

## Devout Negation in “Araby”

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### *Abstract*

This paper aligns the experience of love in “Araby” with the precepts of Catholic belief, the social organization of commerce, and the constitution of the subject. The ideal of negation in religious belief first renders the adolescent love holy; this devotion, the paper argues, denies Mangan’s sister an existence beyond the narrator’s fantasies. The boy’s journey to Araby, in turn, moves the experience of love into the sphere of commerce, where he buys no token of his love and instead encounters bitter self-awareness. This negation, the paper concludes, advances subject formation and leaves the narrator newly sensitive to the condition of women.

**I**n “Araby” love follows the principles of religion to confront those of commerce in order to generate self-development through negation. *A Portrait of the Artist* says of Stephen Dedalus, “In vague sacrificial or sacramental acts alone his will seemed drawn to go forth to encounter reality” (*P* 159), and the autobiographical hero of “Araby” applies religious techniques to a romantic quest in order to build his mind by finding reality. He does so at the end by reaching the goal he sought, which is what Slavoj Žižek refers to as the negation that generates the subject. He also finally sees the conditions women are subject to, and this allows him to see conflicts in himself concealed by his initial romantic dreams.

Religious devotion is built on negation through the principle that the worse off you are materially, the better, spiritually. The technology of meditation involves denying or abstracting the senses in order to have spiritual thoughts. *The Devout Communicant, Or Pious Meditations and Aspirations for the Three Days Before and the Three Days After Receiving the Holy Eucharist* (1813), by Pacificus Baker, one of three books the boy finds on the first page of “Araby,” is based on the principle of building the significance of the sacred event by focusing on what

precedes and follows. The narrator of "Araby" tries to keep his love as far as possible from sensual realization in order to keep it holy. He focuses on before and after, trying to stay in the darkness of anticipation and to avoid the light of action. The machinery of repression is here fitted to a heroic purpose.

One of Joyce's "Epiphanies" of 1900-03 speaks for his pious adolescence, addressing one of his two mothers named Mary:

Hail, holy Queen, Mother of Mercy, our life, our sweetness and our hope! Tomorrow and every day after I hope to bring you some virtue as an offering for I know you will be pleased with me if I do.<sup>1</sup>

The Virgin is used for self-development here, and such usage is part of an enormous European tradition that extended to the earthly beloved: courtly love continually justified itself by arguing that the knight developed his virtues through his devotion to the lady. The plot of "Araby" shows a boy following a course of spiritual exercise that builds him up.

The boy seeks to deny his senses as much as possible in order to feel the romantic sensations with which the idea of Mangan's sister overwhelms him:

I was thankful that I could see so little. All my senses seemed to desire to veil themselves and, feeling I was about to slip from them, I pressed the palms of my hands together until they trembled, murmuring: *O love!* (*D* 31)

The position of his hands suggests prayer, but the emphasis is on the negation of what he invokes. Žižek, following Hegel and Lacan, argues that all transcendent objects are negations. Images that represent the sublime, such as sacred objects, always indicate the impossibility of seeing what they represent. The narrator cannot see the face of Mangan's sister. If he did, it would no longer be sublime.

The boy is proud of how indirectly he can deal with experience. His ability to treat appearances as something beyond themselves is the substance of his intelligence. He says of his uncle, "I heard him talking to himself and heard the hallstand rocking when it had received the weight of his overcoat. I could interpret these signs" (*D* 33). It is important to him not to say, "He was drunk." The boy uses his interpretive power to control annoying figures such as his uncle, who never stops being an obstacle to the boy's dreams. What the boy does not see until the end is how far his subjection of his love to his own skills is self-love. "Araby,"

in which the boy repeatedly watches the girl from his hiding place (*D* 30), adds to our list of scenes of possible masturbation in Joyce's works.

The kernel of romantic love appears in "Araby" as information withheld. The girl's name has great power—"her name was like a summons to all my foolish blood" (*D* 30)—but the story does not reveal it. It is too sacred to be mentioned, like the Jewish name of God. Garry Leonard, in his outstanding treatment of "Araby," points out that the boy sees peripheral details of the girl, but avoids looking in her eyes.<sup>2</sup> Leonard argues that the narrator has to support his masculine subject in Lacanian terms by denying her independent feminine feelings, reducing her to the object of his fantasies.

The code of courtly love holds that a man should ask as little as possible and a woman should give as little as possible: his generosity and her haughtiness elevate love away from the reality of male domination. Meanwhile, however, he builds his strength by playing the role of her champion. When the boy recalls how Mangan's sister asked if he was going to Araby, he doesn't know if he answered yes or no (*D* 31), and afterward, when he thinks of her, "I could not call my wandering thoughts together" (*D* 32). His "confused adoration" (*D* 31) shows her power over him, just as Leopold Bloom, when he is dominated by a woman in *Ulysses*, answers, "Nes. Yo" (*U* 15.2766). But the uncertainty of the boy in "Araby" also reflects the fact that going to the bazaar, as well as being her champion, is an almost inconceivable activity for a sensitive twelve-year-old. When he reaches Araby, he has trouble remembering why he came (*D* 35). It is all too much for him, until he does it; and so it represents the greatest possible extension of his powers.

The disorientation the boy goes through strengthens him like a tough training that shakes one up. As the knight of Mangan's sister, he is perfecting himself. The aristocratic aspect of his ambition appears in the way he uses her to justify his alienation from the people. When he goes with his aunt to market, the loud, crude voices of lower-class people offend him, so that he uses his devotion to her to the rabble: "These noises converged in a single sensation of life for me. I imagined that I bore my chalice safely through a throng of foes" (*D* 31). The chalice joins indistinguishably his sacred obligation to her and the phallus or male authority he derives by using her to reflect his will; and both of these forces put him in conflict with the masses. In fact, the grossness of the crowd, which is mainly the threat of other men, motivates his mission as he heads for the train: "The sight of the streets thronged with buyers and glaring with gas recalled to me the purpose of my journey" (*D* 34). His mission is to distinguish himself.

The boy also uses his infatuation as a tool to train his mind, to focus himself on ideal principles; this is shown by the paragraph that follows the dialogue with the girl that ends with him saying that if he goes, he will bring her something. Insofar as he is oriented toward the world, she interferes with his activities early in the paragraph: "her image came between me and the page I strove to read" (*D* 32). In the middle of the paragraph, he asks for leave to go, committing himself to the trip. After this, "I had hardly any patience with the serious work of life which, now that it stood between me and my desire, seemed to me child's play" (*D* 32). The phenomenology shifts so that instead of his dreams being an obstacle to the ordinary world, the world becomes an obstacle to his dreams. This happens through his devotion to the girl, which expands his ability to see the patterns behind reality. Without this ability, he might not be able to develop aspirations and theories, to project his personal feeling into a vision. A letter Joyce wrote to Nora Barnacle on 5 September 1909 shows that he was attracted to such ideas enough to give her credit for his work: "*Everything* that is noble and exalted and deep and true and moving in what I write comes, I believe from you" (*SL* 169).

Now that this vision has become the boy's goal, however, he must pursue it into the real world. The projecting of the boy's dreams onto actuality through the trip to Araby corresponds to a movement out of darkness into light. For the boy's initial situation is one of hiding in darkness, first collectively with the other children in "our shadow" (*D* 30), then in the front parlor with the blind pulled down so he could not be seen (*D* 30), and then in the dark upper rooms of the house (*D* 33).

There are several scenes in the story in which the upper area is dark and the lower one is light, starting with the first scene in which the boy appears at dusk: "The space of sky above us was the color of ever-changing violet and towards it the lamps of the street lifted their feeble lanterns" (*D* 30). The dark upstairs may represent repression, and it is significant in this context that Mangan's sister is repeatedly described as reflecting light from an external source that seems to touch only the edges of her "brown figure" (*D* 30). The boy wants to stay in the darkness looking toward the light, as he is in the ecstatic scene when he presses his hands together before the girl speaks to him: "Some distant lamp or lighted window gleamed below me" (*D* 31).

As Leonard emphasizes, it is the girl who initiates the conversation, and her desire is what drives him on his quest though he avoids knowing what that desire actually is.<sup>3</sup> Once she speaks to him, he is contained by the symbolic system of manhood, and has no choice but to devote himself to her. Before he is committed, he is in a state in which

she puts words in his mouth: “Her name sprang to my lips at moments in strange prayers and praises which I myself did not understand. . . . My body was like a harp and her words and gestures were like fingers running upon the wires” (*D* 31). But once he takes his position as her knight, he finds that he has to put words in her mouth; and he finds that this position, which would seem powerful, is actually not only vulnerable, but intolerable to someone of his sensitivity. Throughout Joyce’s career he treats the aggressive male role as destructive of human feelings for the man caught in it.

What the boy finds at the bazaar has generally been recognized as the commercialization of love, the counting of coins, the selling of beauty, the market in which love has to involve him. But the center of the scene may be its epiphanic dialogue between a “young lady” and two “gentlemen,” all talking with English accents, representatives of what is socially proper:

- O, I never said such a thing!
- O, but you did.
- O, but I didn’t!
- Didn’t she say that?
- Yes. I heard her.
- O, there’s a . . . fib. (*D* 35)

Leonard points out that she softens *lie* to “fib,”<sup>4</sup> (93), so she is already giving up some of her right to know what she said. Bloom remembers putting words into the mouth of a prostitute: “Parrots” (*U* 13.868-71). After the lady at the stall attends to the protagonist, she and the men return “to talk of the same subject” (*D* 35)—as if all they ever talk about is the men’s insistence that she is saying something that she denies. Conventional gender roles dictate that the man has to put words of desire in the woman’s mouth, while she is not allowed to feel desire for herself.

Seeing how men treat women, the boy (who has already embarked on this path of appropriation) sees her side, sees how the creature woman whom he took to be transcendent is a product of male construction. The cuteness of “fib,” the feminine pliability, is compelled by male force. Mangan’s sister’s ability to put words into the boy’s mouth or soul depends on her fullness, but the bazaar scene empties her out. The realization of how she is compromised by male authority is a loss of innocence. He realizes that his motivation was false because he wanted to give her something, but all he could give her in the system that engaged and defined them was a token of control given to a creature of calculation. As the bazaar with its exotic trimming covered venality, so

the magic of young love covered socially determined powerplay. He wanted to believe in the nobility of his dream, but now he sees that it masked a base fantasy and that devout communication speaks to nothing.

Zizek observes that the subject constitutes itself by realizing that the sublime object it has believed in is a negation.<sup>5</sup> The realization of the emptiness of the other is the only way to develop the subject by weaning it from dependence on the Other. Joyce was weaning himself from dependence on family, Church, and nation, and was going to wean himself from narrative and language. Of course he could never do without these things altogether, but he made progress; and this progress was made through such moments of negation.

Shoshana Felman argues that Freud developed his awareness of the unconscious by focusing on the resistances of women, particularly in the case of Irma's dream. By feeling the suffering of his hysteric patients and listening to their complaints, Freud found the knot of the unknown that involved him as a man and an authority in self-division.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, the boy at the end of "Araby," by seeing how the position of woman is imposed on her, sees through the subjective unity that he had used Mangan's sister to derive for himself. Now he sees himself as divided, and sees the pride that unified him as vanity that drives and derides him. It may be true, as Leonard asserts, that he is bound to go back to depending on the male position.<sup>7</sup> But he will not forget his anguish, and this knowledge of himself will help him to see the truth about women and to relate to them with more understanding. If he is Joyce, he will continue to seek the truth about women for the rest of his life; and he will be kept from finalizing this truth by his awareness of how he is split. As Ellie Ragland-Sullivan puts it, the Joycean epiphany "shows the place of division and the 'truth' of loss around which humans elaborate lives."<sup>8</sup>

The boy's ability to see himself completes his development, ending the group of three stories about him. After this the first person is left behind because the artistic function has been prepared. And because the recognition of the symbolic system is a recognition of women's position, the story that follows is "Eveline," which shows the forces that crush a woman's soul.

**Notes**

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Scholes and Richard M. Kain, *The Workshop of Daedalus: James Joyce and the Raw Materials for "A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man"* (Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1965) 17.

<sup>2</sup> Garry M. Leonard, *Reading "Dubliners" Again: A Lacanian Perspective* (Syracuse: Syracuse UP, 1993) 78.

<sup>3</sup> See Leonard 75-79.

<sup>4</sup> See Leonard 93.

<sup>5</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989) 196.

<sup>6</sup> Shoshana Felman, *What Does a Woman Want? Reading and Sexual Difference* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1993) 100-11.

<sup>7</sup> See Leonard 80, 94.

<sup>8</sup> Ellie Ragland-Sullivan and R. B. Kershner, "More French Connections," *James Joyce Quarterly* 26 (Fall 1988) 115-27.