

Uncoiling the Snakes of Ireland in
A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man:
 From the Souls in Hell to Laocoön

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snakes in clover, picked and scotched, and a
 vaticanned viper catcher's visa for Patsy Presbys
Finnegans Wake I.8, 210.26-27

According to legend, while standing on the top of the hill now called Croagh Patrick, County Mayo, with a bell and a wooden staff, St. Patrick, that vaticanned viper catcher, banished poisonous reptiles from Ireland. Ancient representations of St. Patrick frequently show him trampling on a serpent, as in the medieval carving of him in stone at Patrickswell, County Limerick.¹ The legend has frequently been understood as a parable about his efforts to drive out pagan beliefs and establish Christianity, that is, Roman Catholicism. Despite the pervasive presence of the Catholic Church in Ireland centuries later, for Stephen Dedalus, there are still snakes in the shamrocks associated with religion, the body, and the character of art. The depth of these connections becomes evident when we consider visual aspects of Stephen's experience and imagination in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*.

During Stephen's adolescence, the Church that ministers to his soul encourages him to imagine both the origin of sin and its consequences as viperous. Later, having been sensitized by the reptilian associations to what may be an allergic extent, Stephen's imagination and intellect reject the argument about the character of art in Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's famous treatise *Laocoön, or The Limits of Poetry and Painting*, which depends on an image of reptilian power.² Stephen's thoughts on Lessing and aestheticism are a part of his turn away from religion to art. Dissatisfied with Lessing's evocation of vipers in the poisonous, living chains of the *Laocoön*, Stephen sets his own direction. The vicious, chain-like snakes of the Church and the sculpture group are versions of what Stephen calls the "nets flung at [every Irish soul] to hold it back from flight" (*P* 203). He sets himself to try to fly by those nets, that is, to escape them but to do so by means of the apparently constraining bonds. The *Laocoön* and Lessing's treatise

provide Stephen with an opportunity that the Church's more static images of serpents do not. They enable him to engage in a dynamic process of cultural transformation, one in which Joyce's writing itself participates.

Snakes and serpents are mentioned primarily in part three, though in part five, when Stephen is talking to the dean of studies, he wonders what kind of Protestant sect the English convert had belonged to or encountered, including "seed and snake baptists" (P 189). In part four, when Stephen sees his friends bathing, he feels "a swordlike pain" in response to their "repellent . . . pitiable nakedness" when he looks on them without their usual protective coverings, including Ennis's "scarlet belt with the snaky clasp" (P 168). He associates the pain with the dread he feels about his own body.³ Snake, sword, body, and dread have all combined earlier in Stephen's life, in his experiences with religion, to make an indelible impression. During the retreat, unsurprisingly, Stephen hears that the "devil" came to Adam and Eve in the garden "in the shape of a serpent, the subtlest of all the beasts of the field" (P 118). The aftermath is the driving out not of the snake by people but of Adam and Eve by Michael with a sword. Later in the retreat, the priest compares the torments of the damned to the practice of punishing a parricide by throwing him into the sea in a sack with "a cock, a monkey and a serpent. . . . hateful and hurtful beasts" (P 122). He repeatedly refers to stings, including the "most cruel sting of the worm of conscience" and "the threefold sting of conscience, the viper which gnaws the very heart's core of the wretches in hell" (P 129, 130). The most memorable verbal evocation of the snake occurs when Stephen identifies his phallus and his lust with the serpent after he experiences "[t]he ache of conscience" and decides to confess: "But does that part of the body understand or what? The serpent, the most subtle beast of the field. . . . His soul sickened at the thought of a torpid snaky life feeding itself out of the tender marrow of his life and fattening upon the slime of lust" (P 139-40).

The serpent in Stephen's thinking comes into new focus when we consider the visual images he was almost certainly exposed to during the retreat. These would have included the eight woodcuts in the pamphlet, *Hell Opened to Christians, To Caution Them From Entering Into It*, by the Reverend F. Giovanni Pietro Pinamonti, S.J., one brittle, faded copy of which can be found in the National Library of Ireland and another in the Boston Public Library.⁴ That Joyce drew on the English translation of Pinamonti's text (published originally in Italian in 1688 as *L'inferno aperto al cristiano perche non v'entri*) in the language of part three was established long ago by James R. Thrane's "Joyce's Sermon on Hell: Its Source and Its Backgrounds."⁵ The pamphlet was cheaply printed, probably reprinted many times, and likely distributed by priests, especially at retreats. It supplements and reinforces the

meditation on hell, the fifth exercise for the first week, in *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius Loyola*.⁶ Though essentially similar, the editions in the National Library of Ireland and the Boston Public Library differ from each other and from the one that Thrane cites because the woodcuts have been recarved for each printing. Concentrating on Joyce's borrowings from Pinamonti's text, Thrane reprinted only two of the woodcuts, neither of them presenting snakes: *The Company of the Damned* (The Third Consideration, For Tuesday) and *The Eternity of Pain* (The Seventh Consideration, For Saturday). Two of the intervening woodcuts are memorable representations of snake-like demons tormenting the souls of the damned (both reprinted here from the Boston Public Library copy): *The Sting of Conscience* (The Fifth Consideration, For Thursday) and *Despair* (The Sixth Consideration, For Friday—see front and back covers). Images of this kind would make an impression on anyone but particularly on an adolescent.

The image of the human body writhing in pain and encoiled by serpents captures Stephen's attention later during his university studies when he encounters Lessing's treatise, which meditates centrally on the sculpture of Laocoön and his sons struggling with the snakes (see Figure 1). Stephen mentions both the book and the sculpture group prominently when he talks to Lynch in part five about the character of art (P 211-14). I have reproduced the Laocoön Group from Percy Gardner's entry on "Greek Art" in the so-called monk's edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, which Joyce used.⁷ This edition represents the accepted state of knowledge in the English-speaking world at the time Joyce was writing *A Portrait*. The photograph shows the group as Joyce and his contemporaries would have known it but not as we know it today. The grouping was found in Michelangelo's time in Rome, broken and without the complete right arm of the central figure. It was restored—mistakenly, it is now believed—to the form shown in the photograph. Around 1960, it was restored again with significant changes to the missing arms. Whichever state we take to be the more authentic, the situation depicted is cognate with the images of the damned from Pinamonti. The link is not evident to most readers of *A Portrait* today, because the text is not illustrated and we are too far from Stephen's visual experience, which is historically specific. When the illustrations are juxtaposed, a continuity in Stephen's preoccupations is apparent, but the continuity comes with a shift, from the Roman Catholic conception of Hell, which is static and timeless, to a more dynamic evocation of works and meanings in historical flux.

Here is Gardner's comment on the Laocoön group as part of a historical process of copying and revaluation:

Since the Renaissance Rome has continually produced a crop of works of Greek art of all periods, partly originals brought from Greece by conquering generals, partly copies, such as the group at Rome formerly known as Paetus and Arria, and the overthrown giants and barbarians which came from the elaborate trophy set up by Attalus at Athens, of which copies exist in many museums. A noted work of kindred school is the group of Laocoon and his sons . . ., signed by Rhodian sculptors of the 1st century B.C., which has been perhaps more discussed than any work of the Greek chisel, and served as a peg for the aesthetic theories of Lessing and Goethe. In our days the histrionic and strained character of the group is regarded as greatly diminishing its interest, in spite of the astounding skill and knowledge of the human body shown by the artists. (12:491-92)

Stephen's role in the process of cultural translations and transformations involves his displacing the image of the attacking snakes he had encountered in his religious education to a different context: aesthetics. When he makes the shift, he anticipates the sequence of cultural transformation in *Ulysses* by evoking a Roman version (the Roman rendition of the group) of the Greek original in a series that includes Lessing's interpretation and Stephen's own reconsideration. Stephen's antagonistic response to Lessing's use of the Laocoön is brief and open to interpretation. He says only that "Lessing . . . should not have taken a group of statues to write of" because "[t]he art" (presumably sculpture in general rather than only this particular example) "being inferior, does not present the forms I spoke of distinguished clearly one from another" (P 214). In criticizing Lessing, Stephen follows Oscar Wilde by claiming that literature is the highest art, in part because of its temporal character; in part one of "The Critic as Artist," Wilde's Gilbert says of sculpture and painting: "The statue is concentrated to one moment of perfection. The image stained upon the canvas possesses no spiritual element of growth or change."⁸ Considering Joyce's increasingly experimental use of language, his own distance from Lessing may be reflected in Stephen's, since Lessing attributed expressive form to the plastic, spatial art of sculpture but not to the linguistic, temporal art of literature.

These implied objections are secondary in significance to the sequence of transmission from ancient Greek original through Roman copy and German interpretation to modern Irish response. The sequence is related structurally to Wilde's writings and to *Ulysses*. Wilde praises literature as "the perfect expression of life" (249) and criticizes sculpture's static quality in a dialogue on art that is itself a transforming response by an Irish writer to an ancient Greek original, Plato's dialogues. In *Ulysses*, something Greek, the name Odysseus, has been translated via Rome into (the Latin) Ulysses as part of a further recasting into a complex contemporary embodiment. On the

one hand, the image of figures held involuntarily and tormented by a serpent is a repetition of the woodcuts in Pinamonti's *Hell Opened to Christians*, which Stephen, like his author, would have encountered during his education. The Laocoön would undoubtedly have called up for Stephen the earlier images and their implications. On the other hand, the series of cultural translations that includes the Laocoön, Lessing, and Stephen has a future in history that goes beyond unchanging repetition, while the images from Pinamonti are meant to be static and eternal. The emphasis in Stephen's response to Lessing is on temporality and a process of transformation, as in the transformation of lyrical into epical and dramatic that Stephen vividly describes in the passage beginning with his criticism of Lessing. Like Joyce, who followed Wilde, Stephen Dedalus repeats with a difference by participating in a transforming sequence of cultural and creative revision. The image persists, but it no longer pertains narrowly to the torments of hell. Instead, it contributes to an understanding of art's character as a process.

Stephen turns to art and then exile in his response to the snakes, who include his companions and the way they think. One of them, Lynch, reminds him of "a hooded reptile" with "reptilelike" eyes (P 205, 206). Stephen associates the "mentality" (P 250) of another, Cranly, with Lepidus's comment in William Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*: "Your serpent of Egypt is bred now of your mud by the operation of your sun. So is your crocodile."⁹ In *Ulysses*, Leopold Bloom finds another way to come to terms with what might otherwise be his demons. He also encounters snakes but in a different key from religious and aesthetic thinking. He carefully finds a way to lie down, fakir-like, in the snakepit, freely and apparently without injury. As the narrator of "Ithaca" presents the matter jocosely, at the culminating moment of homecoming when this modern Hiberno-Jewish Odysseus-becomes-Ulysses "enter[s] the bed," he does so "[w]ith circumspection" and "with solicitude, the snakespiral springs of the mattress being old, the brass quoits and pendent viper radii loose and tremulous under stress and strain: prudently, as entering a lair or ambush of lust or adders: lightly, the less to disturb: reverently" (U 17.2113, 2115, 2116-19).

Later, Joyce makes a joke out of St. Patrick's legendary act, one that reflects on his own writing. In I.5 of *Finnegans Wake*, we learn, concerning the "mamafesta," that its "strange exotic serpentine"—presumably its style of writing as calligraphy—"so properly banished from our scripture . . . seems to uncoil spirally . . . under pressure of the writer's hand" (FW 104.04, 121.20-21, 21-25). Uncoiling is both the actualizing of the snake's coiled potential and the freeing of restricted limbs from the bondage of coils. Both uncoilings are enabled by the writer's hand(writing). Unwanted in Ireland, the snake-like writing

and its writer, "a wrigular writher" (FW 291.28), depart for Europe, to uncoil, sometimes laughingly, having left the serpents and other snaky devils of Ireland in their clover. The choice to "set it up all writhefully rate in blotch and void" far from home is more than understandable, considering the "serpumstances" (FW 229.27, 297.07).

NOTES

I wish to thank Marie-Anne Verougstraete for preparing the illustrations for this essay and Patrick McCarthy for responding in detail to my thinking about snakes in *Finnegans Wake*.

¹ The image is reproduced in Brian Labor, ed., *The Encyclopedia of Ireland* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 2003), p. 861.

² Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Laokoon, oder, über die Grenzen der Mahlerey und Poesie* (Berlin: Christian Friedrich Voss, 1766), reprinted as *Laocoön, or The Limits of Poetry and Painting*, trans. William C. Ross (London: J. Ridgway, 1836).

³ The later language of *Finnegans Wake* reflects the link between the unclothed body and the serpent in verbal plays on "naked" and "snake," including "with one snaked's eyes" and "snakedst-tu-naughsy" (FW 564.34, 505.07).

⁴ Reverend F. Giovanni Pietro Pinamonti, S.J., *Hell Opened to Christians, To Caution Them From Entering Into It; or, Considerations of the Infernal Pains* (Dublin: G. P. Warren, n.d.), in the National Library of Ireland, and *Hell Opened to Christians, To Caution Them From Entering Into It; or, Considerations of the Infernal Pains* (Dublin: C. M. Warren, 1841), in the Boston Public Library.

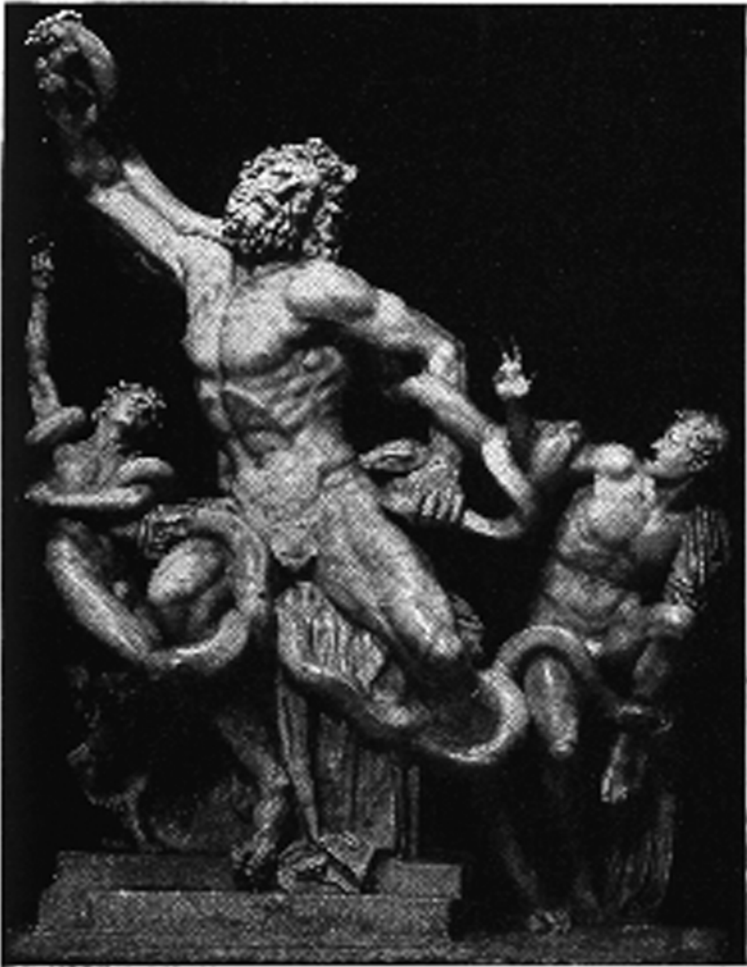
⁵ See James R. Thrane, "Joyce's Sermon on Hell: Its Source and Its Backgrounds," *Modern Philology*, 57 (February 1960), 172-98. Thrane's essay will be reprinted in Michael Patrick Gillespie, ed., *Foundational Essays in James Joyce Studies* (Gainesville: Univ. Press of Florida, 2011). James Doherty's later essay, "Joyce and Hell Opened to Christians: The Edition He Used for His 'Hell Sermons,'" *Modern Philology*, 61 (November 1963), 110-19, attempts to identify the precise edition of Pinamonti that Joyce used, but his argument is speculative. He does establish convincingly that *Hell Opened to Christians* was well known in the 1890s.

⁶ See St. Ignatius Loyola, *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius Loyola*, trans. Father Elder Mullan, S.J. (New York: P. J. Kenedy & Sons, 1914), pp. 29-30. The text is available online as a pdf document at <<http://www.jesuit.org/images/docs/915dWg.pdf>>. Further references to the online version will be cited parenthetically in the text.

⁷ See Percy Gardner, "Greek Art," *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (1910), 12:472bis. Further references will be cited parenthetically in the text by volume and page number.

⁸ Oscar Wilde, "The Critic as Artist," *The Artist as Critic, Critical Writings of Oscar Wilde*, ed. Richard Ellmann (1969; Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1982), p. 363. Further references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

⁹ William Shakespeare, *Antony and Cleopatra, The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans et al. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974), II.7.26-27.



Phox Assier.

FIG. 59.—LAOCOÖN GROUP. (VATICAN.)

Figure 1. Pictured are Laocoön and his sons struggling with the snakes. The "Laocoön Group" is reproduced from Percy Gardner's entry on "Greek Art" in the so-called monk's edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*.