JOYCE’S DANTEAN PIETY, OR
THE SURVIVAL OF ACCEPTABLE IDEAS

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When, later in life, Morris Ernst asked him precisely when he left the Catholic Church, James Joyce replied: “That’s for the Church to say” (Best 118). Joyce’s reticent response is rather surprising given an earlier, specific, and spirited recollection; writing to Nora Barnacle in 1904, he flatly asserted: “Six years ago I left the Catholic Church, hating it most fervently…I made secret war upon it when I was a student…Now I make open war upon it by what I write and say and do” (48). Curiously, however, after thirty years of apparent open war—of writing, saying, and doing—Joyce’s rebellious defiance is supplanted by an enigmatic equanimity.

Joyce’s answer to Ernst could be taken as evidence of a resurgent sympathy for the repudiated religion of his birth; or it could simply be a demonstration of the “cunning” that along with “silence” and “exile” are the weapons which his protagonist and proxy, Stephen Dedalus, commends to himself at the end of A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man (218). However, the possible personal feelings that Joyce’s response obscures are less important than the acquiescent gesture of the rejoinder itself. For Joyce, here, does not simply parry a direct question about his belief—as Stephen does in similar fictional scenes—but refers (and, in a sense, defers) to the Church’s judgement. His answer quietly acknowledges the elaborate intellectual apparatus which amazed the unnamed narrator of the first story in Dubliners, the child who is so impressed by the “difficult questions” put to him by the late Father Flynn—those “intricate questions” which showed him “how complex and mysterious were certain institutions of the Church” (6). These questions are then parodied perfectly when Stephen, at the end of A Portrait, extemporizes a facetious series of quæstiones which, according to his friend, Lynch, possess “the true scholastic stink” (188). And the carapace of this catechetical conceit appears again in the penultimate chapter of Joyce’s modern epic, Ulysses, which is rendered entirely in the form of questions and answers. If Joyce’s “open war” against the Church was waged through this series of attentive emulations, he seems to bring his crusade to a conclusion with his answer to Ernst by becoming such a question himself, permitting his interpellation by the very system he had so vehemently opposed.

The mollification that occurs between Joyce’s early letter to Nora and his later answer to Ernst can be explained by what he achieves in the interim. In Blake’s Jerusalem, the poet-prophet, Los, declares: “I must Create a System, or be enslav’d by another Mans” (154, l. 20), and the two novels that Joyce produced in this period—A Portrait and Ulysses—constitute precisely this kind of liberating system.1 Blake’s Los, however, defiantly denies any dependence on past forms: “I will not Reason & Compare: my business is to Create” (154, l. 21). But Joyce’s system, in contrast, consists entirely of comparisons and reproductions, his method of composition being the “imaginative absorption of stray material” (Ellmann 250). If it is Blake’s business to create, then it is Joyce’s to repeat, and the paradox at the heart of Joyce’s emancipating artistic output is its conspicuous unoriginality: his artistic apostasy—and the disarming docility to the Church which it enables—is accomplished through accurate but impious repetitions of Catholic rites and rotes, and the systematic assimilation of its “stray material”.

Joyce, who was famously dismissive of his own imagination (see Ellmann 661n), attributes the same creative incapacity to his autobiographical surrogate, Stephen. Consequently, in Ulysses, Stephen’s pernicious companion, Buck Mulligan, surmises that his friend “can never be a poet” because he is unable to feel “the joy of creation” and blames this inability on the Church that

1 In The Best is Yet, Ernst reports that he dined with Joyce “[t]he next summer” after his legal victory on his American publisher’s behalf in 1933 (117-118); in A Love Affair with the Law, however, Ernst simply says he dined with Joyce “[s]hortly after the decision” (98-99).
“drove his wits astray […] by visions of hell” (10.1072-1075). Yet if, as Mulligan complains, Stephen is unable to “capture the Attic note,” the “note of Swinburne” (10.1073), it is not because he lacks creativity or is impeded by his religious inheritance; rather, it is because neither Stephen nor his author is content to indulge in the archaisms and anachronisms which a direct emulation of the Classics would produce. Instead, by immersing himself in the literary and religious traditions he inherits, Joyce, in fact, realizes Mulligan’s dream of “Helleniz[ing]” (1.158) Ireland through the indirect art of allusion. And, while Homer is his most obvious epic precursor, the allusive aspect of Joyce’s art actually depends on the example of the poet who envisioned hell most vividly; more than any other of his artistic forbears, it is Dante whom Joyce takes as a model. Dante offers Joyce an example of how to mobilize the material of a religion he rejects, while simultaneously continuing the implicated literary traditions which he loves.

Dante’s Piety, Joyce’s Form

It is not simply Dante’s syncretic catalogue of Classical and Christian figures in The Divine Comedy that Joyce found congenial for his artistic purposes; more instructive than this collection itself was Dante’s attitude towards it, the relationship of supersession which he establishes with the traditions that he engages. In his “Letter to Cangrande,” Dante describes the mode of his epic as “poetic, fictive, descriptive, digressive, [and] transumptive,” with the last adjective, as John Hollander notes, “seeming to sum up the others” (qtd. in Hollander 139). It is, of course, no coincidence that Joyce’s own epic mode could be described in identical terms: as his immediate antecedent in the tradition of epic transumption, Dante is, for Joyce, both an inheritance as well as an exemplary heir.

Throughout his fiction, Joyce not only incorporates material from Dante’s epic, but also adopts an identical disposition towards the literary and religious traditions he inherits. Because of this, critics have recognized that their relationship resists conventional “source studies”; as Jennifer Margaret Fraser puts it: “Dante does not influence Joyce; [rather,] he teaches Joyce how to harness and yet circumvent authority” (8). Instead of simply influencing him, then, Dante teaches Joyce how to be influenced, how to give place to the past while making space for himself. Dante, in other words, offers Joyce a model of literary piety, an example of how to resist and yet retain his various influences and inheritances. The peculiar—and, for Joyce, crucial—characteristic of this piety is that it authorizes authorial deviations to enact its version of devotion; the apparent impieties of each artist are, therefore, the paradigmatic features of this strange virtue’s practice. Virgil’s paradoxical reproach of the pilgrim in Inferno, in fact, characterizes the kind of piety that each of them observes: “pietà lives only when it is quite dead” (XX.28, mod.).

In The Divine Comedy, Dante enacts this double-gesture of piety by venerating the tradition he inherits, while vindicating the new values which he himself represents. By taking the ancient poet of the Empire as his guide, he adopts and adapts pietas, the Roman virtue par excellence, into a Christian one—and simultaneously critiques the courtly connotations which its vernacular cognate had acquired. And, by transposing his dynamic interaction between pagan past and Christian present on to the personal relationship of the pilgrim and his guide, Dante creates a fictional vehicle for conveying both his pity and his piety: his filial feeling for the tradition he inherits, as well as the distance from it that his own poetic achievement establishes. Joyce, for his part, emulates this example of piety with exacting fidelity; but the Dantean template he adopts is altered in one crucial respect. Whereas Dante can dramatize his interaction with his poetic tradition through the personified protagonists of his epic journey, Joyce’s own engagement must occur above the action of his narrative, and is played out, instead, on the level of form. Although Ulysses reached presentational complexities unprecedented in English literature to that point, the content of its narrative is meticulously unremarkable. The novel, then, pursues its epic enterprise without any epic action as such, and participates in the

2 A vision of hell, of course, is the aesthetic centerpiece of A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man (95-118).
genre not in what it presents, but in the way its material is presented: “the central event of the novel,” as Margaret McBride observes, “is the novel’s own narration” (29). And Joyce’s piety is, likewise, a feature of his novel’s narrative form.

The formal dynamics of Joyce’s Dantesque piety are demonstrated in the first chapter of *Ulysses*, “Telemachus”. Here, the drama of Joyce’s engagement with his religious and literary legacies is enacted in the presentation of its material and the network of allusions interwoven into the locutions of its central character, Stephen. Embedded in this episode, then, is a kind of formal “counterplot” to its action, resembling the one which Geoffrey Hartmann observes in *Paradise Lost*. In his influential article, Hartmann argues that the imagery Milton employs in certain similes insinuates a sense of “divine imperturbability” into scenes describing the machinations of Satan and his minions (3). Similarly, in “Telemachus,” even as Stephen consolidates his status as the novel’s recalcitrant rebel angel, the allusions incorporated into his declarations put Joyce at a certain distance from the defiance of his fictional double. In *A Portrait*, Stephen asserts that “[t]he artist, like the God of creation, remains within or behind or beyond or above his handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent, paring his fingernails” (189). Such authorial detachment, however, is only achieved by Joyce when, in *Ulysses*, Stephen’s impious rejection of Catholicism is filtered through his creator’s pious dependence on Dante.

**From Portrait to Pentimento**

In the last pages of Joyce’s first novel, Stephen vows to depart from Ireland and all that it represents—in his distillation, “nationality, language, [and] religion” (179)—so that the eponymous young man can mature and realize his artistic potential. Moved by the promise of his bright future, he scribbles excitedly in the penultimate diary entry which concludes the novel: “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” (224). But when Stephen sub-

...reappears at the outset of *Ulysses*—a novel set in the same year of *A Portrait*’s first dateline, 1904—he is a penniless pedagogue, living in Dublin, in a tower built by the British, awakening to a mock Catholic Mass. Joyce shows at a glance, then, that the ambitious Icarus, who wanted to slip the nets of the Celtic clan and Catholic creed, has not taken flight; indeed, he is no longer even the central character of Joyce’s fiction, and is, instead, recast within the novel’s epic structure as the spiritual son of its true hero, Leopold Bloom. Stephen’s diminution, however, allows Joyce to demonstrate his own maturation, as well as his elected affiliations; the expectations created in the last lines of this previous work are, thus, consciously disappointed in order to illustrate not only the formal devices his new novel employs but also the deference it displays.

Before the narrative of *A Portrait* is superseded by Stephen’s diary entries, he has a fraught, confessional conversation about religion that is understatedly summarized in his first entry as a “[l]ong talk with Cranly on the subject of my revolt” (219). At the outset of *Ulysses*, an English stranger, Haines, takes the place of the now-estranged friend, Cranly, in a similar exchange concerning his beliefs. After Mulligan’s recitation of his “rather blasphemous” ballad (1.605), Haines asks Stephen: “You’re not a believer, are you? […] I mean, a believer in the narrow sense of the word. Creation from nothing and miracles and a personal God,” a question which Stephen parries, replying: “There’s only one sense of the word, it seems to me” (1.611-614). Haines then offers a cigarette to his interlocutor, and holds “the flaming spunk towards Stephen in the shell of his hands,” saying:

—Yes, of course […] Either you believe or you don’t, isn’t it? Personally I couldn’t stomach that idea of a personal God. You don’t stand for that, I suppose?
—You behold in me, Stephen said with grim displeasure, a horrible example of free thought. He walked on, waiting to be spoken to, trailing his ashplant by his side. Its ferrule followed lightly on the path, squealing at his heels. My familiar, after me, calling, Steeeeeeeeeeeephen! A wavering line along the path. They will walk on it tonight,
coming here in the dark. He [Mulligan] wants that key. It is mine. I paid the rent. Now I eat his salt bread. Give him the key too. All. He will ask for it. That was in his eyes.

—After all, Haines began.... Stephen turned and saw that the cold gaze which had measured him was not all unkind.

—After all, I should think you are able to free yourself. You are your own master, it seems to me.

—I am a servant of two masters, Stephen said, an English and an Italian.

—Italian? Haines said. A crazy queen, old and jealous. Kneel down before me.

—And a third, Stephen said, there is who wants me for odd jobs.

—Italian? Haines said again. What do you mean? (1.620-642)

In response to this question, Stephen identifies these two masters: “The imperial British state, Stephen answered, his colour rising, and the holy Roman catholic and apostolic church”—a reply which then precipitates an acerbic mental reverie as the Church’s “proud potent titles [clang] over Stephen’s memory the triumph of their brazen bells” (1.644-651).

In her classic study, Joyce and Dante: The Shaping Imagination, Mary T. Reynolds reproduces a galley proof of this passage, corrected in the author’s hand, which shows that Joyce struck out the word “food,” substituted for it “salt bread,” and thus added an allusion to Cacciaguida’s prophecy of Dante’s exile to Stephen’s suspicious stream of thoughts (188). This detail from the novel’s compositional history might make this allusion—which Reynolds identifies as the novel’s first (272)—seem like an afterthought, a late, inessential flourish. However, given the other Dantean material interspersed throughout this exchange, it is more likely that this explicit reference was added for the reader’s sake—to “[g]ive him the key too,” as it were.3 Instead of an afterthought, Joyce’s inserted allusion is, rather, an unsubtle hint about how the entire passage should be read.

3 This line in Ulysses anticipates the “final” two sentences of Finnegans Wake: “The keys to. Given!” (628).

Servant of Two Masters

[W]hen the question, often put, “If on a desert island what one book?” was again raised, Joyce said: I should hesitate between Dante and Shakespeare but not for long (Budgen 184).

Between Haines’s two questions, the fire from his tinderbox is described as a “flaming spunk […] in the shell of his hands”—a seemingly trivial detail but one which offers the unarticulated link between Stephen’s first and second reply. What Stephen thinks to himself as he watches the flame’s tongue is not narrated; but, formed as he is by the Church’s—and the Florentine poet’s—“visions of hell,” it is possible that the fire held in the niche of Haines’s hands reminds him of the souls trapped in the flames which enclose the sinners in the pouch of thieves in Inferno XXVI—the most famous of whom, of course, is the Homeric hero with the Latinized name, Ulysses.

This connection with the later cantos of Inferno would help to account for Stephen’s second answer to Haines which, as Geert Lernout notes, employs a line from a letter Joyce wrote to his brother describing his appearance during a memorial procession for Giordano Bruno: “I was a horrible example of free thought” (106). It is telling that Joyce employs a description of himself at the memorial of the famous heretic in Stephen’s answer to Haines; but equally significant is his arrangement of this self-quotation as the direct object of the verb, “behold”—a grammatical formulation which makes Stephen’s self-description resemble the reflexive construction in the final striking statement, not of Dante’s defiant adventurer, Ulysses, but of Bertran de Born, who appears two cantos later: “And thus, in me one sees the law of counter-penalty” (XXVIII.141). Bertran de Born would be an especially appropriate figure for Stephen to employ in response to Haines: a poet punished in Hell for turning an English son against his royal father, he would align exactly with Stephen, a subversive servant of the two (ostensible) masters he mentions, God’s Church and Britain’s Queen. And this oblique allusion to the infamous cephalophore would prepare for the appearance, later in the novel, of Bloom’s hallucinated grandfa-
ther who unscrews his head and holds it in his hands (see 15.2636).

Joyce's allusion to Cacciaguida thus does not mark an inauguration but a culmination of Dantean echoes in Stephen's mind—echoes, moreover, suggested by the actions and questions of his companion. Haines's inadvertent evocations of Dante themselves reach a high-water mark after Stephen's quotation of Cacciaguida when, as Gifford notes (25), he unconsciously alludes to Virgil's liberation of the pilgrim in Purgatorio as he says, in passing: “I should think you are able to free yourself. You are your own master”. Virgil's double-coronation of the pilgrim, which Haines's comment recalls, remains in Stephen's mind throughout the novel as a kind of contradictory counsel: a failed exile, he must internalize, not an achieved freedom, but his clandestine rebellion. At a climactic moment later in the day, he says, tapping his brow: “But in here it is I must kill the priest and the king” (15.4436-4437), which evokes Virgil's coronation through its inversion by Blake, who, in a letter, “speaks of The Mind, in which every one is King & Priest in his own House” (qtd. in Thornton 420).

But, more significant than even the weaving of this subtle Dantean vein through the novel is Stephen's cryptic response that follows, in which he styles himself “a servant of two masters.” Although he immediately reveals the English and the Italian to whom he is enthralled, a different identification is insinuated clearly enough. For while Stephen may be an unwilling subject of the English State and the Roman Church within the novel, Joyce is a willing ward of each country's national artist: Shakespeare and Dante. Shakespeare already features prominently in this opening chapter and becomes a major presence later in the novel when Stephen offers his provocative biographical reading of the poet-playwright's oeuvre in the National Library. And Shakespeare, whose life and work are so clearly incorporated into the content of Ulysses, is contrasted with Joyce's other, Italian master, Dante, whose presence is elliptically indicated through the form of this highly allusive passage itself.

Between Autobiography and Impersonality

Stephen's biographical reading of Shakespeare's art in a later episode in the novel marks a departure from the poetics of impersonality which he had propounded in A Portrait. This new theory establishes, within Ulysses, an interpretive apparatus through which the creator can be disclosed through his occluding creation. His approach seems to be in deliberate imitation of the one which Basil Hallward proposes in The Picture of Dorian Gray: “Every portrait that is painted with feeling is a portrait of the artist, not of the sitter” (52). Even though Mulligan dismisses any such resemblance with Wilde's theory—“Pooh! […] We have grown out of Wilde and paradoxes” (1.554)—a resemblance not only persists but the same kind of reflexive disclosure is demonstrated by Haines's immediate (but erroneous) reaction to Mulligan's summary of Stephen's theory: “It’s quite simple. He proves by algebra that Hamlet's grandson is Shakespeare's grandfather and that he himself is the ghost of his own father,” which receives the incredulous response: “What? Haines said, beginning to point at Stephen. He himself?” (1.555-558, emphasis added). Haines's pronominal misidentification of Stephen for Shakespeare offers a sort of automatic verification of his theory as the distinction between interpreter and the interpreted becomes blurred, and the hermeneut is implicated in—and thus disclosed through—his own exegesis. Stephen's unorthodox biographical approach is all the more significant because of Shakespeare's reputed impersonality, his apparent self-concealment behind the veil of his art. Stephen's theory, then, uncovers a dialectic between effacement and revelation similar to the one Samuel C. Chew observes in Henry James, whereby the artist remains “present in every page of every book from which he sought so assiduously to eliminate himself” (1550).

Joyce's adoption of Shakespeare as the exemplar of an artistic sublimation of life into work, however, is made in tandem with his parallel (and paradoxical) election of Dante: Joyce takes the famously autobiographical epic poet as the counterintuitive patron of his revised aesthetic of impersonality. If the lesson Joyce takes from Shakespeare is that self-effacement can be a form of
In her view, does not just possess the requisite insights for the novel’s composition, but the novel itself is his creation. Even McBride’s robust reading of the novel’s metafictional valence, however, affirms—and, in a sense, depends upon—the distance between teller and tale which her interpretation ultimately seeks to collapse. As Stephen puts it: “Where there is a reconciliation […] there must have been first a sundering” (9.334).

It is under this disjunctive sign that Stephen’s (and Joyce’s) commitment to two masters in “Telemachus” should be read: the very passage wherein Stephen signals his antipathy to the Church and State is, crucially, the one through which Joyce affirms his authorial indifference as well as his artistic debt. When Stephen responds to Haines, the very description of his inhibiting and overlapping allegiances is made, not with further allusions to literature, but to St. Luke’s account of the Sermon on the Mount: “No servant can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or he will hold to the one, and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon” (Lk 16:13). Caught in a similar conflicting double-indenture, however, Stephen creates an alternative through his devotion to neither of his political or ecclesial masters, and his detestation of them both. Joyce, on the other hand, takes the other implied alternative, embracing both Shakespeare and Dante and the opposed attitudes to autobiography and impersonality which they are made to represent. Paradoxically, the apparent double-bind they constitute actually liberates Joyce from the exclusive adherence to each imperative: his novel is, therefore, neither a concealment nor a confession. And, while Budgen reports that, given the choice between Dante and Shakespeare, Joyce would eventual choose Shakespeare—“[t]he Englishman is richer and would get my vote” (184)—he is under no obligation to such alternatives in Ulysses, and fully embraces the incompatible models that each master represents.

Acceptable Sirens

Stephen’s impassioned declaration of apostasy in “Telemachus,” therefore, does not ventriloquize his creator’s true feelings and is,
instead, spoken in a sort of authorial “middle voice”; Joyce escapes the very dyad in which his character finds himself confined through the expression of sentiments that he no longer needs to espouse himself. Joyce, in a sense, overcomes his hatred for the Church when it is articulated by his ostensible avatar—in the same way that, in the Divine Comedy, Dante dramatizes the growth that he has already achieved through the pilgrim’s progressive purgation. Indeed, Joyce activates the Greek etymology of this episode’s name by putting himself at a distance (tele-) from the battle (machus) he depicts, achieving indifference to the very influences which Stephen strives to escape by anchoring himself within a network of filial obligations to his literary masters. And, just as Dante’s pilgrim cannot proceed without his own paternal patron, Virgil, so too Joyce, after encoding his affiliation to his two proximate predecessors, can recognize the ultimate sponsor of his epic enterprise with an enigmatic aside: when Stephen says, to no one in particular, that he has “a third” master, Homer—Joyce’s epic progenitor par excellence—is acknowledged behind this obvious reference to Ireland through a deferential circumlocution, the “odd jobs” required of Stephen being a self-deprecating allusion to his high vocation of forging the “uncreated conscience of [his] race” (Portrait 224).

That the author’s enabling inheritances should appear allusively beneath Stephen’s oppressive ones allows Joyce to expose an irreducible double-aspect of influence: the definitive forces which shape the artist are never fully escaped or suppressed; they can only be accurately represented. This, moreover, is a lesson Joyce takes from the Homeric epic itself. At the outset of her study, Reynolds reproduces a passage from Bacon’s The Wisdom of the Ancients—which gives an allegorical gloss of Ulysses’ encounter with the sirens:

The first means of escaping is to resist the earliest temptation in the beginning, and diligently avoid and cut off all occasions that may solicit or sway the mind; and this is well represented by shutting up the ears, a kind of remedy to be necessarily used with mean and vulgar minds such as the retinue of Ulysses. But nobler spirits may converse, even in the midst of pleasures, if the mind be well guarded with constancy and resolution. And thus some delight to make a severe trial of their own virtue, and thoroughly acquaint themselves with the folly and madness of pleasures, without complying or being wholly given up to them. (Bacon 323, see Reynolds 10)

Bacon’s moral for Joyce is that the artist must endure his seductions, and “thoroughly acquaint” himself with “the folly and madness” of his rejected religion without “complying or being wholly given up” to the pleasures of the past. Joyce’s allusions to Dante thus enable the fictional overhearing of Catholicism’s siren song: like the cords which restrain Ulysses, they are a suturing strength through which he transfers his allegiance from the Church itself to its literary legacy embodied in Dante.

The ingenuity of Joyce’s recalibrated relationship to Catholicism is its catholicity, its magnanimous, inclusive indulgence. This attitude might be described as “subversive toleration,” for although it enables the representation of religious material of all kinds—from sacred doctrines to stray detritus—it does so in order to exorcize its allure and neutralize its nostalgic power. In The Swerve, Stephen Greenblatt describes the history of Lucretius’ survival in the West as an illustration of the way that heterodox doctrine can circulate under the aegis of art: it is this kind of “aesthetic toleration” which enables “the survival of unacceptable ideas.” Joyce, for his part, extends the same exemption to Catholicism’s “stray material,” permitting the Church’s unsuppressed, acceptable ideas to circulate in his fiction precisely in order to resist them by means of that selfsame art.

In their final conversation in A Portrait, Cranly asks Stephen if he believes in the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist:

4 Although Reynolds reproduces Arthur Gorges’ contemporary translation of De Sapientia Veterrum that appears in the edition in Joyce’s library, I have here given Peter Shaw’s more fluid, 18th-century rendering of Bacon’s Latin.

5 Greenblatt presented material from The Swerve at a lecture sponsored by the Mahindra Humanities Center at Harvard entitled: “Aesthetic Toleration: Lucretius and the Survival of Unacceptable Ideas,” a title from which I have borrowed for my own.
Stephen replies: “I neither believe in it nor disbelieve in it” (211). But the attitude to which Stephen here aspires cannot be achieved by the young artist simply through an assertion of indifference; he lacks not only a relationship with what is rejected but, more importantly, a representation of its continuing influence on him. In response to Stephen's answer, Cranly observes: “It is a curious thing, do you know [...] how your mind is supersaturated with the religion in which you say you disbelieve” (212). It is only in *Ulysses*, however, that Joyce is able to turn this supersaturation into a strength, as Dante's allusive presence—detectable on the level of formal arrangement—enables him to encounter Catholicism through the mediating membrane of literary history.

Works Cited