It’s All about Caring and Not-Caring at the Same Time: Or, Home Is Where You Start From

Abstract: Lemuel Gulliver and Stephen Dedalus are more similar than they would appear. Importantly, neither respects home, both fleeing from it, for a world elsewhere. Gulliver, of course, always starts from his home at Redriff, using it primarily as a launch-site, and shows up again and again, after satisfying his lust to travel and to gain new knowledge, straining for the extra-ordinary in the strange and unfamiliar, never really at home. Stephen flies away, from Ireland to Paris at novel’s end, happily leaving family and friends behind, sadly mistaken in believing that separation from home leads to vaunted transcendence—his world remaining dark.

God loves from Whole to Parts: but human soul
Must rise from Individual to the Whole.
Self-love but serves the virtuous mind to wake,
As the small pebble stirs the peaceful lake;
The centre mov’d, a circle strait succeeds,
Another still, and still another spreads,
Friend, parent, neighbour, first it will embrace,
His country next, and next all human race,
Wide and more wide, th’ o’erflowings of the mind
Take ev’ry creature in, of ev’ry kind;
Earth smiles around, with boundless bounty blest,
And Heav’n beholds its image in his breast.

Alexander Pope, An Essay on Man

Gulliver would seem to have this much right, at least compared with
Stephen Dedalus: he starts from his geographical home (as well as
returns there). In a grand gesture, Stephen flees from his home, in the
process escaping not just from his mother-country but also from his
mother-church and his biological mother (who just may be the ultimate
object of his desire). Both Stephen and Gulliver begin with abundance
of self-love, but neither one of them moves beyond it—one thing from
which they do not separate.

As we have seen, time and again, Gulliver leaves home, essentially for-
gets about it (and its inhabitants, his wife and increasing number of chil-
dren), on occasion expresses the hope never to return there (the Flying
or Floating Island, Laputa, being “the most delicious spot of ground on
the earth”). If anything, Stephen is more determined, even less attached,
planning to “fly by those nets” of “nationality, language, religion”: to
Davin’s statement that “a man’s country comes first,” Stephen offers his
famous definition of Ireland as “the old sow that eats her farrow.” He
would escape totally, absolutely.

For Gulliver, with his “violent” desire of knowledge and the new,
home is (merely) a launch-site. It remains nothing more, even after
his final voyage, for as he makes clear in his letter from Redriff to his
cousin Sympson, he had immediately set about (in his exalted terms)
reforming humankind, removing “all tincture” of vice and corruption,