

## Bildung and the “Bonds of Dominion”

Wilde and Joyce

There is a moment in James Joyce’s *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* when Stephen Dedalus discusses his aesthetic opinions with the dean of students at his school. Stephen uses the image of a lamp to explain how Aristotle and Aquinas provide light and guidance for his own intellectual journey. This soon leads to Epictetus and his lamp and the word “funnel.” Stephen, perhaps eager to trump the dean, an English convert, flourishes the native Irish “tundish.” Later, in the diary entries that conclude the novel, Stephen notes that he had gotten it all wrong, that tundish was “English and good old blunt English too” (*P* 251).<sup>1</sup> This dialectic of discovery and betrayal, enacted at every level of speech and behavior, characterizes Stephen’s aesthetic education in colonial Dublin. It is also the foundation of the aestheticism that underwrites Oscar Wilde’s *Picture of Dorian Gray*. That the Catholic Joyce and the Anglo-Irish Wilde should share the same mixture of discovery and betrayal owes much to the peculiar social conditions of Ireland. In the latter part of the nineteenth century, after years of uneven modernization, three social trends marked the advent of decolonization: the rise of nationalism, the emergence of a newly empowered Catholic middle class, and the gradual disempowerment of the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy. Beginning in earnest in the 1870s, these parallel developments culminated in the Free State of 1922, that *annus mirabilis* of modernism.<sup>2</sup> As a metrocolony, with close geographic and political ties to England, Ireland had always enjoyed a higher degree of social and cultural assimilation than other colonies in the British Empire.<sup>3</sup> But at the same time, this proximity led to asymmetries in the degree to which modernization took hold in Ireland: uneven industrialization, colonial rule, nationalism, and sectarian divisions created social conditions markedly different from those in the rest of Europe and the United States. These generally unstable social conditions—the symptoms of decolonization—are well suited, as Terry Eagleton argues, for the development of modernist tendencies and movements. Moreover, Irish modernism

in its Anglo-Irish form, which dominated the field until the 1920s, tended to be more conservative than European and American forms.<sup>4</sup> But this conservatism was often conjoined with a revolutionary energy that found expression in Gothic literature. In this chapter I will look at Wilde's and Joyce's Bildungsroman and argue that each seeks to address the problem of self-development in a colonial society but that the two proceed from radically different starting points to achieve the same end: the aesthetic education of their protagonists and the achievement of personal Bildung. That both Dorian Gray and Stephen Dedalus fail in their respective cases is an index *not* of the failure of the Bildungsroman form nor of classical Bildung. The failure of social conditions to encourage and nurture Bildung is the focus of Wilde's and Joyce's representations and of an immanent critique of the modes of socialization that had displaced and transformed classical Bildung.

It is my contention that throughout the nineteenth century, neither aesthetico-spiritual nor socially pragmatic Bildung could find a foothold in colonial Ireland, given that social conditions were inimical both to the freedom necessary for Bildung to flourish as an option for self-cultivation and to the institutions that would encourage and regulate the production of "viable" social subjects. However, the upsurge of cultural nationalism in the 1890s created a climate of creative instability which proved especially conducive to the retrieval of aesthetico-spiritual Bildung and the ideal of an aesthetic education. In part because of social and political pressures unique to the colonial situation in Ireland, Wilde and Joyce, more emphatically and more critically than their English counterparts, reinscribed the fundamental values of Bildung at the same time that they critiqued the processes of socialization that had displaced them in the nineteenth century. Their more intensive, more radical critique of Bildung produced a colonial variant of the modernist Bildungsroman. The *Bildungshelden* of English Bildungsromane, like Jude Fawley and Paul Morel, may be marginalized by their class status, but the Bildung they seek to achieve is part of a tradition of self-development and socialization that stretches back as far as the Earl of Shaftesbury, whose *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions and Times* (1711) was an important early influence (in England and Germany), and that includes Coleridge, Mill, and Arnold in the nineteenth century. The critique of Bildung offered by Lawrence and Hardy is the critique of a normative discourse of development and socialization that was at the same time a native discourse, one that was intimately bound up with what it meant to be English. The critique of Bildung in a colonial setting targets an essentially foreign discourse with no normative status in colonial society. Colonial Bildung is therefore always a more

or less self-conscious role-playing, in which colonial subjects find themselves in an alienated relation to the goal of classical *Bildung*, with effects that range from sincere imitation to subversive mimicry. George Moore's protagonist in *Confessions of a Young Man* can be regarded as an example of sincere imitation, while both Dorian Gray and Stephen Dedalus exemplify subversive mimicry in quite different but equally compelling ways. In Homi Bhabha's terms, the latter constitutes "a form of colonial discourse that is uttered *inter dicta*: a discourse at the crossroads of what is known and permissible and that which though known must be kept concealed."<sup>5</sup> The vicissitudes of colonial *Bildung* are, of course, more traumatic for Catholic Irish subjects. Lacking the "legitimate" subjectivity to enter into symbolic discourse as a fully indemnified and enfranchised subject, the Catholic *Bildungsbeld* will always be something of an alien, debarred from the "mediated routes" of upward social mobility, even those limited paths available to the working and lower-middle classes in England. Throughout the nineteenth century, the Catholic majority in Ireland suffered under what amounted to penal laws, and the country was administered as a colony even though its parliament had been united with that of Britain since 1800. Indeed, Ireland at the beginning of the twentieth century was not much better off than it had been at the end of the ill-fated revolution of 1798. One difference was clear: by the 1890s, a rising Catholic middle class was opening up new opportunities for young men, especially in the urban areas. However, these opportunities were unsuited to the aspirations of an artist-hero like Stephen Dedalus.

For quite different reasons, the social conditions of Anglo-Ireland were just as unsuited to the kind of aesthete protagonist that we find in Wilde's *Bildungsroman*. A legacy of ineffectual rule and mutual distrust between the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy and the British Parliament resulted in a sense of estrangement and deracination that was exacerbated by the erosion, through expropriation, of the grand demesnes that symbolized Anglo-Irish rule. The resistance to socialization that we see in *Dorian Gray*, though quite different from that which we see in *Portrait*, exhibits the same frustration with a "borrowed" concept of self-cultivation and a similar recourse to a model of classical *Bildung*. And though they seek inspiration in different sources—Joyce finds his in the sacramental theology of the Catholic Church, Wilde in continental aestheticism and the Anglo-Irish Gothic tradition<sup>6</sup>—they construct *Bildung* plots that focus in the same critical fashion on the trauma of colonial identity. Thus the peculiar nature of colonialism in Ireland, where a proxy ruling class stands between the native Catholic population and the British Empire, pro-

duces two models of colonial Bildung, neither capable of producing harmony, autonomy, or wholeness.

In the colonial Bildungsroman, the harmony of inner and outer worlds that is the aim of the classical form is displaced and reconfigured as an *inner split*, a dehiscence in the normative concept of Bildung and its dialectical will to harmony in which the disavowed colonial subject speaks dissonantly from an open, ambivalent, nonuniversal but immanent perspective.<sup>7</sup> The colonial subject radicalizes the modernist strategy of depersonalization by raising the political and cultural stakes. In a negative critique of the dialectic of self-development, identity is no longer balanced and affirmed by its "other," nonidentity. Where Irish modernists differ from their English counterparts is in their willingness to depart from generic convention and in their greater success in recapturing the aesthetic dimension of classical Bildung. The Irish Bildungsroman, because it employs the defamiliarizing techniques of parody and mimicry, thus functions like the radical modern art that Theodor Adorno describes, which is hated "because it reminds us of missed chances, but also because by its sheer existence it reveals the dubiousness of the heteronomous structural ideal."<sup>8</sup> It is these missed chances that I want to examine in the modernist Bildungsromane of Wilde and Joyce.

Some clarification is necessary before I begin my discussion of the Irish Bildungsroman, which did not emerge as part of a larger development in Irish literary history, for there was no significant native tradition of Bildungsromane that came before. Autobiographical forms existed, of course—George Moore's *Confessions of a Young Man* is a good late-nineteenth-century example—as did biographical forms like Sydney Owenson's *Wild Irish Girl*, but neither of these forms emphasizes the concept of Bildung.<sup>9</sup> What we see in works like Wilde's *Picture of Dorian Gray* and Joyce's *Portrait* are instances of generic transculturation, a process by which colonial writers transform genres from an imperial culture, blending native elements with those that are retained from the "originary" genre.<sup>10</sup> With a form as conservative as the Bildungsroman, this has meant that a good many of the original elements—themes, characterization, plot structure—have been retained in the Irish colonial form, though there is a wide variety of variations on those retained elements. This is especially evident in the work of Joyce and Wilde. The former tends to hew closely to the line of generic conventions at the same time that he dramatizes their insufficiency for representing the experience of a colonized Catholic Irish hero who must choose exile over social integration, while the latter Gothicizes the Bildungsroman in order to illus-

trate a similar insufficiency for representing the experience of the Anglo-Irish aesthete whose development takes place in the cosmopolitan, transnational realms of art rather than in the institutions of colonial society. For both the Catholic Joyce and the Anglo-Irish Wilde, the Bildungsroman becomes a site of critique, the principal targets being the normative modes of self-development and the socially pragmatic form of Bildung deemed appropriate for that development.

As I have indicated in previous chapters, the socially pragmatic form of Bildung that developed throughout the nineteenth century differed significantly from the Goethean/Humboldtian variants of classical Bildung and served significantly different ideological interests. I have been arguing that the aesthetico-spiritual form of Bildung is an ideal that modernist writers seek precisely as an alternative to the socially pragmatic form. It is, in short, the key element in a negative critique of the nineteenth-century Bildungsroman, one in which the dialectical energies of normative socialization are the starting point for developing more satisfying, effective, and elective forms of Bildung. What the Irish Bildungsroman points up, among many other things, is the extent to which the recuperation of classical Bildung answers the needs of new and challenging social situations and the extent to which the Bildungsroman form continues to be resilient enough to rise to the challenge of representing these new situations.

The Anglo-Irish intelligentsia faced unique challenges in the late nineteenth century, a time when anxiety over class status reached critical levels in the wake of land acts, disestablishment of the Church, and Catholic movements of self-determination in the economic, cultural, and political spheres. For a writer like Wilde, this resulted in a displacement of development onto different, non-Irish social and cultural spaces, a kind of imaginative exile that found coded expression in a manner familiar to readers of Anglo-Irish Gothic writers like Charles Maturin, Sheridan Le Fanu, and Bram Stoker. This tradition, of which *Dorian Gray* is a key modernist exemplar, is often regarded as an index of the deracination and anxiety felt by members of a class who believed that the British parliament had undercut their authority and made it impossible to achieve ideological hegemony.<sup>11</sup> It also indexes a loss of innocence, for many members of the Ascendancy, like Standish James O'Grady, condemned rackrent landlordism and exploitation of the Catholic Irish and believed these to be the root causes of the Ascendancy's failure to achieve, much less sustain, hegemony.<sup>12</sup> The fact that the Anglo-Irish Gothic tradition so often depicts non-Irish locales should not detract from its potential to comment upon Irish

matters. Though Wilde's Bildungsroman does not feature self-cultivation in an Irish context, Julia Prewitt Brown argues that Irishness figures significantly in his cosmopolitan aesthetics.<sup>13</sup> Joyce himself realized that Wilde's example could not be ignored, for it provided a precedent for dissent from a society that equated self-development with socialization and socialization with a repressive educational system: "the truth is that Wilde, far from being a perverted monster who sprang in some inexplicable way from the civilization of modern England, is the logical and inescapable product of the Anglo-Saxon college and university system, with its secrecy and restrictions."<sup>14</sup> Wilde wrote from a position of estrangement and even marginalization—the Irishman abroad—very similar to that which Joyce himself would occupy in Rome, Trieste, Paris, and Zurich. In very different ways, then, Wilde and Joyce narrate forms of colonial Bildung within the immanently critical framework of exile.

The narration of colonial Bildung challenges the "logical form of contradiction" that for Adorno and other theorists lies at the foundation of classical modes of identity formation.<sup>15</sup> Also implicated in this challenge are the "bonds of dominion" that (re)enforce unity as a function of a rationalized, bureaucratized society. "The absolute subject cannot get out of its entanglements," writes Adorno: "the bonds it would have to tear, the bonds of dominion, are as one with the principle of absolute subjectivity."<sup>16</sup> As we have seen in the previous chapter, the protagonists of the English Bildungsroman attempt to achieve personal Bildung within a society defined by a liberal humanist ethos that underwrites, at its deepest levels, the discourses of dominion, colonial and otherwise.<sup>17</sup> A paramount feature of this ethos, of course, is formal state-sponsored education, which, in the English tradition, is one of the chief "mediated routes" of upward social mobility. For the protagonists of the Irish Bildungsroman, education is far more problematic, tending to threaten rather than facilitate the dominant modes of socialization. Historically, education in Ireland has been a more politicized process than in England.<sup>18</sup> On the one hand, the National Schools sponsored by the colonial authorities were designed to repress nationalist sentiment and encourage the processes of Anglicization. On the other hand, denominational schools tended either to reverse the priorities of the National Schools or to bypass the political problem altogether and emphasize theology. In England, the division between secular and parochial education was not accompanied by a division between nationalist and colonial ideologies. Complicating this situation further is a long tradition of radical popular education that originated in the "hedge schools" of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and continued in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in social organiza-