Egotism Versus Love in James Joyce

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Why do I, a potato-famine Irish-American, a Catholic, a priest, and a Jesuit, enjoy and teach James Joyce? Did he not turn his back on Ireland, Catholicism, priesthood, and Jesuits? Let us take these in order. Did he not abandon and vituperate Ireland? Writing to his Aunt Josephine Murray of his wife's and children's 1922 visit to Ireland, he said:

The only enlivening feature of their journey appears to have been their interview with my father, who amused them vastly by the virulence, variety and incandescence of curses, which he bestowed on his native country and all in it—a litany to which his oldest sons say Amen from the bottom, that is to say the nethermost or lowest part of his heart.¹

Did he not abandon his Catholic faith? Ellman conjectures "... Joyce probably did not take communion after his burst of piety at Easter in 1897."²

Did he not spurn the invitation to the priesthood? His brother Stanislaus reports that the director of studies at Belvedere, in a solemn interview, invited the 16 year old James to consider becoming a priest. As Ellman observes, "By now the priesthood meant imprisonment and darkness for the soul, and Joyce was committed to art and life, whether damnation lay that way or not."³

And do not the Jesuits come off rather badly in Joyce's writings? In A Portrait Of the Artist As A Young Man, there is the cruel Fr. Dolan and

²Ibid, p. 67.
³Ibid, p. 56.
the suave but inadequately sincere Fr. Conmee at Clongowes. Later, in
the same work, at University College, there is the pedestrian Dean of
Studies and the possibly flirtatious Fr. Moran who talked and laughed
with the then light of Stephen’s life, Emma Clery.

All of this is true, and yet Joyce who always called Dublin “dirty,”
always called it “dear” as well. Furthermore, having lived in London,
Trieste, Zurich, Pola, Rome, and Paris, he could not think of writing
about any place but Ireland and Dublin. About his loss of faith, Joyce
has Stephen in Portrait respond to Cranly who asks him if he did not
intend to become a Protestant: “I said that I had lost the faith, but not
that I had lost self-respect.” Cranly earlier had noted to Stephen
Dedalus what can be said as well of James Joyce, “It is a curious thing,
do you know ... how your mind is supersaturated with the religion in
which you say you disbelieve.” As for Joyce’s attitude toward priests
and Jesuits, the case of the interior monologue of Father Conmee in
“The Wandering Rocks” episode of Ulysses is to the point. Within lim-
its that allow small vanity, a certain prissiness, and religious and social
narrowness, the priest’s thoughts are never unpriestly, improper, mean,
or unkind. This is an amazing tribute from Joyce who is so ruthlessly
honest in his treatment of the inner thoughts of his principal charac-
ters.

My interest and delight in Joyce, obviously, has nothing to do with
his animosity toward Ireland, Church, priesthood, or Society of Jesus.
Nor do I think that what I have just said to balance these hostilities suc-
ceds in doing away with them. I am primarily interested in Joyce be-
cause he is intelligent, penetrating, varied, comic, human, and, above
all, so much fun. All this should be remembered because my subject in
this discussion may have the effect of my seeming to forget these qual-
ties. Perhaps too, I must admit as Irishman, Catholic, priest and Jesuit,
that the very emphasis that I am about to make somehow frees me to
enjoy all these other important qualities — an emphasis upon the ex-
traordinary, and yet often overlooked moral quality of the writings of
Joyce.

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4James Joyce, A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man (New York: Viking Press, 1968),
pp. 243-44.
5Ibid, p. 240.
Moral quality? Surely this is paradox! Not in the slightest. Yes, I am aware that for eleven years the U.S. Customs Authority would not allow the importation of the "dirty" book *Ulysses* into the United States. It is equally true that George Moore wondered "how one could plow through such stuff," and surmised that "Probably Joyce thinks that because he prints all the dirty little words he is a great novelist."6 Yes, Edmund Gosse spoke of the "worthlessness and impudence of his writings" and of *Ulysses* as an anarchical production, infamous in taste, in style, in everything" and announced that "there are no English critics of weight or judgement who consider Mr. Joyce an author of any importance."7 Virginia Woolf was shocked in her patrician sensibilities and called *Ulysses* "underbred ... the book of a self-taught working man, of a queasy undergraduate scratching his pimples."8 So in planning to emphasize the moral quality of Joyce's work, I must protest that I know that this might surprise, and yet I need not even begin to list the enthusiasts on the other side of the question, such as Hemingway who wrote to Sherwood Anderson saying "Joyce has a most goddamn wonderful book."9 The throng of enthusiasts, if listed, would be tediously long since the early shocking effect of *Ulysses* has long since given place to rather universal acclaim. Even the Irish Jesuits have come around. One of them admitted that "Irish Jesuits have never found it particularly congenial to own responsibility for James Joyce."10 In 1952, One of them quoted Joyce's Triestene friend, Italo Svevo, who observed "Joyce still feels admiration and gratitude for the care of his educators, whilst his sinister Dedalus cannot find time to say so."11 Svevo knew Joyce, and better than very many, understood *Portrait*.

The moral quality is all important and is constant in Joyce's works, and yet the wealth of other splendors in that work can operate to obscure it. Furthermore, there are "indecencies," in *Ulysses* especially, but we must at all costs distinguish these from a profound concern for

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6*James Joyce*, p. 543.
8*Ibid*.
morality. Indecencies are failures of decorum, and decorum is a matter of propriety of behavior or speech, the required manner of polite society. Such indecencies, to be sure, are many in *Ulysses*. “The area of morality,” on the other hand, to cite Tindall, is “whatever concerns our fundamental attitudes toward man.”

Nothing is more fundamental in Joyce than his indictment of pride and egotism and his celebration of love. This is morality, and this is the point that I would like to make.

One other proviso must be made before we proceed. Joyce is an artist, not a teacher. I am a teacher, but a preacher too, not an artist. The artist suggests morality or immorality through his presentation of human experience. He has a horror of direct teaching, and if he did not have that horror, he could not be an artist. So please do not let this preacher’s emphasis and interest mislead you about Joyce. I assure you, furthermore, it is not my only interest. I do not suggest that Joyce ever dreamt of presenting profound human experience in any spirit of enthusiasm for teaching a moral lesson. He did it surely to celebrate life and humanity. For the reader of Joyce, on the other hand, to miss the moral in the artist’s presentation is seriously to misread James Joyce.

I have mentioned a name in passing and should do more than that. A teacher of mine at Colombia, William York Tindall, first alerted my thinking to this egotism–love conflict when I made at that time the first of many readings of Joyce’s works. To show that my thesis is not just a preacher’s crotch, let me put myself by Tindall’s side by using his words. Of Stephen in *Ulysses*, Tindall says he “becomes a kind of Bloom, leaving pride for charity, and inhumanity for acceptance of mankind.”

More directly to the point I am making, Tindall adds: “Clearly, the theme of *Ulysses*, implied by the quest and determined by the characters, is moral. Like the Church he rejected, Joyce condemns pride, the greatest of sins, and commends charity the greatest of virtues.”

The burden of my argument that Joyce celebrates love over egotism will emerge from a study of “The Dead,” *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, and *Ulysses*. Some preliminary indications of this point, however, emerge in the first fourteen stories of *Dubliners* as well.

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14 *Ibid*. 
Early Dubliners Stories

By and large, the first fourteen stories of Dubliners illustrate the egotism-love conflict through failures of love. This is true since the heart of the case that this work makes against Dublin, and, by extension, of humankind generally, is moral paralysis. As Joyce wrote in a letter to Constantine Curran in August of 1914, “I call the series Dubliners to betray the soul of that hemiplegia or paralysis which many consider a city” (259). And, writing to Grant Richards in May of 1906: “My intention was to write a chapter of the moral history of my country and I chose Dublin for the scene because that city seemed to me the centre of paralysis.”

Thus the third story, “Araby,” is an illustration of the disillusionment of that childish kind of “love” called infatuation or, popularly, “puppy love,” which is in great part an exaltation of the self and its ardors. The young boy at the end, forced to come to terms with his discovered self-inflation, sees himself “as a creature driven and derided by vanity and ... [his] eyes burned with anguish and anger.”15 “Two Gallants,” the sixth story, is a probing and comic look at the prostitution of love in which prostitute and client change roles.”16 Again, “The Boarding House,” the seventh story, satirizes in a devastating way a Dublin mating rite which is all seduction and ill-concealed violence and extortion, the obvious antithesis of love. This will result in the main character, Bob Doran, reappearing in Ulysses on his annual one-month drunk in reaction to his earlier entrapment.17

Continuing with the first fourteen stories of Dubliners, “A Little Cloud,” the eighth, is a study of envy in which Joyce never reveals until the last sentence his point that envy is another failure of love. Little Chandler has spent an unusually, for him, “wet” evening with his old and now very successful friend Ignatius Gallagher. Returning home to wife and child, full of envious distaste of his old friend, and careless of these two at home, he is startled by his infant’s sobbing and his wife’s anger, into awareness of his lovelessness. That lovelessness precisely and not his lack of success is what comes to Chandler as “tears or remorse

16Ibid, p. 60.
started to his eyes."\textsuperscript{18} Remorse, not regret. Regret can be for an advantage not gained. Remorse, as Joyce knows, is for a moral failure. "A Painful Case," the eleventh story, reveals in James Duffy a total paralysis of love coming from a dried and withered personality which has walled itself away from all human communion until a hopelessly late revelation of epiphany.\textsuperscript{19} Finally, in these \textit{Dubliners} stories prior to "The Dead," we have in "Grace," the fourteenth story, again with fine comic detail, the indictment of a Church which has been commissioned to preach the new commandment of love. It settles, however, for the role of spiritual accountant for cash-register Christians.\textsuperscript{20}

"The Dead"

It is in the last and most remarkable \textit{Dubliners} story, "The Dead," that the Joycean insistence on the egotism-love conflict comes out most vividly. It is clearer here than it is in the still larger accomplishments which we will take up next — \textit{A Portrait} and \textit{Ulysses} — because the moral focus in "The Dead" is not challenged by the other myriad and stunning effects present in the two subsequent works.

"The Dead," for the beginning reader of Joyce, can be a confusing and unsatisfactory story. The novice, experiencing the double setting, first the Morkan sisters’ party and then the Gabriel-Greta hotel scene, wonders what the connection is between the two. If the party, why the hotel; if the hotel, why the party? If party, indeed, why so much detail there in some thirty-eight pages before the shorter, nine-page hotel scene? How do the two parts connect? They connect brilliantly in the development and working out of the character of Gabriel Conroy preparing him and us for his epiphany or revelation. The story is Gabriel's discovery of his egotism, his lovelessness, his failure of communion. The party scene, by a very carefully orchestrated and balanced series of drops and rises in Gabriel's vanity and self-esteem, establishes this Everyman who will, in the hotel, come to his terrifying vision of himself. It is a mark of Joyce's achievement in "The Dead" that we can call this most realistic, most three-dimensional, least allegorical character, Gabriel

\textsuperscript{18}\textit{Dubliners}, p. 85.
\textsuperscript{19}\textit{Ibid}, p. 117.
\textsuperscript{20}\textit{Ibid}, p. 174.
Conroy, *Everyman*. For Joyce's success here is in making the protagonist of this story not the somewhat flat, cautionary figures, the obvious failures of the earlier fourteen stories. Here we have, rather, the publicly good, successful, responsible, respected, even somewhat sensitive man we would all like to be. In this sense he is Everyman, and it is Gabriel-Everyman who comes to the appalling discovery that he has never loved.

A momentary digression here for those of you who have seen Huston's film version of "The Dead." I find it a movie of almost perfect surface and yet a disappointment in largely missing the effect of Joyce's tale. In the story, Gabriel suffers at the party eleven emotional drops to his ego until the moment when he is at the head of the table carving the goose for the assembled guests. Then a balanced set of eleven "rises" in ego and vanity follows. We have seen Gabriel feeling worse and worse about himself and then with perfect symmetry, feeling better about himself. At the end of these eleven inflations, this central character is so full of himself and his minor victories that the only fittingly successful culmination which he can imagine of all this ego-swelling will be his lovelessness, physical possession of his wife, Greta, at the hotel. The lovelessness is clear in that Joyce three times uses the word "lust" to describe Gabriel's feeling for Greta at this time.\(^{21}\) This usage is quite deliberate and important—a short story writer and especially Joyce uses his words and repetitions with serious care—but it presents some difficulty for the teacher facing a class full of casuists who cannot conceive of the possible relevance of such a word in the context of a marriage relationship. The problem with the film is that the connection between party and hotel, egotistic pain and vain preening followed by a most horrifying revelation, is lost when Gabriel disappears from the middle of the film. For Joyce has introduced the drunk, Freddy Malins, with his drunken sincerity as a foil to the insincerity of Gabriel, but never does the focus leave Gabriel. Huston, deciding to work Freddy Malins for comic diversion or variety, forgets about Gabriel for ten minutes or so in the middle of the film, and this most focused of stories loses itself and the viewer's attention to what is going on.

And so, in this almost novelized last story in *Dubliners*, Joyce has revealed most clearly his continuing moral concern. Where there should have been and where there seems to have been love in this man whose silly roller coaster vanity we have been privy to at the party, he and we find there has been no love: “A vague terror seized Gabriel at this answer, as if, at the hour when he had hoped to triumph, some impalpable and vindictive being was coming against him gathering forces against him in its vague world.”22 And very soon afterward: “Generous tears filled Gabriel’s eyes. He had never felt like that himself towards any woman, but he knew that such a feeling must be love.”23

*A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*

I have just called “The Dead” an almost novelized story, and soon after writing it, Joyce was indeed ready to bring the continuation of this theme into novel form. It is perhaps a surprising thing to say, but true nevertheless, that in one sense *A Portrait* and *Ulysses* are one novel or, at least, a diptych. The same character, Stephen Dedalus, moves through both works, becomes “a kind of Bloom, leaving pride for charity, and inhumanity for acceptance of mankind.”24

Connected though these two are they must be treated separately. If, as everyone knows, *Ulysses* is a difficult novel, it is equally true as fewer know, that the shorter, earlier, and seemingly simpler novel is difficult as well. The difficulty lies in how we are to read in *A Portrait* the author’s attitude toward his protagonist, or as some would say — I think erroneously — his alter ego. Is Stephen Dedalus a surrogate for James Joyce? All the dates and places and important incidents of the two are the same. Is Stephen simply victorious? Does he triumph over family, church, and nation, three agencies bent on defeating the young artist? Is he the conqueror who, in almost the last words of *Portrait*, cries out: “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”?25 Is he indeed as he says so himself,

23Ibid, p. 223.
25Portrait, pp. 252-53.
comparing himself favorably to one of the University College priests, 
"... a priest of eternal imagination, transmuting the daily bread of 
experience into the radiant body of everliving life"?26 Or are both of 
these, as they sound, the language of youthful self-inflation? If these are 
not accepted as ironic examples of swollen language deliberately 
chosen to deflate, what about the following, among many others like it, 
which could be offered: (Stephen has just had the "inspiration" for a 
villanelle about his flirtatious beloved,) "O, In the virgin womb of the 
imagination the word was made flesh. Gabriel the seraph had come to 
the virgin's chamber. An afterglow deepened within his spirit, whence 
this white flame had passed, deepening to a rose and ardent light"?27

Portrait is a five-chapter novel of apprenticeship dealing progres-
sively with the following: one, infancy and the start of grade school; two, 
early adolescence and first sexual adventures; three, adolescent sexual-
religious crisis and conversion; four, abandonment of conversion and 
religious vocation for the life of the artist; and five, the stumbling, 
introverted process of the self-declared artist through college toward 
exit.

In the "Cyclops" or twelfth episode of Ulysses, Joyce presents to us 
most amusingly the contrast between the two-eyed Bloom and the one-
eyed "Citizen" representing Homer's Cyclops. The latter can see but one 
side of an issue — in this case, Irish nationalism. Bloom, the binocular 
hero, sees both sides of this and other issues. This very quality, how-
ever, incurs the wrath of the Citizen who just fails to "destroy" Bloom 
with a projectile as Cyclops just failed to destroy Odysseus. I am con-
vinced and could martial ample critical and textual support for the idea 
that there is a one-eyed and a two-eyed perception of Portrait. In the 
one-eyed vision, Stephen is the isolated but vindicated hero, who 
conquers all that would limit and defeat him and fixes his eyes on splen-
did, lonely exile in the austere dedication of the artist. The two-eyed 
picture is of a self-absorbed, self-important, unloving and unloved 
young man who may or may not in the future achieve the goals set forth. 
In any case, the two-eyed reader can never read the inflated self-asser-
tions just cited without smiling and realizing that there is more to

26 Ibid, p. 221.
27 Ibid, p. 117.
Stephen than glorious, betrayed but undaunted hero. Recall the words of Joyce’s Triestene friend Italo Svevo, who called Stephen Joyce’s “sinister Dedalus,” with attitudes so different from those of the Triestene Joyce.

Recall, too, the character, Davin, in the last chapter of Portrait and his words. Davin represents sincerity, simplicity, unquestioning nationalism and seems to be the one of all Stephen’s companions whom even Stephen in his near paranoia cannot accuse of of having betrayed him. Davin to whom alone is allowed the familiarity of the name “Stevie” (as only Nora could call Joyce “Jim”) says “You’re a born sneerer, Stevie,” and “You’re a terrible man, Stevie . . . Always alone.”28 These are words not to be ignored when penned by a writer who made so much of “communion.”

If there is anything, however, that proves Joyce does not intend the end a Portrait to be simply the apotheosis of Stephen as courageous artist, it is Stephen’s reappearance as one of the protagonists of Ulysses.

Ulysses

The flight into exile in Paris has been tried twice and the young wild goose has been brought back lap-winged to Ireland (as, of course, was Joyce) by a telegram reporting his mother to be dying. Now about two years after the end of A Portrait, the same Stephen has yet to finish his flight successfully. He is shattered by the death of his mother and the part he played, or did not play, while she was dying. He is still, however, convinced of the necessity of flight. But there is a difference. A new awareness has convinced his creator of the need of something else, and it is the experience of June 16, 1904, which will have him point his character toward it. Although Stephen doesn’t know it, it is the achievement of communion which will occur realistically and symbolically in No. 7 Eccles Street in the next to last episode of Ulysses. A similar communion had occurred for James Joyce — if it is legitimate to make this connection — on June 16, 1904 when he learned he was in love with Nora Barnacle. In October of the same year, the two wild geese would “fly” from Dublin. Richard Ellman speaks of this June date:

The appointment was made, and for the evening of June 16 when they were walking at Ringsend, and thereafter began to meet regularly. To set *Ulysses* on this date was Joyce’s most eloquent if indirect tribute to Nora, a recognition of the determining effect upon his life of his attachment to her. On June 16 he entered into relation with the world around him and left behind the loneliness he had felt since his mother’s death. He would tell her later, ‘You made me a man.’ June 16 was the sacred day that divided Stephen Dedalus, the insurgent youth, from Leopold Bloom the complaisant husband.\(^{29}\)

It is no secret to biographer and reader that Stephen Dedalus is twenty-two in 1904 and Leopold Bloom is thirty-eight. James Joyce was forty years old when *Ulysses* was published (on his birthday, February 2, 1922) and he had started the book in 1914 at the age of thirty-two. The dates themselves reveal what is equally well known, and has been suggested in the quotation form Ellman: As Telemachus and Odysseus are distinct, father and son, Stephen Dedalus and Leopold Bloom are distinct as well in *Ulysses*. In the communion, however, there is the suggestion of one becoming the other, youth taking the first steps toward adulthood. It is tempting, but dangerous, to suggest that the two characters might reflect James Joyce as youth and James Joyce as adult. The “biographical” details of Stephen’s life are, of course much closer to those of James, while the portrait of Leopold represents an imaginative and fictional flight from the close parallels of *Portrait*.

But the question to be answered before ending is just how “communion” is attained between youth and adult, father and son and, less central to our purpose, does Bloom/Ulysses indeed conquer and himself achieve communion with Molly. It is of course true that *Ulysses* is Bloom’s book more than it is Stephen’s, just as *The Odyssey* is the book of Odysseus more than it is that of Telemachus.

And so the Stephen of *Ulysses* is the Stephen of the end of *Portrait*. Two unsuccessful attempts at flight behind him, a terrible sadness and remorse regarding his mother’s dying afflicted him as well as a sense of betrayal by friends, especially personified by Buck Mulligan. (Cranly and others were his “betrayers” in *Portrait.*) Stephen sulks in the first

\(^{29}\)James Joyce, pp. 163-64.
episode and registers insult, teaches a class and probes his remorse over his mother's death in the second and thinks about a thousand things in the third, including, prominently, the idea of paternity and the longing for love. Paternity will be symbolically found in Bloom, and Stephen's love-longing too will be addressed in a sense through his consubstantiality with Bloom, and the solution to that longing will be foreshadowed in Bloom's reunion with Molly.

This is the love-longing, heard on the Sandy Cove beach in the third or "Proteus" episode: "Touch me. Soft eyes. Soft soft soft hand. I am lonely here. O, touch me soon, now. What is that word known to all men? I am quiet here alone. Sad too. Touch, touch me."30

The remaining fifteen episodes are mainly those of Ulysses/Bloom save for a few in which Stephen does appear with greater or less prominence. In "Aeolus," Stephen hosts a noon drinking bout. In "Scylla and Charybdis" the self-involved Stephen shows off in a literary way before some of the learned of Dublin. He reappears in "Oxen of the Sun" blasphemous and roaring drunk. This is followed by the "Circe" episode in which both Bloom and Stephen reach nightmarish nadirs from which Bloom recovers more completely than the drunken Stephen. The latter is tortured in the extreme again by his remorse about his mother. Then, knocked down by a British soldier, he is raised up by Bloom/Ulysses (the "Father"), taken to rest in a cabman's shelter in "Eumaeus" and then to Bloom's and Molly's home at No. 7 Eccles Street in "Ithaca." There, Stephen and Bloom, Telemachus and Odysseus, Father and Son, youth and adulthood, achieve communion and Stephen leaves the house and the novel after being shown by Bloom the lighted window of Molly's room.

Of the communion, Tyndall remarks: "... their sitting down together in the kitchen celebrates communion or the sacramental sealing of togetherness. Stephen receives the body of his "host" in the kitchen as place for creating."31

Stephen, symbolically and actually, has atoned, "at oned" and communed with Bloom. Bloom is lover of Molly and Molly of Bloom and this is all we will see of Stephen's passage from self-centeredness to

30 Ulysses, p. 49.
31 A Reader's Guide to James Joyce, p. 222.
other-centeredness, from egotism to love. As we have seen, however, his alter ego, Joyce, also began a related transition on the same day, June 16, 1904.

Bloom, on the other hand, the central character of Ulysses, has no need of making the transition from egotism to love. He is the lover of Molly first and last. He is weak, somewhat ridiculous, challenged, insulted, even cuckolded, but never faltering in his love. Recall the connection of the Bloom character with the adult Joyce. The only question about Bloom is will his love be requited, will Odysseus regain Penelope, and will the ending of this comical book make it indeed a comedy reflecting The Odyssey. Since that question is not central to the thesis of this study, I will answer it in only the briefest way. The voyage of the novel is the pursuit of love, successful or not. Bloom need not pursue (though Stephen must), but it is surely of some interest whether his love is requited or not. In symbol and in fact, Bloom does regain Molly. “Throwaway,” (Bloom, the dark horse) defeats “Sceptre” (Boylan, the adulterous suitor) in the Gold Cup horse race. Molly will rise early and prepare Bloom’s elaborate breakfast in the morning of the seventeenth of June as the not yet victorious Bloom prepared it for her on the morning of the sixteenth. And, finally, despite her infidelity, Molly’s first and last thoughts in the “Penelope” episode, which ends the novel, are of Poldy, Bloom, and her final word is “Yes” (783). Love has not only been sought, but has triumphed — in a way.