

# Did Stephen Dedalus Reincarnate in Buddha's Son?

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## 1. Introduction

The enormous influence of Joyce's work on all contemporary literature, especially in the English language, is well established. In this sense, probably no other twentieth-century author has had such an extensive effect. There is ample evidence to show this, particularly with regard to the structural and stylistic discoveries in *Ulysses*, yet many other aspects of Joyce's work have also enjoyed considerable success in later literary tradition. Specifically, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*<sup>1</sup> cannot but be acknowledged as a text that provides an unparalleled example of a narrative centred in the personal and intellectual development of a writer. It is therefore not surprising that the book has become a source of direct inspiration for many testimonial works (whether autobiographical or pseudo-autobiographical) dealing with similar themes.<sup>2</sup> While I do not aim to provide an exhaustive list, I would cite relevant examples such as *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Dog* (1940) by Dylan Thomas, *The Landscapes Within* (1981) by Nigerian author Ben Okri, or *A Strange and Sublime Address* (1991) by Indian writer Amit Chaudhuri.<sup>3</sup>

The aim of this essay is to show the extent to which *A Portrait* has influenced one of the major novels in contemporary English literature, *The Buddha of Suburbia* by Hanif Kureishi.<sup>4</sup> To my eye, there is a strong link between the novels that can by no means be thought of as coincidental; not just with regard to the aspects that they have in common, but also in light of their indisputable differences, which I believe should be seen as diverse ways of resolving the same problems. Despite the evident link, and as far as I have been able to discover, this relationship has not been previously studied in depth. I trust that these pages will provide a modest contribution towards the vindication of such an analysis.

## 2. Vitalism: the discourse of Modernity

The concept of vitalism is essential if one is to understand the genesis and development of aesthetic premises associated with what has come to be known as "Modernity". Several authors<sup>5</sup> have highlighted this idea. Vitalism originated in the first half of the nineteenth century as a reaction to the rationalism prevailing in the previous era. The imaginary Romantic exalted the value of emotions, that is, of direct and purely subjective perception of events completely disassociated from reason. This became synthesised in the dialectic between "life" (irrational) and "theory" (rational), particularly important in the aesthetic thinking of Goethe. One can recall, for example, his famous saying: "Dear friend, all theory is grey, / And green the golden tree of life".<sup>6</sup>

During the second half of the nineteenth century and until well into the twentieth, vitalism emerges not only within the field of artistic praxis, but also as a complex philosophical movement with considerable influence on many European intellectuals. A wide range of authors can be mentioned, including Nietzsche, Emerson, Bergson, and Ortega. Also to be considered within the general framework of vitalism are the members of the so-called "Philosophy of Action": Newman, Blondel, Sorel, etc.<sup>7</sup> Although there are notable differences between them, there are at the same time enough similarities to justify this common grouping. One of the first concerns of philosophical vitalism revolves around the problem of conscience, both in its individual and its collective aspects. Nevertheless, this conscience is conceived above all as will, that is, creative intent that becomes action. Whether it is expressed in terms of praising the Dionysian (Nietzsche) or the life impulse (Bergson), the starting premise is essentially the same: life is a free and unpredictable creation. As such, life exists in all aspects of the human being. The various fields of action (social, moral, aesthetic, etc.) lose their distinctiveness as they all become submerged in the unity of conscience.

What has been stated in the previous paragraph is of great importance to the history of Western literary and aesthetic thought, as for more than a century it has served as the ideological basis for Modernity. Furthermore, it has been shown that during the second half of the nineteenth century the original Romantic vitalism evolved in two separate directions as regards artistic praxis. On one side, it generated an aesthetic or purist strain, based on the highest ideals of "art for art's sake". On the other, it led to a strain of voluntarism whose pragmatic goal consisted in the full merging of life and poetry, where the latter was understood to be the archetype of all artistic creativity. However, as Rodríguez and

Salvador opportunely point out,<sup>8</sup> both tendencies share the same basis, which is none other than the overcoming of the Kantian dichotomy between the “transcendental” and the “empiric”. It is precisely the denial of such duality that has provided a common element in all vitalist discourse: the synthesis that is offered as an alternative solution in each case is relatively secondary and, in any case, is always subject to gradations and qualifications. Thus, the aesthetic option in its most genuine manifestation vindicates a form of artistic expression that is limited to the transcendental, with no contact whatsoever with the empiric (understood under these terms as something “impure”). The origins of this aestheticism can be glimpsed in the Romantic period (in Alfred de Vigny, for example), although it becomes more precisely defined during a later period. On the philosophical level, we can point to Ortega’s defence of “dehumanised art”,<sup>9</sup> which was put into practice by artists such as Piet Mondrian in painting, Stravinsky in music, or Paul Valéry, Juan Ramón Jiménez and Ezra Pound in poetry.

Unlike aestheticism, voluntarism denies the validity of any kind of artistic transcendence in itself. The artist’s life experience (in his role as creative subject) acts as a parameter for all forms of aesthetic appraisal and action. At the same time, voluntarist vitalism offers two possibilities, depending on which aspect of the life/poetry duality has the greater role. The first of these possibilities attempts to turn life into poetry. In this option, the artist makes himself into a literary character, where eccentricity and excess are elements aimed at the “construction of his own legend”. This I will call “life-oriented” voluntarism. In English language literature, there are notable examples of this tendency. It can already be observed in the Romantic period—who could forget Byron?—and in Oscar Wilde, who are followed in the twentieth century by Jack Kerouac and the aforementioned Dylan Thomas, who ideally exemplifies it. In French, many nineteenth-century poets can be included, such as Gautier and, in particular, Rimbaud, who gave up poetry to become a “man of action”. Among Spanish-language poets, the Nicaraguan Rubén Darío deserves a prominent position. With regard to other forms of artistic expression, Salvador Dalí must be mentioned for his work in painting.

The second possibility within voluntarist vitalism is “poetry-oriented”. That is, a type of artistic creation is promoted that responds fully to the vital preoccupations of the subject (a “live” poetry, to give the word its full meaning). As postulated by Nietzsche, but without forgetting contributions in this area by Bergson, Emerson and others, the conscience of the individual is at the same time the agent and the object of the

aesthetic praxis, a praxis that has its origin in the artist's participation in the world, but which frequently leads to a renunciation of the world in favour of a complete dedication to the "poetic vocation". Indeed, there is no lack of authors who, like Joseph Conrad or Jack London, followed the opposite path to Rimbaud: having been "men of action" in their youth, they ended their days devoted entirely to literature, with the aim of putting their own experiences to paper. However, even without following this course, there are many other examples of voluntarism that are "poetry-oriented": Van Gogh and Picasso, despite their differences, share this search for "art made life" in the field of painting. In poetry, the same yearning can be found in the works of Cuban writer José Martí or American poet Walt Whitman, among others. Finally, I consider that Joyce must be included in this last group. I will explain this hypothesis in the next section.

### 3. Voluntarist vitalism as the central idea of *A Portrait*

At this point, we come to Joyce. This is because he is, at least as regards the English language, one of the most representative authors of the artistic tendency just mentioned: poetry-oriented voluntarist vitalism. Scholars such as Hederman have already noted this,<sup>10</sup> although their focus and terminology differ from those which I am using here. Likewise, Leonard interprets Joyce's modernity as a consequence of the socio-cultural situation of Ireland, between semi-colonial and post-imperial state.<sup>11</sup> Vitalist elation can be found throughout *A Portrait*, and in particular in the final chapters. As an example, among many others, the following fragment can be quoted:

He was alone. He was unheeded, happy and near to the wild heart of life. He was alone and young and wilful and wildhearted, alone amid a waste of wild air and brackish waters and the seaharvest of shells and tangle and veiled grey sunlight and gayclad lightclad figures of children and girls and voices childish and girlish in the air. (P 175)

Traces of philosophical vitalism are also very frequent in *A Portrait*, particularly in the form of the so-called "philosophy of action". It must be recalled that the founder of this philosophy, Cardinal Newman, wrote a major autobiographical text in which he explained the formation of his religious ideas.<sup>12</sup> Although it is not the subject of this study, I must point out the idea—in my opinion very thought-provoking—that there are certain parallels between the birth of an artistic conscience as developed

by Joyce in *A Portrait* and the formation of a religious conscience (with its move from Anglicanism to Catholicism) that is the crux of Newman's autobiographical account. In any case, one fact cannot be denied: Newman is explicitly quoted by Joyce in three episodes of huge significance.<sup>13</sup> What is more, in the first passage of the novel where the debate on the nature of art is broached, the following dialogue between Dedalus and some of his Clongowes Wood boarding school companions takes place:

—Fudge! said Heron. Ask Dedalus. Who is the greatest writer, Dedalus?  
Stephen noted the mockery in the question and said:  
—Of prose do you mean?  
—Yes.  
—Newman, I think.  
—Is it Cardinal Newman? asked Boland.  
—Yes, answered Stephen. (*P* 82)

Dedalus's answer is extremely important, as Newman has never occupied a position of priority in standard literary canons. Indeed, his texts are usually examined within the framework of theological and philosophical studies, rather than literary ones. The doubtful tone of the first answer ("Newman, *I think*") does not detract from such an affirmation, as this is confirmed immediately afterwards with a resounding "Yes". Dedalus places Newman on the same literary level as Byron, whom he shortly afterwards refers to as the best poet. Byron and Newman are precisely the two clearest representatives of voluntarist vitalism that can be found in the English language, and this is, in all likelihood, what links them in Dedalus's preferences.

Newman appears in Joyce's text not only by means of direct reference, but also through allusions that are no less revealing for their subtlety. In particular I would point out the Dean of Studies, a character who acquires a deeply significant role in the novel's final chapter and for whom Dedalus, despite having broken with religion by this stage in the book, shows a special respect and veneration. It seems evident that, in portraying the Dean, Joyce is providing an image of Newman.<sup>14</sup> Like Newman, the Dean is English by birth, educated as a Protestant and, after his conversion, a member of the Company of Jesus. It would be difficult to see this as mere coincidence. In addition, the ideas that are transmitted by the character throughout his long conversation with Dedalus are consistent with the premises laid out by the English Cardinal and offer some prime keys for decoding the literary praxis expressed in *A Portrait*.

In fact, the elderly Jesuit is the first to identify in a direct way Stephen's vitalist vocation:

You are an artist, are you not, Mr. Dedalus? said the dean, glancing up and blinking his pale eyes. The object of the artist is the creation of the beautiful. What the beautiful is is another question. (P 190)

In light of what has been stated, it might be acknowledged that, within Joyce's work as a whole, *A Portrait* shows evidence of redoubled voluntarism. On the one hand, this is a work of maturity by an author (Joyce) who had for a long time devoted himself entirely to his literary calling. On the other, it is a text that exposes with considerable detail the formative path that eventually will lead the protagonist (Stephen Dedalus) to the aesthetic choice that is being discussed here. It could be thought that the voluntarism of both Joyce and Dedalus are the same thing. However, this is not the case, as the "play of mirrors" particular to autobiographical works forces author and character to maintain essentially distinct identities despite their congruence. One trait that highlights the separation of author and character is the fact that the novel is written in the third person. Because of this, even though the non-verbal perception of events always takes place through the eyes of Stephen, the verbal communication of this perception takes place using a voice distinct from the character. In the words of Rimmon-Kenan, Stephen Dedalus is a focalizer, but not a narrator.<sup>15</sup>

As an aside to this, I would like to point out that *A Portrait* shows the dialectic between art and life in a very direct and explicit way. Indeed, in twentieth-century literature I can only find two novels where this dialectic achieves an approach of similar intensity, and then with notable refinements. I refer to *Jean-Christophe* by Romain Rolland (published between 1904 and 1912) and *Doktor Faustus* (published in 1947) by Thomas Mann. Contrary to what occurs in *A Portrait*, in both these novels the protagonist is a musician rather than a writer, and the narratives encompass their entire life experience, not just their formative years, which places them apart from Joyce's work. But, in addition, the latter's uniqueness can be seen even more clearly in its highly radical way of solving the aforementioned dialectic. It can be synthesised broadly in the following way: in order for art to transmit life, it is necessary that life submit entirely to art.

#### **4. The three renunciations of Stephen Dedalus**

Hederman states that there are at least three modalities in art: the art of propaganda, the art of entertainment, and the art of excavation and exploration. This last is characterised by “seeking meaning where scientific words or normal human discourse can no longer be trusted to register the subtlety of what is being experienced”.<sup>16</sup> This triple classification may perhaps appear somewhat rigid and reductionistic, but in any case, it works rather well. Indeed, the third artistic modality to which Hederman refers fits largely with the programmatic approach of voluntarist aestheticism. The concept of art as a tool for exploration endows artistic products with an immediate purpose, a purpose which is no less important for differing from utilitarian priorities (or perhaps because of this). Consequently, the artist is forced to perform a “mission” in the broadest sense of the word. That is, he must fulfil the aesthetic task set by his conscience. This implies not only a large dose of effort and dedication but, above all, the renunciation of any life impulse that could separate him from the vocation to which he has been called. Joyce is one of the main representatives of such devotion to a literary vocation. Stephen Dedalus’s story not only exemplifies this vocation but, most importantly, also portrays the renunciation of any element that dares disturb his creative will. What does Stephen Dedalus renounce? He renounces family, homeland and religion. He admits as much to his friend Cranly in a conversation a few pages before the novel’s end:

Look here, Cranly, he said. You have asked me what I would do and what I would not do. I will tell you what I will do and what I will not do. 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 mode 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. (*P* 251)

Almost at the end of the book, he summarises his vocation in the following words (which I venture to state that Nietzsche himself would have endorsed unequivocally):

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. (*P* 257)

A further aspect that should be remarked upon in this regard is that Stephen Dedalus’s vocation as a writer emerges very late, not before the

last chapter of the novel. Until then, it appears only occasionally and in a latent state, as something of which the character himself has not been aware. Only once the conversation above with the Dean has taken place does it acquire the status of central theme. Moreover, in the last instance, the true consolidation of his literary career begins to take place only after his self-imposed exile, beyond the boundaries of the narrative. All this is fully consistent with what has been pointed out already: *A Portrait* is not so much an exposition of how artistic praxis is achieved as of everything that must be given up because of the threat it may pose to the free exercise of such praxis.

The developmental structure of the narrative is very much conditioned by what has been described here. Therefore, in the first chapter the role of the three pillars (family, homeland and religion) that support the vitalist environment in which Stephen has spent his childhood starts to be established. Particularly revealing in this sense is the long episode relating to the Christmas dinner, because it shows the dynamic relationships, including conflicts and strong tensions, between them all. At home arguments arise on subjects such as anti-clerical opinion and the role of the Catholic hierarchy in relation to the fight for Ireland's national emancipation. This also agrees with the voluntarist premises to which we have referred throughout this essay. The fact is that all these three fields emerge as candidates for inspiring the individual's full vocation. This means that they require full commitment, and this provides scant opportunity for compromise. Essentially, Stephen is faced with the possibility of becoming a religious man, starting a family, or becoming a patriot who will fight for the freedom of Ireland. But these three vocations are irreconcilable with one another.

The second chapter shows the transition through which Stephen Dedalus, based on the experience he acquires from his environment, becomes aware of his own individuality and prepares to make his own decisions. The following passage, relating to his walks in the company of his father and his Uncle Charles, is highly revealing:

Trudging along the road or standing in some grimy wayside publichouse his elders spoke constantly of the subjects nearer their hearts, of Irish politics, of Munster and of the legends of their own family, to all of which Stephen lent an avid ear. Words which he did not understand he said over and over to himself till he had learned them by heart: and through them he had glimpses of the real world about him. The hour when he too would take part in the life of that world seemed drawing near and in secret he



began to make ready for the great part which he felt awaited him  
the nature of which he only dimly apprehended. (*P* 64)

During this phase, it is the field of religion, given the atmosphere prevalent in Clongowes Wood boarding school, which appears to gain prominence over the others. This leads to the third chapter, in which the experience of the Retreat holds full sway. As I see it, what is important here is not the potential element of “religious fundamentalism” in ideological terms that such spiritual exercises may possess, but their implied vocational commitment in vitalist terms. In other words, the demand they make of full commitment to a cause. This explains the transition that takes place in Stephen’s mind in the course of the fourth chapter. Like the explanation given at the beginning of the same, the Retreat can be said to have fully achieved its objectives: Stephen behaves like a pious young man who regularly performs devotional practices and who feels removed from sin. In fact, and in his own words, he is a young man who has “amended his life” (*P* 157). But this situation is soon cut off from what should have been its natural conclusion. The college headmaster asks him about his possible religious vocation and invites him to join the Company of Jesus (*P* 160ff). Stephen, despite considering this possibility, does not come to accept it as his definitive destiny. His conscience does not call him to take the decisive step in favour of the religious option. Voluntarism, due to its transcendentalist conception of art and life,<sup>17</sup> does not tend to admit half measures. This, therefore, has consequences of the highest importance. As he does not devote himself entirely to religion, all forms of devotional practice (now degraded to sterile moralism) cease to have any meaning, including his membership in the Church. Escaping from the atmosphere of the College (by going to University) becomes a necessity for him.

In the fifth chapter, the break with the Church is completed. But neither homeland nor family manage to fill the gap. Due to this, McCann, a young propagandist, tells him: “Dedalus, you’re an antisocial being, wrapped up in yourself” (*P* 181). This explains, on the one hand, his lack of enthusiasm for patriotic matters—Gaelic lessons, political activism, and so on (*P* 206ff)—and, on the other, his incapacity to deepen his relationship with the girl to whom he feels attracted; Stephen sees her more as a source of poetic inspiration than as a possible partner in the creation of a family (*P* 223-28). The gap left by religion in the will of this young student is eventually filled, successfully and definitively, by his literary vocation.

Although Dedalus states that he no longer believes in what he renounces (*P* 243, 251), this must be explained further. His denial is not that of an agnostic; rather, and using a word frequently found within the text, it is the denial of a heretic, whose heresy is art. Taking this even further, it can be seen as a demoniacal heresy, similar to the *non serviam* of Luzbel that Dedalus makes his own (*P* 243). The existence of God (or Ireland, or the family) is not denied; what is denied is their role as the vitalist objective of conscience.<sup>18</sup> The objective, for both Dedalus and Joyce, can only be one: art become life.

**5. *The Buddha of Suburbia*: an anti-voluntarist rewriting of *A Portrait*?**

At this point, we turn to the similarities detected in the narrative development of *A Portrait* and Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia* (hereafter *The Buddha*). The hypothesis being put forward is that Kureishi's text is, based on the author's own perspectives, a description of the process of maturing of conscience in terms analogous to those originally presented by Joyce. This implies that there are numerous points of contact between the novels, particularly as regards the characterisation of their respective protagonists, Stephen and Karim. Nevertheless, the texts also show a very strong difference in ideology, meaning that ultimately each responds to a radically opposed literary praxis. I refer to the fact that the narrative discourse of *The Buddha* takes a profoundly anti-voluntarist position. Because of this, and I am convinced that herein lies the originality of Kureishi's contribution, *The Buddha* can be seen in large measure as a rewriting of the formative experiences in *A Portrait*, yet from a point of view that breaks with the vitalist aesthetic of modernity and takes us into what has been called, perhaps not entirely accurately, "Postmodernity". In highly artificial terms, the anti-voluntarism to which I am referring negates any possible integration between poetry and life. Poetry (and with it all other forms of artistic expression) is a possible component of life awareness, and as such deserves to be vindicated in a fair manner. But if art transcends such limits in an extremist and exclusivist tone, it will also have adverse effects by annulling all the rich potential of the individual. Anti-voluntarism, therefore, sees human development occurring by means of a rich variety of factors, not by the submission of the will to a single vocational objective. Art, therefore, loses any sublime or "sacred" quality granted it by modernist aesthetics. Such demystification is evident in Kureishi's essays, where he rejects the usefulness of the isolation of the

author and advocates not asking of art more than it can realistically offer. These are his words:

The solitude of writing is not the same as loneliness or isolation. When the words are flowing the self disappears and your anxieties, doubts and reservations are suspended. There isn't a self to be lonely. . . . In a sense you are asking too much of your art.<sup>19</sup>

It should be mentioned that the influence of Joyce on Kureishi has been previously noted and in fact explicitly acknowledged by the latter. In an interview published on 5 November 2001, Kureishi was asked about the parallels between his novel *The Black Album, America* by Kafka and *A Portrait* by Joyce. Kureishi's reply included, among other remarks, the following:

The Joyce comparison I can understand, because it's the model for anybody writing a book about growing up. But *The Black Album* was also an attempt to write a book about ideology, about Islam; about a young man who is drawn to that, struggles with it and finally rejects it. Joyce is basically about fundamentalist faith and love—so there might be similarities in themes.<sup>20</sup>

The parallels that have been observed with *The Black Album*, however, have not been highlighted, at least to the same extent, with regard to *The Buddha*. One possible explanation for this is that religion has a much more prominent role in *The Black Album* than in *The Buddha*, which links it in an apparently direct manner to the religious experiences of Stephen that dominate the central chapters of *A Portrait*. However, the concomitants in *The Buddha* are actually much stronger, as they concern not only religious experience but also artistic vocation and the other vitalist aspects that in *A Portrait* were in conflict with it, that is, family and homeland.

Broadly speaking, *The Buddha* narrates in the first person the adventures of Karim, a young man living in an outer London borough in the seventies. Although his mother is British, his father is an immigrant of Muslim Indian origin. After various ups and downs (punctuated to a large extent by the break up of his parents' marriage), by the end of the novel Karim manages to become a fairly successful actor. This ends a formative process in Karim parallel to that which led Stephen to a full commitment to literary art. But here we find that the famous observation made by Marx comes true: when a historic event is repeated, the first

time it appears as tragedy, the second as farce.<sup>21</sup> Certainly what was epic in *A Portrait* is mere grotesque comedy in *The Buddha*. The epic undercurrent pervading Stephen Dedalus's achievement of his literary vocation is totally absent in Karim's choice of art form. How can it be epic to take part in a television series? Art appears in *The Buddha* simply as another professional activity, lacking any transcendental aspect. In one way, Karim can be described as a mere caricature of Stephen Dedalus. As opposed to Stephen, Karim achieves his objective almost by chance, never having experienced profound and radical compulsion. At most, his final decision to follow this path has been motivated by the opportunities it provides for the achievement of economic success and fame. From a vitalist point of view, money and fame are simply vanities, which is why they played no real role in the choice made by Stephen Dedalus. Moreover, acting is not the only art form that is "demystified" in this novel. Something similar happens with music, in that Karim's friend Charlie manages to set himself up, despite his superficiality and lack of talent, as a sought-after punk-rock star.

In the texts under study, the most obvious distinction between epic and farce is the fact that Karim, in marked contrast to Stephen, at no point has to give up any life structures, simply because such structures have already disintegrated by themselves. The value of Stephen's artistic choice is based precisely on the importance of everything he has had to give up to achieve it. Karim's artistic choice implies no such renunciation and hence does not have the same value. It becomes just another event in his life and remains a long way from providing fulfilment. In anti-voluntarist discourse such as Kureishi's, art and life never merge, so that art can never take the place of another potential awareness-creating element. Therefore, in Karim's formative process, adapting his life to a situation lacking secure life structures is not the most important task, because art does not fill a gap left by the absence of family, homeland or religion.

With regard to homeland, it provides the first definition of the leading character's identity. The novel opens as follows:

My name is Karim Amir, and I am an Englishman born and bred, almost. I am often considered to be a funny kind of Englishman, a new breed as it were, having emerged from two old histories. But I don't care —Englishman I am (though not proud of it), from the South London suburbs and going somewhere.<sup>22</sup>

Thus, Karim begins by vindicating his Britishness, which must be nuanced from the beginning, for there is the qualifying “*almost*”. From this point onwards, his condition as Englishman will be eroded continuously as he broadens his awareness of what his Indian heritage and position as the son of an immigrant mean. This awareness happens slowly, and certain episodes are particularly relevant, among them—and as has been pointed out by Sandhu<sup>23</sup>—the episode in which Karim attends the funeral of a friend of the family. In the end, the discourse of the novel shows a definite break with regard to national and cultural identity. Karim will talk of the British in the third person, with the air of someone who feels alienated from them:

I began to wonder why I was so strong—what it was that held me together. I thought it was that I’d inherited from Dad a strong survival instinct. Dad had always felt superior to the British: this was the legacy of his Indian childhood—political anger turning into scorn and contempt. For him in India the British were ridiculous, stiff, unconfident, rule-bound. And he’d made me feel that we couldn’t allow ourselves the shame of failure in front of these people. You couldn’t let the ex-colonialists see you on your knees, for that was where they expected you to be. They were exhausted now; their Empire was gone; their day was done and it was our turn.<sup>24</sup>

Family, which has a much more influential role here than in Joyce’s novel, presents a number of different aspects. The basic family group, composed of a husband and wife and two adolescent children, appears in the initial pages as apparently stable and, apart from its inter-ethnic qualities, relatively typical of the suburban London lower-middle class. However, this image disappears very early on, as the adultery of Haroon (the father) leads to the break-up of the nuclear family and encourages Karim to seek contact with the collateral branches: his uncles and aunts, English on his mother’s side, Indian on his father’s; Eva, Haroon’s new partner; and so on. To this must be added his sexual initiation, where there is no lack of homosexual encounters (with Charlie, Eva’s son) or incestuous ones (with his cousin Jamila). All this will combine to form a complex mosaic of human relationships, which rather than supporting Karim’s social integration, will disorient him and lead him to become more introverted when faced with the serious flaws that undermine his image of typical family life. This is illustrated by the following passage, which shows the different home environments that are available to the protagonist at a certain point:

When Dad moved in with Eva, and Jamila and Changez moved into their flat, there were five places for me to stay: with Mum at Auntie Jean's; at our now empty house; with Dad and Eva; with Anwar and Jeeta; or with Changez and Jamila. I finally stopped going to school when Charlie did, and Eva arranged for me to go to a college where I could finish my A levels. This college seemed as if it was going to be the best thing that happened to me.<sup>25</sup>

Lastly, religion is the aspect of Karim's environment that has been most undermined beforehand. His father was born into the heart of a Muslim family, his mother into a Christian one. Neither of the two is a believer, nor do they practice any form of religious worship at home. At most, the presence of Islam can be detected in socio-cultural activities (with regard to the role of men and women in Jamila's family, for example) but without being part of any vitalist experience. This is so much the case, in fact, that religion becomes dismissed as a snobbish invention, as when Haroon, backed by Eva, passes himself off as a Buddhist with the aim of leading some pseudo-sessions in Oriental philosophy. This explains the *Suburban Buddha* of the title. Religion is alien to the formation of Karim's conscience simply because his experience of it completely lacks authenticity. He admits this when he states his opinion of his father after catching him in the act of adultery with Eva:

Beneath all this hair and flesh, and virtually concealed from me, was my father. I knew it was Daddio because he was crying out across the Beckenham gardens, with little concern for the neighbours, 'Oh God, oh my God, oh my God.' Was I conceived like this, I wondered, in the suburban night air, to the wailing of Christian curses from the mouth of a renegade Muslim masquerading as a Buddhist?<sup>26</sup>

## 6. Conclusion

It is evident, as I have previously pointed out, that *The Buddha* is a farce in which the hero must find his own way in a complex and difficult environment, rejecting the voluntarist idealism that identifies art with life. Kureishi directs this farce magnificently by means of a sharp sense of humour that emerges in the presentation of several situations common to the best life-style satires: the Buddhist meditation sessions led by Karim's

father, life in a pseudo-hippie commune in the heart of London, and so on. The characterisation of secondary figures also plays a part. Some of these are exaggeratedly grotesque, for example Haroon, the protagonist's father, or Changez, the Indian husband of Jamila, Karim's cousin. But even in these extreme cases the author applies a tender touch that allows these weaknesses to be forgiven. Certainly Karim forgives them, as is clearly shown in the episode that closes the novel. Here, Karim invites several of the people who make up his "emotional space" in London, with whom he wishes to continue to live, to a luxurious Soho restaurant. The bill is paid with money obtained by cashing in a plane ticket that would have taken Karim to New York—an ending in complete contrast to that in Joyce's work, where Stephen, once he has achieved self-knowledge, must give up everything and isolate himself in order to serve his destiny. In Kureishi's text, Karim rejects this form of sacrifice, despite the fact that such a renunciation would not have involved any particular effort. This is because, in his case, self-knowledge implies knowledge of the people around him, knowing them and accepting them. In his own words: "I could think about the past and what I'd been through as I'd struggled to locate myself and learn what the heart is".<sup>27</sup> Therefore, once art is no longer confused with life, giving up life has no meaning.

To conclude, I synthesize the contents of the present paper in the following terms. The aesthetic discourse of Modernity is characterized by its vitalism, and it conceives life as a free and unpredictable creation. *A Portrait* is openly inscribed in this movement, particularly in one of its aesthetic tendencies: poetry-oriented voluntarism. Voluntarism in *A Portrait* is manifest in the fact that Stephen devotes his entire life to an artistic cause. In doing so, he is obliged to renounce any other aspect of human life that might distract him from that objective. He thus renounces his country, his family and his religion. In fact, *A Portrait* narrates this triple renouncement. There are, in addition, reasons to believe that, as part of this frame, the personality of Cardinal Newman was of great influence on Joyce. Newman is one of the principal theorists of philosophical vitalism, and his presence in *A Portrait* is repeatedly evident, not only through explicit references, but also through the characterisation of the Dean of Studies, who is manifestly similar to Newman, as much in life as in thought.

In comparing *A Portrait* with Kureishi's *The Buddha*, we observe both many concomitants and revealing differences which justify their study together. The hypothesis defended here is that such differences may be understood in light of Kureishi's adopting the discourse of postmodernity, as opposed to the vitalism dominating Joyce's work. In

this sense, *The Buddha* offers an anti-voluntarist rewriting of *A Portrait*. In contrast with Stephen, the protagonist of *The Buddha*, Karim, is not obliged to face any vital renunciation. Firstly, artistic activity is desanctified and thus cannot aspire to be the only focus of personal realisation. Secondly, Karim's environment shows a deep crisis in the values of country, family, and religion, and he is not obliged to renounce them so as to devote his life to acting. For Karim, art is a professional option. His choice does not bear the epic weight of Stephen's, and for this reason we may argue that, while *A Portrait* holds the stature of a tragedy, *The Buddha* repeats the paradigm by means of a farce.

### Notes

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<sup>1</sup> James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (Oxford: Heinemann, 1986), henceforth cited parenthetically in the text.

<sup>2</sup> See Margarita Estévez Saá, "The Spectre of Joyce's 'Inartistic' Portraits of the Artist", *Papers on Joyce* 7/8 (2001-2002) 89-120.

<sup>3</sup> Ben Okri, *The Landscapes Within* (Harlow: Longman, 1981) and Amit Chaudhuri, *A Strange and Sublime Address* (London: Vintage, 1998 [1991]). See, for the latter, Fernando Galván, "Amit Chaudhuri's Would-Be Writers: A Joycean Rewriting", in *Silverpowdered Olivetrees. Reading Joyce in Spain*. eds. Jeffrey Simons, José M<sup>a</sup> Tejedor Cabrera, Margarita Estévez Saá and Rafael I. García León (Seville: University of Seville Press, 2003) 83-90.

<sup>4</sup> Hanif Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia* (London: Faber, 1999 [1990]).

<sup>5</sup> See, for instance: Hans Robert Jauss, "Tradición literaria y conciencia actual de la modernidad", *La literatura como provocación* (Barcelona: Península, 1976 [1967]), 13-81; Juan Carlos Rodríguez, "Poesía de la miseria, miseria de la poesía (Notas sobre el 27 y las vanguardias)", *La norma literaria* (Granada: University of Granada Press, 1985 [1981]), 234-271; Juan Carlos Rodríguez and Álvaro Salvador, *Introducción al estudio de la literatura hispanoamericana* (Madrid: Akal, 1987), especially 149-208.

<sup>6</sup> Johan Wolfgang Goethe, *Faust* (1808-1832), trans. George Madison Priest <[www.levity.com/alchemy/faust05.html](http://www.levity.com/alchemy/faust05.html)> (20/06/2004). The original German text reads as follows: "Grau, teurer Freund, ist alle Theorie, / Und grün des Lebens goldner Baum".

<sup>7</sup> See Niccola Abbagnano, *Historia de la filosofía*, 3 vols. (Barcelona: Montaner y Simón, 1973 [1956]), especially vol. III: 374-388, and Johannes Hirschberger, *Historia de la filosofía*, 2 vols. (Barcelona: Herder, 1970 [1949-1952]), especially vol. II: 378-387.

<sup>8</sup> Rodríguez and Salvador 164.

<sup>9</sup> José Ortega y Gasset, *La deshumanización del arte* (Madrid: Biblioteca Nueva, 2005 [1925]). Ortega's is the main theoretical work about the



philosophical background involved in the discourse of Modernity, and its consequences for the appearance, in the twentieth century, of the artistic avant-garde.

<sup>10</sup> Mark Patrick Hederman, *The Haunted Inkwell* (Dublin: The Columba P, 2001). See especially 124-164.

<sup>11</sup> Garry M. Leonard, "Histericising Modernism: Modernity in Joyce", *European Joyce Studies* 15/1 (2003) 167-188.

<sup>12</sup> Cardinal John Henry Newman, *Apologia pro vita sua: being A History of his Religious Opinions* (London: Longman, Green, Reader and Dyer, 1865). The Spanish edition is *Apología "pro vita sua". Historia de mis ideas religiosas* (Madrid: Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos, 1977 [1883]).

<sup>13</sup> See *A Portrait* 82, 179, and 192.

<sup>14</sup> For Newman's life, see Meriol Trevor, *Newman*, 2 vols. (Garden City: Doubleday, 1962-1963) and Charles Stephen Dessain, *John Henry Newman*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: Black, 1971 [1966]). The reader is also directed to Newman's abovementioned autobiography.

<sup>15</sup> Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics* (London: Routledge, 1994 [1983]), especially 72. As all readers know, the first person is used in the last pages of *A Portrait*, which transcribe Stephen's diary.

<sup>16</sup> Hederman 8f.

<sup>17</sup> See Rodríguez and Salvador 165.

<sup>18</sup> In this regard, the last conversation between Dedalus and Cranly (*P* 243-252) is crucial.

<sup>19</sup> Hanif Kureishi, "Reflections on Writing", *Something Given* (2002), <[www.hanifkureishi.com/something\\_given.html](http://www.hanifkureishi.com/something_given.html)> (14/01/2004).

<sup>20</sup> Hanif Kureishi, "Faith, love and fundamentalism" (An interview with Hanif Kureishi), *The Guardian*, 5 November 2001 <[www.books.guardian.co.uk/departments/generalfiction/story](http://www.books.guardian.co.uk/departments/generalfiction/story)> (07/03/2004).

<sup>21</sup> Karl Marx, *El dieciocho Brumario de Luis Bonaparte* (Barcelona: Ariel, 1985 [1852]) 11.

<sup>22</sup> Kureishi, *Buddha* 3.

<sup>23</sup> Sukhdev Sandhu, "Paradise Syndrome", *London Review of Books*, 22 November 2000 <[www.lrb.co.uk/v22/n10/print/sand01\\_.html](http://www.lrb.co.uk/v22/n10/print/sand01_.html)> (15/02/2004).

<sup>24</sup> Kureishi, *Buddha* 250.

<sup>25</sup> Kureishi, *Buddha* 93f.

<sup>26</sup> Kureishi, *Buddha* 16.

<sup>27</sup> Kureishi, *Buddha* 283f.