference to *The Art Spirit* by Robert Henri. See Robert Henri, *The Art Spirit*, J. B. Lippincott, 1923.

mother, “I don’t think I want to free myself that way” (*Asher Lev* 203). Powerfully, Asher feels that turning away from his family, community, and culture, is not a solution to his artistic quandary. Rather, he cultivates the ability to hold both “cultures” simultaneously. Art is not a tradition that threatens to subsume Asher’s Jewish tradition; instead, he nurtures both his religious and artistic faiths in parallel with one another.

At the end of the novel, the Rebbe asks Asher to leave Brooklyn for the Ladover yeshiva in Paris. His crucifixion paintings have crossed a boundary, and the Rebbe recognizes that Asher must leave for both the good of the community and for his own self-preservation. Asher and the Rebbe both know that Asher’s artistry cannot develop in a place where he is surrounded by people who do not understand him or his work. Significantly, however, the Rebbe does not send Asher off into total solitude—he refers him to a Paris yeshiva that is a hub of religious connection within the global Ladover network.

Asher departs for a land of both freedom and community in a way that is reminiscent not only of exile, but also of *exodus*. Asher is certainly acquainted with this context for understanding departure because of the pivotal Jewish Exodus from Egypt to the Holy Land recounted in the Old Testament. The Exodus is a period of great enlightenment for the Jews, who receive the Ten Commandments from God at Mount Sinai during their desert wanderings. The Exodus story perhaps, then, is evocative of segments of the grand *Bildungsroman* of the Jewish people. The exodus metaphor is especially pertinent because the crucifixion scene vignette and its aftermath take place directly after the Jewish holiday of Passover, the origins of which are laid out in the Book of Exodus, the second book of the Torah’s Pentateuch (*Asher Lev* 327). The term

“exodus” conjures diaspora, central to the Jewish ethos, and is an existential paradigm of liberation. It also connotes a journey undertaken by a collective or individual in order to attain both freedom from oppression and freedom of expression (Neufeld Redekop 119). Clearly, Asher leaves for Paris in order to pursue the freedom that he requires to pursue his artistry uninhibitedly.¹²

This manner of departure is very reminiscent of the religious odyssey that Chaim Potok himself underwent. Despite his Orthodox upbringing, Potok became enthralled with Western secular literature and realized that Orthodoxy was stymieing his literary and intellectual pursuits. At the Jewish Theological Seminary, a Conservative Jewish institution, Potok decided to pursue a master’s degree in Hebrew literature, followed by ordination as a Conservative Jewish rabbi. Conservatism is a denomination of Judaism that arose out of a desire for a traditional yet moderate and flexible approach to Jewish observance (Jewish Virtual Library, “History”). “To his family and friends,” Potok’s *New York Times* obituary reads, “his choice was almost as great a defection as becoming a gentile” (Fox, “Novelist Illumined”). Potok served as a United States army chaplain during the Korean War and went on to earn a PhD in philosophy at the University of Pennsylvania. He remained a prominent Conservative intellectual even while pursuing his career as a novelist. Asher Lev, too, must gain physical distance from a stifling religious community in order to achieve intellectual and artistic accomplishments. Redemptively, however, both Asher Lev and Chaim Potok hold fast to their core religious convictions rather than summarily casting off Judaism.

¹² The novel’s sequel, *The Gift of Asher Lev*, indicates that Asher’s flight from Brooklyn enables him to achieve this goal.

In the novel's closing scene, Asher looks back at his Brooklyn apartment building, the only home that he has ever known, to see his parents standing "framed in the living-room window" (*Asher Lev* 369). This is an explicit reenactment of Asher's crucifixion paintings. As Asher's cab pulls away, his backwards-looking gaze evokes the retrospective narration that Potok has implemented over the duration of the entire *Künstlerroman*. Potok gives a nod to Asher's opening scene of confession, leaving the image of Asher's unhappy parents framed behind the fateful living-room window emblazoned in the reader's mind. The end—Asher's exodus—brings us to the beginning—Asher's genesis. Asher Lev is an observant Jew who paints crucifixions, and Potok's *Künstlerroman* makes it clear that art and religion do not have to be antithetical to one another.

Stephen Dedalus's Misbelief, Exile, and Retreat

Asher's commitment to remaining tethered to his people stands in stark contrast to that of Stephen Dedalus, who attempts to turn away from both Dublin and Catholicism when he makes his choice to escape to Paris. However, it is important to note that Stephen is not successful in rejecting Catholicism altogether. Irish Catholicism confers a compound identity upon him: he cannot be Irish without being Catholic, and he cannot be Catholic without being Irish. Because Stephen's upbringing is so entrenched in both identities, it is impossible for him not to carry them with him abroad. Moreover, as discussed previously, Stephen's religious socialization is inextricable from his aesthetic formulations and acts of creative production. For these reasons, Stephen "could leave Ireland, he could renounce the Catholic Church, he could abjure family ties, but he could never stop having being a Dublin Irish-Catholic son and brother" (Gillespie 25).

Roy Gottfried introduces a term that aptly characterizes James Joyce's relationship with Catholicism: *misbelief*. He defines the term in opposition to what it does not mean:

A misbeliever is one who engages the issues and tenets, the figures and forms of dogma, from a distance, from a place that is off, separated. Misbelief shares with belief the same terms, the same facts of history, the same forms of worship, but wants to handle them differently, wrongly, of course, by slightly misapplying or misdirecting them.

To be a misbeliever is to set oneself away from faith, alien from it, but always aware of its place, its shape and topology. Apostasy is literally a standing away, a conscious act of separation. Misbelief, looking at unitary belief from afar and defining itself by that distance, is a chosen sort of exile. In that space of distance, of exile, is an openness crucial to Joyce's misbelief: he wants to challenge the "narrow" view of religion, the only definition of the believer, with an openness to possibilities of redirection. (Gottfried 4)

Gottfried notes the distinction between misbelief and other descriptors such as belief (faith in "Catholic pieties"), unbelief (rejecting "the rich complexity of religious thought and symbol"), and disbelief (rejecting "Catholicism in order to hold to another and alternate religious system"). Instead, Joyce is a misbeliever, "someone who does not think as others do about Catholicism, but who clearly thinks about it nonetheless" (Gottfried 2). Joyce clearly maps this belief system onto Stephen via the novel's autobiographical modality. The minds of both Joyce and Stephen are "supersaturated with Catholicism, but they also function as "a profane 'cloister' in which 'limp priestly vestments' were made 'to sway and caper in a sabbath of misrule'" (Pinkerton 26). Illustratively, when Stephen's friend Cranly asks whether Stephen believes in the eucharist, Stephen replies that he does not. When Cranly asks whether he disbelieves in it, Stephen again replies

that he does not. His encapsulating response? “I neither believe nor disbelieve in it” (*Portrait* 211). Thus, misbelief is the terminology that best describes Stephen Dedalus’s complex, nuanced relationship with Catholicism, both during the action of *Portrait* and during its aftermath in *Ulysses*.

Joyce’s adherence to the *Künstlerroman* form enables the development of Stephen’s artistic ideology. Notably, this articulation of Stephen’s mature aesthetic philosophy engages religious ideology and iconography. It arcs along a trajectory towards a positive definition of art by defining art by what it is, rather than his earlier gestures at backing into a definition through isolated confrontations with what it is not. At *Portrait*’s pinnacle in Chapter V, Stephen engages in a philosophical conversation with his university peers, who ask him point blank to explicitly articulate his views on aesthetics. And so Stephen does, thinking aloud to work through his definitions of art, rhythm, truth, beauty, and the types of literary and artistic forms that can be employed to convey these qualities. This is a moment of self-realization for Stephen as he explicitly, rather than tacitly, embraces his artistic identity. This scene also develops earlier threads pertaining to the creative power of the artist. For instance, Stephen declares the following as a core tenet of his aesthetic philosophy:

The personality of the artist passes into the narration itself, flowing round and round the persons and the action like a vital sea... The personality of the artist, at first a cry or a cadence or a mood and then a fluid and lambent narrative, finally refines itself out of existence, impersonalizes itself, so to speak. The esthetic image in the dramatic form is life purified in and reprojected from the human imagination. The mystery of esthetic like that of material creation is accomplished. The artist, like the God of the creation, remains within or behind or beyond or above his handiwork,

invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent, paring his fingernails.
(*Portrait* 189)

Here, Stephen reiterates and elevates his vision of the artist as not only creator, but as akin to the Creator. The very act of creation, he says, is not sanctified by association with God; instead, it is sanctified through its anthropomorphism via “the human imagination.” Echoing refrains from his childhood, he solipsistically elevates the status of the artistic self not as approaching God, but rather as competing with and superseding Him. Stephen invokes himself through his reference to the proverbial artist, justifying his own aloofness and striving towards the sublime as a deterministic matter of artistic typology. Steinberg also notes that here, “a worldly function is described by means of religious imagery” (Steinberg 158-159).

In addition, Joyce’s text adopts a meta, self-referential quality. It prompts the reader to identify the artist and the art in question not just as Stephen and his creative acts (respectively), but as Joyce and his novel, *Portrait*, as well. Joyce has constructed nested works of creative production: the novel itself and Stephen’s world within it. Therefore, Stephen’s description of the relationship between artist and narrative begs the question of the degree to which Joyce has inserted himself into his rendering of Stephen’s consciousness, “flowing round and round the persons and the action like a vital sea.” The passage also calls attention to the reliability of Joyce in conveying Stephen’s aesthetic philosophy. Stephen describes the secondary role of the artist as transcendental, Godlike, and above the fray of his material production—“within or behind or beyond or above his handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent, paring his fingernails.” By writing this line and underscoring his own artistic role in the creation of the novel, Joyce

pokes fun at Stephen's philosophy. Here, Joyce is far from impersonalizing himself or refining himself out of existence. He instead employs self-referential humor to defuse the seriousness with which Stephen espouses his worldview—and with which he takes himself.

Self-aggrandizing though this philosophy might be, this scene suggests a moment of triumph through Stephen's culminating rejection of integration into a Catholic society that inherently rejects his individuality—the manifestation of his misbelief. In fact, S. J. Caterson describes *Portrait's* contribution to the *Künstlerroman* form as “[inaugurating] a process by which the protagonist seeks confirmation of the intuition that alienation and suffering are the means by which the artist can achieve a state of consciousness deeper than that available to the mass, or even most writers” (Caterson 92). Therefore, by adopting the *Künstlerroman* form, Joyce primes Stephen to turn away from religion by playing out the dialectic between his religious and artistic sensibilities. Stephen attempts to cast off Catholicism because he feels that it inhibits his transcendent artistic journey of self-discovery. Additionally, Stephen is far less tethered than Asher by relationships that confer interpersonal guilt upon him.

Unlike Asher, Stephen feels minimal inclinations to uphold his religious faith for the sake of his family and community. The end of his childhood is marked by an awareness of his family's dysfunction, his father's failures and destitution, and his mother's fruitless piety. The distance and disdain that he feels for his impoverished, broken family is evident even in Chapter II, when he states, “He saw clearly, too, his own futile isolation. He had not gone one step nearer the lives he had sought to approach nor bridged the restless shame and rancour that had divided him from mother and brother and

sister. He felt that he was hardly of the one blood with them but stood to them rather in the mystical kinship of fosterage, fosterchild and fosterbrother” (*Portrait* 86). Stephen goes on to reflect on the diverging trajectories between his own faith and that of his mother’s: “Coldly how he had watched the faith which was fading down in his soul ageing and strengthening in her eyes. A dim antagonism gathered force within him and darkened his mind as a cloud against her disloyalty” (*Portrait* 144). While this comment suggests the widening schism between himself and his mother on the matter of faith, it is important to note that in contrast, no such divergence occurs between Asher and his mother Rivkeh.

Following Stephen’s Catholic zeal in Chapter IV, Stephen begins to cast off his religious discipline. This agnosticism is perhaps the ultimate form of blasphemy and mortal sin. This undulating cycle of turning towards and away from both religion and aesthetic experience reflects Stephen’s broader feeling of entrapment with Dublin society. Stephen’s attempts at emancipation all come to naught because the pleasure that he derives from both corporeal sin and religious austerity are fleeting. In fact, these extremes lead to his eventual self-exile from both Dublin and Catholicism writ large. Stephen’s profound utterance in Chapter V cuts to the root of these entwined issues: “When the soul of a man is born in this country there are nets flung at it to hold it back from flight,” he muses. “I shall try to fly by those nets” (*Portrait* 179). This powerful sentiment has a profound dual meaning. In one sense, it expresses Stephen’s desire to try to pass or escape those nets. In another, however, Stephen acknowledges that he cannot cast off the nets, and must instead take flight despite their continued weight and

entanglement. This latter interpretation solidifies Stephen's misbelief; Catholicism is difficult for him to give up entirely.

Joyce reveals through Stephen's inability to turn away entirely from his artistic sensibilities that personal artistic liberation is not possible in Dublin, an environment in which mortification of the senses imprisons rather than emancipates the artist. Stephen's push and pull towards aesthetic sensory experiences mirror his relentless cycle of existential guilt and repentance. The reader is subjected to this sensory and moral disorientation alongside Stephen. This exhaustingly circuitous relationship with Catholicism thus solidifies Stephen's impression of Dublin (and Ireland) as a place of constraint and repression.

However, despite Joyce's implicit commentary on Catholicism's entrapping ethos within Dublin, he perhaps offers Stephen's aesthetic sensibilities as an antidote to such austerity. Stephen is at once enervated and revitalized by his attention to sensory detail during his period of self-flagellation in Chapter IV. In fact, it is this quintessentially Catholic cycle of guilt and absolution that revives his artistic perception of the world, the pursuit of which ultimately prompts his flight from Dublin to Paris. It is certainly paradoxical that Stephen's mind is "supersaturated with the religion" in which he "[disbelieves]" (*Portrait* 212). However, Stephen's inconsistencies bring into focus his unique aesthetic outlook, which is a powerful throughline that "supersaturates" the novel in its own right. Despite the frustrations invited by Dublin's innate religiosity, Joyce's narrative demonstrates that Dublin does in fact leave room for sensory immersion and aesthetic appreciation. Joyce's subtle humor injects ironic levity into this passage; the inevitability of Stephen's sensory abandon brightens an otherwise bleak depiction of

Dublin. There is more to Ireland than its people's superficial characterization as a "priestridden Godforsaken race" (*Portrait* 32). Stephen's experiences illustrate that even during his most extreme period of self-restriction and self-reproach, Dublin provides a rich sensory backdrop against which aesthetic possibility and the artistic spirit can thrive—in spite of censorship from within and without. Yet, for Stephen, the artistic spirit can become truly free only beyond Dublin's boundaries.

Ultimately, Stephen chooses self-exile from Dublin as a means of resolving his artistic and religious angst. His rationale is twofold. The first prong is that Catholicism is a fetter. The second is that art must be unfettered. Stephen declines the opportunity to enter the priesthood and discusses his misbelief with his university friend Cranly. He explains to Cranly that he refuses to make his Easter Duty, per his mother's wishes, on grounds that he "will not serve"—*non serviam*. In fact, Stephen pronounces the following summative perspective on his attitude toward religion and homeland: "I will not serve that in which I no longer believe whether it call itself my home, my fatherland or my church: and I will try to express myself in some more of life or art as freely as I can and as wholly as I can, using for my defence the only arms I allow myself to use, silence, exile and cunning" (*Portrait* 218). In his own words, the artist must leverage exile as a self-defensive tool in order to live freely.

In many ways, Stephen's notion of departure from Dublin can be characterized not just as exodus—an escape—but also as a form of *retreat*. The Modern Catholic Dictionary defines retreat as "withdrawal for a period of time from [sic] one's usual surroundings and occupation to a place of solitude for meditation, self-examination, and prayer, in order to make certain necessary decisions in one's spiritual life" (Menezes,

“Spiritual Retreats”). In fact, during Chapter III, Stephen’s high school prepares for its annual retreat before the feast day of its patron saint. In addressing his pupils, Father Arnall provides his own definition of retreat:

Now what is the meaning of this word *retreat* and why is it allowed on all hands to be a most salutary practice for all who desire to lead before God and in the eyes of men a truly christian life? A retreat, my dear boys, signifies a withdrawal for a while from the cares of our life, the cares of this workaday world, in order to examine the state of our conscience, to reflect on the mysteries of holy religion and to understand better why we are here in this world. During these few days I intend to put before you some thoughts concerning the four last things. They are, as you know from your catechism, death, judgement, hell and heaven. We shall try to understand them fully during these few days so that we may derive from the understanding of them a lasting benefit to our souls. (*Portrait* 96)

This scene takes on deep irony in light of Stephen’s vacillating faith and ultimate misbelief. Stephen, who sits among the students addressed above, internalizes the moral benefits of retreat, of turning away from worldly concerns in order to pursue spiritual practice and contemplation. His decision to depart from Dublin is inspired by pursuit of his own spiritual practice, that of aesthetic divination and literary pursuit. Additionally, as previously discussed, Stephen’s art is inextricable from his Catholic socialization. Therefore, Stephen’s exile, both self-imposed and imposed by the strictures of his society, is in this sense a retreat. Father Arnall fervently impresses on the boys that the retreat should “be one to which you can look back in after years when, maybe, you are far from this college and among very different surroundings, to which you can look back with joy and thankfulness and give thanks to God for having granted you this occasion of laying the first foundation of a pious honorable zealous christian life” (*Portrait*

97). The irony of Stephen's appropriation of this concept of retreat for his exilic act of misbelief is palpable. He certainly escapes the "din of all these hollowsounding voices" in Paris (*Portrait* 74), but only does so by engaging in an act that for him is inseparable from Catholicism.

Over the course of the novel, Stephen turns towards and away from Catholicism, unable to escape Dublin's dominating force yet also leaning into it as a framework through which to express his unfolding artistic understanding of the world. For Stephen, Cranly says, Catholicism "... is a form: nothing else" (*Portrait* 213). Cranly is correct in diagnosing Stephen's perception of religion as a form, as a model upon which he bases his aesthetic philosophy. Yet while Cranly interprets Stephen's silence as affirmation, it also belies a more nuanced relationship with Catholicism. Stephen's development was shaped by the simultaneity of Catholic piety and artistic striving; these forces are inextricable from his maturation throughout the *Künstlerroman*. Therefore, despite his self-professed flight from Dublin's religious doctrines in the name of artistic self-fulfillment, he even expresses this rationale in religious terminology.

Stephen's diary entries at the very conclusion of the novel provide a raw perspective on his final interactions with his mother before he leaves for Paris. The entries are Stephen's final act of artistic production in *Portrait*. They are written in language that is unfiltered by the fluid prose employed by Joyce in the rest of the novel:

24 March. Began with a discussion with my mother. Subject: B.V.M. Handicapped by my sex and youth. To escape held up relations between Jesus and Papa against those between Mary and her son. Said religion was not a lying-in hospital. Mother indulgent. Said I have a queer mind and have read too much. Not true. Have read little and understood less. Then

she said I would come back to faith because I had a restless mind. This means to leave church by backdoor of sin and re-enter through the skylight of repentance. Cannot repent. Told her so and asked for sixpence. Got threepence....

26 April. Mother is putting my new secondhand clothes in order. She prays now, she says, that I may learn in my own life and away from home and friends what the heart is and what it feels. Amen. So be it. 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. (*Portrait* 220, 224)

The diary entries are true creative byproducts of Stephen's aesthetic sensibilities and musings. Yet they bear a striking, unoriginal resemblance to a form with which Stephen (and by now, the reader) is overly familiar: the Catholic confession. Even now, Stephen's casual, vernacularized reference to his soul and use of the term "Amen" invokes biblical terminology and religion-informed morality. Furthermore, his oxymoronic reference to "new secondhand clothes" evokes a sense of Stephen's selectively engaging with Catholic precepts but deliberately misappropriating and recycling them. His misbelief, then, does not enable him to totally extricate himself from Catholicism. His Catholic socialization is inescapable, even during his retreat to Paris. Nonetheless, his very inclination to abandon the religion that once structured his life and gave it meaning signals a distinct departure from Asher Lev's uninterrupted religious devotion. Stephen's burgeoning artistry provides the impetus for his escape from Dublin. His Catholicism, however, imbues his flight with moral ramifications. Art and religion, therefore, both tether Stephen to and repel him from Dublin, the hub of his social and religious networks and responsibilities.

In a fitting concluding thought, Stephen reflects in his diary that “The past is consumed in the present and the present is living only because it brings forth the future” (*Portrait* 222). In doing so, he captures the essential nature of the *Künstlerroman* form’s advancement of the simultaneous religious and artistic development of Stephen Dedalus in *Portrait*. Tracing pivotal moments across Stephen’s maturation reveals his continual juxtaposition of his own creative power with that of God. He subverts traditional Catholic conceptions of the diminished role of the individual through self-affirmation of his artistry. This phenomenon extends from his earliest childhood encounters with art to his culminating articulations of aesthetic and religious philosophy. The *Künstlerroman* therefore serves as a conduit for both Joyce and Potok to convey the inextricability of their protagonists’ aesthetic and religious development. Stephen Dedalus’s misbelief and Asher Lev’s steadfast religious observance ultimately lead to their respective retreat and exodus from their home communities. Nonetheless, neither artist can entirely cast off the religion and relationships that so inform their creative acts. For Stephen Dedalus and Asher Lev, Paris is a blank canvas that provides the medium for their uninhibited artistic expression.

CODA

All Grown Up:

The Künstlerroman Continued in Ulysses, The Gift of Asher Lev, and “Shtisel”

The pairing of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and *My Name is Asher Lev* is logical not only due to the novels' shared *Künstlerroman* properties, but also for their common staging of the battleground between art and religion, individual and community. In addition to these overlapping thematic elements, they also share a less common dimension: each is the antecedent novel to a sequel.

James wrote his modernist epic *Ulysses* (1922) to pick up where *Portrait* left off. He uses the model of Homer's *Odyssey* to craft a novel that radically experiments with form, charting the course of a single day in Dublin as experienced by protagonists Stephen Dedalus and Leopold Bloom. The story is roughly contiguous with that of *Portrait*: *Ulysses* plunges the reader into a Dublin morning experienced by a morose Stephen, who has been summoned home from Paris to bid farewell to his deceased mother. The specter of his mother haunts him, and he is hounded by the memory of her dying wish that he return to the Church. Yet in spite of the morbidity in which he stewes, Stephen's focus remains centered on his art and self-advancement. In Chapter I, for example, medical student and buffoonish roommate Buck Mulligan snidely remarks to Stephen that “O, it's only Dedalus whose mother is beastly dead” (*Ulysses* I.198). Stephen takes issue with the statement not because of the disrespect shown to his mother, but instead because of the “offence” to himself. The glib use of the word “only” undermines Stephen's self-importance and is at odds with how he hopes to be perceived.

Furthermore, Stephen consistently asserts his break with religion in this sequel. When his companion Haines asks whether Stephen believes in a personal God, Stephen retorts: “You behold in me ... a horrible example of free thought.” Stephen also quips that he is a servant of three masters: “The imperial British state... and the holy Roman catholic and apostolic church.” His repeated self-affirming, areligious sentiments coalesce into an inward plea to his mother’s ghost: “No, mother! Let me be and let me live” (*Ulysses* I.279). Paradoxically, though, as he progresses through Dublin, his aesthetic intake of the city is inseparable from its pervasive Catholicism, and he is now equipped with the aesthetic and linguistic frameworks to make sense of this Catholic homecoming. Thus, Stephen’s resolute disavowal from the religious elements of Catholicism nonetheless indicates that he remains enveloped by Catholicism in a cultural sense. Michael Patrick Gillespie interprets Stephen’s continued grappling with the themes of community and religion that so consumed him in *Portrait*:

Throughout the narrative of *Ulysses*, in a fashion more subtle but just as insistent as that which one finds in the discourse of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Joyce’s writing accumulates examples that reiterate the inadequacy of social establishments like the family, the Church, and the nation for individuals seeking guidelines for determining their sense of self. In the pattern of all modernist/ postmodernist novels, these institutions no longer delineate paths for fulfillment. Rather, they lay traps that circumscribe individuality with sterile prohibitions meant to prop up an artificial moral system. (Gillespie 101)

Thus, in the aftermath of *Portrait*, Stephen Dedalus does not find ready answers to the questions that plague him. In fact, his fairly resolute disavowal of family and traditional Catholicism in *Portrait* becomes more complex as he is summoned home to his mother’s deathbed. The family ties that he all but renounced now haunt him as he acts

upon an innate sense of a son's duty to his mother. According to Gillespie, "Family, particularly embodied in his mother, stands as the most problematic institution for Stephen to escape in his efforts to achieve independence," for he cannot resist his mother's cry for him to return to Dublin (Gillespie 84). Nevertheless, in *Ulysses*, he still refuses to make his Easter Duty—receiving the sacraments of Penance and the Holy Eucharist sometime between Ash Wednesday and the Feast of Pentecost—per his mother's dying wishes. *Ulysses*, a sequel that continues Stephen's story, illustrates the intricate conflicts that Stephen continues to negotiate between his artistic pursuit and his relationships with religion and family.

Potok's sequel is also a novel of homecoming, but Asher Lev's relationship with Judaism and family is far less ambivalent than that of Stephen Dedalus. *The Gift of Asher Lev* (1990) follows an adult Asher's return home from Paris to Brooklyn for his uncle Yitzchok's funeral. This is Asher's first return home in the twenty years since the events of *My Name is Asher Lev*. The novel's title is a triple entendre: it refers to Asher's artistic gift and professional success; the estate bequeathed to him by his uncle, who is revealed to be preeminent collector of Asher's own paintings; and Asher's son Avrumel, who ultimately takes Asher's place in the line of succession for the aging Rebbe. Unlike *Ulysses*, however, *The Gift of Asher Lev* affirms that although Asher has relocated to Paris, he has not given up his religious observance and faith. He unwaveringly carries on his Ladover Hasidic practice and instills his Jewish tradition in his children. It is apparent that Asher has maintained ties with his community throughout his twenty years abroad in Paris. It also becomes clear that his home community in Brooklyn and especially his parents have become accustomed to his profession as an artist and are even proud of his

success. The rupture imposed by his community at the end of *My Name is Asher Lev*, therefore, is temporary. The bonds of peoplehood and faith are permanent. Asher Lev is portrayed as somewhat of a boon to the Ladover community because his public-facing role shows the world that one does not need to “escape” Judaism in order to pursue a meaningful life of artistic pursuit. The homecomings of Stephen and Asher to their places of artistic origin in the wake of family deaths therefore diverge in the characters’ attitudes towards religion and religious community.

In her Shalom Hartman Institute podcast “Heretic in the House,” Professor Naomi Seidman espouses the following argument: “America has a fascination with Hasidic Jews; they show up frequently in memoirs, in newspapers, and even on Netflix. But these popular depictions don’t tell the whole story; they just tell the story the public wants to hear. What they hide is a complicated dance between Orthodox Judaism and those who leave the community, and a web of stereotypes that trap Hassidim, rebels, and the public alike” (Seidman, “Heretic in the House”). Seidman critiques popular shows such as “Unorthodox” and “My Unorthodox Life,” which have elevated otherwise-obscure religious Jewish communities to the public consciousness, but for all the wrong reasons. For her, these shows make them out to be places of oppression from which modern individuals must necessarily “escape.” This thesis analysis supports the view that literature like the *Asher Lev* novels combats these misconceptions about Jewish Orthodoxy because of their triumphalist attitudes toward religion. Entire communities need not be vilified and religious practices cast off in order for an individual to attain self-fulfillment.

Another contemporary parallel to the *Asher Lev* novels is the Israeli television show “Shtisel,” which bears remarkable similarity to *Asher Lev* along axes of both plot and ethical stances toward religion. Like Potok’s novels, “Shtisel” presents an ultra-religious Jewish environment as the stage on which much melodrama unfolds. The nuances of the conflicts and plot are of course very particular to their niche religious settings, but the themes that arise from these domestic epics are utterly universal. For all intents and purposes, it is a modern adaptation of Asher Lev’s story—from the particular to the universal. “Shtisel” debuted in Israel in 2013 and on Netflix in 2018 and has a global audience despite its Hebrew delivery. The show’s three seasons follow the travails of Akiva Shtisel, an ultra-Orthodox, Haredi Jew living in Jerusalem who pursues his passion for drawing and painting in ways that create tension with his obstinate father and in his romantic life. Akiva deviates from Haredi norms, but the show never presents his departure from his community as an option.

So, too, does Chaim Potok work towards a capacious understanding of religious community that is not antithetical to artistic pursuits. James Joyce, on the other hand, perpetuates a model of the *Künstlerroman* that suggests that abandoning one’s religious practice and community is the necessary condition for pursuing one’s artistic goals. Asher Lev and Akiva Shtisel actualize a redemptive relationship with their Judaism, steeped in historically-informed senses of responsibility and obligation, in a way that Stephen Dedalus does not. Through *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and *My Name is Asher Lev*, James Joyce and Chaim Potok masterfully illustrate how a *nomos* in which one’s mutually-constitutive aesthetic and religious worldviews can exist simultaneously lessens the burden of crosses that are already difficult to bear.

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