

The Secular City and the Sacred Countryside:

A Reflection on James Joyce's "Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man"

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Theologians, in an attempt to understand man and woman more fully, may look not only to philosophy but also to literature—not simply to the book in vogue at this or that particular moment, but literature that gives promise of endurance. For, as Father Anthony Padovano states, "just as every perennial philosophical intuition can serve Christianity to some degree, so every true artistic expression of the universe can bring a man to God."¹ In order to illustrate the point, we propose this brief reflection on a portion of James Joyce's masterpiece, *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, in terms of the new theological problem of secularity—a fragment of Joyce's attitude towards the "secular city" on the one hand and the "sacred countryside" on the other.

In a remarkable essay on Joyce, Frank O'Connor points out that one reason for his great and instantaneous popularity in America

was because of his appeal to scholars and "townees" rather than to the country bred; in simple terms, the book store and libraries were in the cities and not in the country, and it was there that books such as *Portrait of the Artist* made headway. But ironically, it was Joyce's hatred of the city that so captivated urban Americans. He was from a country where the population had been forcibly driven off the land, and were herded into cities with no prospect of returning to the country, and soon lost their desire to return. Besides this historical phenomenon, Joyce had learned the same lesson from his mentor Yeats:

. . . the folk life and country life is nature with her abundance, but the art life is sterile when it is not married to nature. The whole ugliness of the modern world has come from towns and their ways of thought, and to bring them back to beauty we must marry the spirit and nature again!²

These were the words master had spoken to pupil; in a word, he had filled Joyce with the belief that every Irishman was full of already, namely, that the spirit was somehow a rural thing, nestling and hovering over peat bogs and green, clear valleys; the city was the arid wasteland of the devil, the home of ugliness, of privation. Not only do the words confirm Joyce in the belief that the country is tied to mystical realities, but they also serve to emphasize the split between urban and rural which, with the religious connotations we have already seen, quickly, become the split between the secular and the sacred. Now let us turn to a portion of the text itself.

Stephen Daedalus, hero of *Portrait of the Artist*, describes his first encounter with Dublin:

Dublin was a new and complex sensation. Uncle Charles had grown so witless that he could no longer be sent out on errands and the disorder settling in the new house had left Stephen freer than he was in Blackrock.³

The stage is set. Joyce, a master of language, has given us Dublin in the context of novelty, complexity, a witless uncle, errands, disorder and freedom—a significant montage. He continues:

In the beginning he contented himself with circling timidly round the neighboring square or at most, going half way down one of the side streets: but when he had made a skeleton map of the city in his mind he followed boldly one of its central lines until he reached the customs-house.⁴

Notice here that Stephen is circling in the city, or going "half way down" rather than completing his motion; notice too the "skeleton map in his mind," which suggests not only death in the city, but far more importantly the Platonic "inside-out" approach Stephen feels forced to take is in the city. Joyce's suggestion is that things are unpleasant in the city ("the whole ugliness of the modern world," Yeats had told him), and that in cities we work from our minds outward to the unpleasant reality instead of from the outside-in, as we shall see him doing in the beautiful country. The images of the circling and half-way-going are merged with the "skeleton" death at the end of the sentence, where Stephen finally takes a direct route to the customhouse alone, this map of death in his mind, perhaps suggesting the despaired plodding of the "dead" city-dweller.

He passed unchallenged along the docks and the quays, wondering at the multitude of corks that lay bobbing on the surface of the water in a thick yellow scum, at the crowds of quay porters and the rumbling carts and the ill-dressed bearded policemen.⁵

Here, surely, is the city in a nutshell to the worshipper at the shrine of the country beautiful. The striking image of the ugliness of the bobbing corks in yellow scum suggests both the hapless existence of those in the city, bobbing like corks, and the pollution of that sacred element, water, which will be so important in the country in a sacramental sense. Here in the city there is noise and crowds, and "ill-dressed bearded policemen," suggesting the shabbiness and unpleasantness of city law, and the beards suggesting the old law which indeed seems to flourish in the city, as opposed to the new law which we shall see when Stephen returns to the countryside and becomes the high priest of his own imagination.

The vastness and strangeness of the life suggested to him by the bales of merchandise stocked along the walls or swung aloft out of the holds of steamers . . . a vague dissatisfaction grew up within him as he wandered up and down day after day as if he really sought someone that eluded him.⁶

Here the city suggests a certain vastness and strangeness—not, however, in the exotic sense of the country, but rather associated with merchandise (not bales of hay), the profane business of buying and selling. Stephen's experience of a "vague dissatisfaction" reminds us of the aimless circling of the first sentence in the section; here the skies "lower" rather than smile, and Stephen wanders up and down beneath them. He is looking for something that he cannot seem to

find; the "wandering up and down" suggests Sisyphus on his dread hill, doomed to an aimless task.

Let us move now to a later section of *Portrait of the Artist*, in which Stephen returns to his beloved countryside. He has decided not to become a priest of the Church, but rather seeks to dedicate himself to beauty as a writer. First of all, notice the difference in the kind of "wandering" he does:

Evening would deepen above the sea, night fall upon the plains, dawn glimmer before the wanderer and show him strange hills and fields and faces. Where?⁷

The contrast to the city is striking: here the wanderer glides, whereas in the city he plodded; moreover, the sea and sky are cast peacefully in the country; hills and fields and faces are strange, not in the ominous sense but rather exotically; finally, the open-ended "where?" is far different from the sense of loss of direction in the city, suggesting a warm and inviting promise, soon to be fulfilled.

He looked northward towards Howth. The sea had fallen below the line of seawrack on the shallow side of the breakwater and already the tide was running out fast along the foreshore.⁸

Here Joyce's diction makes the country seem sacred, the water holy: the long vowels in "north" and "Howth," and the magnificent, almost purely poetic line

. . . running out fast along the foreshore . . .

suggests the serene and peacefully majestic strength of water in its natural habitat, far from being yellow-scummed, as it was in the city.

Already one long oval bank of sand lay warm and dry among the wavelets.⁹

Whereas the city had been dangerous and confusing, here the country is inviting, warm and safe; although man had built Dublin to be safe in (O'Connor called it a "sentinelled ghetto"), it is a far more dangerous place to be than the wild country Stephen had left. Now we reach the climax of the description:

In a few moments he was barefoot, his stockings folded in his pockets and his canvas shoes dangling knotted laces over his shoulders; and picking a pointed salteaten stick out of the jetsam among the rocks, he clambered down the slope of the breakwater.¹⁰

Indeed, this is hallowed ground; appropriately, Stephen takes off his shoes, like Moses of old. Having put the canvas shoes over his shoulder and folded his socks in his pocket (St. Paul's folding up the canvas tent of this body and moving on to higher things), and with his crozier (salt of the earth, a salteaten stick) in hand, the new-born apostle of beauty proceeds no longer to aimlessly wander, but now to "clamber down the slope of the breakwater" in a flurry of zeal.

The clouds were drifting above him silently and silently the seatangle was drifting below him; and the grey warm air was still; and a new wild life was singing in his veins.¹¹

With the regular pauses of monastic chant, the liturgical exercise is described in all its stillness and restraint, yet holds "wildness" within; it is the simultaneous silence and song of cathedral. Notice too how the sky here is silent and peaceful, as opposed to its ominous "lowering" in the city. At the end of the experience, as evening comes, we find Stephen thus:

He had climbed to the crest of the sandhill and gazed about him. Evening had fallen. A rim of the young moon cleft the pale waste of sky like the rim of a silver hoop embedded in grey sand; and the tide was flowing in fast to the land with a low whisper of her waves, islanding a few last figures in distant pools.¹²

There seems to be as much alienation here as in the city, and yet the sorcery of language has made even alienation seem lovely and desirable. Stephen is alone, and the "last few figures" are "islanded" not together. Yet the magic of the scene as Joyce describes it fills us with an almost overwhelming sense of serenity: we want to be there too, if only for a moment. Stephen, of course, will stay here, at least in spirit, for the rest of his life.

Having finished the analysis of this small fragment of Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, we may proceed to question its theological significance, especially with regard to the sacred and the secular. The implications should be clear: strongly influenced by his nation and his mentor, Yeats, Joyce has unmistakably drawn the countryside as sacred and the city as profane. In the country, more-tizing himself in the cathedral of nature; in the city the boy wanders over, Joyce (Stephen) becomes a kind of high priest of beauty, bap-aimlessly and encounters nothing but ugliness. It is a theme that will be repeated in the writers over whom Joyce exercised such influence: Hemingway, in the sacred trout stream or the sacred arena of the

bullfight, far from the ugliness of the city; or John Updike in touch with beauty in his beloved Pennsylvania countryside, meeting only blind resistance in the city (and even here, in Tarbox as well). Although the church *buildings* are in the city, there is no religion there: the religious experience, where a man becomes a priest-bridge between the human and divine, is in the country.

In short, there is a chasm between urban and rural. It seems to be expressed in terms of direction, fulfillment, justification, as opposed to aimlessness, emptiness, fear and ugliness. There seems to be a sense of *sinfulness* in the city; in the country, on the other hand, there is the suggestion of that first primal garden, when man existed in what theologians call a state of original justice; moreover, Eden is coupled with the notion of redemption, as Stephen undergoes a kind of Baptism in the country, healed from the wounds of his sins. It is in the country where this new law reigns supreme; in the city, on the other hand, as symbolized by the brilliant and subtle image of the bearded policeman, the old law of fear holds sway.

Perhaps the split between sacred and secular—evidence here by the split between rural and urban—is a split that has come about because of man's sinful condition; specifically, because of the sin of our first parents and their banishment from the garden (country) and into a world of their own making (city), such as the site of the ultimately urban tower of Babel. Seeking to be cleansed of this sinful condition, Stephen Daedalus goes back to the garden and washes himself clean.

But it is *God* who must do the washing. When He does there is no split but, in fact, just the opposite—a healing of the breach. God's regenerating act, namely, the redemptive Incarnation, took place in both sacred and secular realms, both in country and city; the stable in Bethlehem suggests the binding of opposite *poies*, where the rural hut, situated in the urban town packed with those to be counted in the census, is the site of God becoming man. Likewise the Crucifixion took place outside the city walls, after the climax of Jesus' ministry had taken place within them. We are reminded that the sacred and secular spheres or dimensions of man's life are not two separate worlds, but rather related dialectically in a dynamically balanced order and integration.

But it is God who accomplishes the balance. As the Christian is united to Jesus, the union between sacred and secular is effected as it was in Him. While for Joyce and others who have left the Church (or who have not had the Word preached to them) there will

always seem to be a split between sacred and secular—geographically and psychologically—for the Christian united to Jesus, there will be no split at all; the apparent contradictories become complementaries. The contradiction will only appear when a man proclaims that most contradictory of all words, namely, that justification lies within his own power, as Stephen Daedalus thought it lay in his.

In a sense, Stephen is the prodigal who does not return home. As Saint Ambrose says, the prodigal son began to be in want when he left his father's house and went away into a far country; he squandered his patrimony, and was fleeing from himself. The Saint continues: "He who separates himself from Christ is an exile from his fatherland and becomes a citizen of the world." But, he urges, *let us return home*: "To those that dwelt in the region of the shadow of death, light is risen." (Is 9:2) For Ambrose and the Christian, the "far country" is the shadow of death, whether that country be urban or rural; it is our homeland when we are in flight from Jesus and ourselves. It is here that the sacred-secular split takes on not only geographical dimensions, but psychological ones as well. But as Christians, we are called not to live in that far country, but in the shadow of Christ who is the light, where both sacred and secular are seen united in the same dazzling gleam.

FOOTNOTES

¹ Anthony Padovano, *The Estranged God* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1966). p. 59

² Cited in Frank O'Connor, "James Joyce," *The American Scholar* (Summer, 1967), XXXVI, no. 3, p. 468.

³ James Joyce, *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (New York: Viking Press, 1964) p. 66.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 170.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 173.