

“Ireland Is the Old Sow that Eats Her Farrow”

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In *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* we find many references to the soul. This word has religious connotations in chapter 3, where the protagonist, Stephen, is in a retreat listening to a lurid description of the torments of the sinful soul after death.¹ The word soul is also used in a more general sense apart from the religious one where it means that immortal part of man subject to the judgement of God. The more general meaning of the word refers to the emotional and intellectual nature of man, a part of which is his freedom, as an individual, to develop these two aspects of himself. This contrasts with the narrower, religious meaning of the word soul. The Romantics often used the term soul and “freedom of the soul” to speak of what we nowadays call the freedom to be oneself, in other words, freedom to develop emotionally and intellectually. It is a word used in this way by Shelley and other romantic poets and also used with this very meaning in *A Portrait*.

Joyce's reading of the romantic poets and of Shelley in particular is something which has left its mark on the book. We find the freedom of the artist, this intellectual freedom, referred to using imagery of flight as in Shelley's “Ode to Liberty,” for instance.² Joyce, as we shall see in the following, speaks of the freedom of the soul, this very romantic concept in similar terms. In Shelley's poem the soul hovers “in verse” like a “young eagle” and it spurns “the chains of dismay.” As will be seen in the following passage from *A Portrait* the central imagery used to describe the protagonist's desire for freedom is that of flight. Even to an inattentive reader the metaphor and images of birds and flight that abound must be noticeable. The quality of the language and the very word soul used in this way show the influence of the Romantic movement, as the following conversation between Stephen, the protagonist and his nationalist friend Davin will show. Here it is made clear that what is curbing the freedom of Stephen's artist soul is his country, language and religion:

—The soul is born, he said vaguely . . . It has a slow and dark birth, more mysterious than the birth of the body. When the soul of a man is born in this country there are nets flung at it to hold it back from flight. You talk to me of nationality, language, religion. I shall try to fly those nets.

. . . Too deep for me, Stevie, he said. But a man's country comes first, Stevie. You can be a poet or a mystic after.

—Do you know what Ireland is? asked Stephen with cold violence. Ireland is the old sow that eats her farrow. (P 184-85)

Stephen is speaking of his nation, race and religion as if they were his enemies, because they hold him back from this freedom to develop. He despises Davin's narrow-minded approach to patriotism, the putting of one's country above everything else and the resulting belittlement of one's emotional and intellectual nature, those very important elements in the

Romantic's definition of soul. This is made obvious when Davin says that Stephen's ideas are too deep for him and that one's country comes before all else, before poetry and mysticism. This type of nationalism and patriotism embodied in the person of Davin is unacceptable and even abhorrent from Stephen's point of view. He scoffs at Davin's concept of the world "that lay beyond England" of which "he knew only the foreign legion of France in which he spoke of serving" (P 164). Davin unthinkingly "stood armed against in obedience to a password" anything "of thought or feeling" that came from English culture (P 164). Here he shows himself to be emotionally and intellectually inhibited in his inability to accept enlightenment because it comes from an enemy country. Davin is quite obviously soulless, according to the romantic interpretation of the word, he is a "dullwitted loyal serf," a "young peasant" who "worshipped the sorrowful legend of Ireland" (P 164). This is a deprecatory attitude to Davin who is portrayed as being soulless not only because of his intellectual and emotional inhibitions but also because of this inability to think for himself, this superficiality means he will never be capable of true self-development. Davin, who it must be admitted is the antithesis of Stephen, seems to represent Joyce's attitude to the nationalists of his day. But there is something paradoxical in the way Stephen represents Davin as there is in his remarks about religion and country. We feel that Stephen, in common with Davin, worships "the sorrowful legend of Ireland" with his romantic soul but in a not very obvious way and that it has been difficult for him to fly those "nets" of nationality and religion.³ These paradoxical elements will now have to be elaborated in greater detail.

Firstly, let us take Stephen's attitude to Davin. We feel that it is one of contempt and snobbish to an extreme. And yet there seems to be a type of envy of him, a longing for those very characteristics in Davin which he despises, his simplicity and innocence. Later in the book there is a scene in the park where Stephen encounters a couple and without seeing the man's face observes "the hand freckled and strong and shapely," which for him is Davin's hand. This sight provokes an angry reaction from Stephen and the question "Had Davin's simplicity and innocence stung him more secretly?" (P 206).

As I have said Davin is a nationalist and he spouts forth the ideas of the nationalists of his day. It is strange to find Stephen wondering about being hurt by his simplicity and innocence, characteristics in his nationalistic philosophy which he despises earlier. Certainly the simplicity of Davin's nationalism contrasts vividly with Dedalus' complex views on Ireland. Davin is an unthinking prisoner of his country, of all that Stephen wishes to escape and yet we see the protagonist envying him.

A parallel could be drawn between this enigmatic attitude to Davin and nationalism and Stephen's rather contradictory attitude to religion. In a conversation between Stephen and Cranly on the former's unwillingness to do his Easter duty, Cranly points out that "it is a curious thing . . . how your mind is supersaturated with the religion in which you say you disbelieve" (P 216). Cranly proceeds to elaborate on Dedalus's still present fears of and respect for the religion he has stopped practising. He has not fully freed himself from it and this is explicitly stated in *A Portrait*.

In the same way he has not liberated himself from the influence which his country and his nationality have on him either. This is implicitly stated in certain passages in the book. He still fears and respects the Roman Catholic religion and he has similar contradictory feelings of love and hate for his country. It is a curious type of patriotism. In the same conversation quoted

earlier, with Davin, he is in a way defending his country from the nationalists of his time. He tells Davin:

No honourable and sincere man, said Stephen, has given up to you his life and his youth and his affection from the days of Tone to those of Parnell but you sold him to the enemy or failed him in need or reviled him and left him for another. And you invite me to be one of you. I'd see you damned first. (P 184)

Dedalus is indignant at the way his country has been treated by the so-called patriots. And he is angry because he identifies with those he sees as its redeemers. But the treachery of the nationalists is a product of the country that has bred them. Paradoxically, it is from this that it must be defended. It is a country to be protected from itself and from its people. When Dedalus asks Davin here "you mean I am a monster" he himself answers the question by saying "this race and this country and this life produced me, he said. I shall express myself as I am" (P 184).

Perhaps it should be pointed out that one reason which could be suggested for Stephen's and also Joyce's contradictory attitude to Ireland is to be found here. As Stephen admits his race, his country and the nationalists have made him what he is. But to what extent is it possible to hate and abhor completely something that is a part of oneself? In this love-hate relationship the objectivity mentioned in the book as a quality of the artist is replaced by anger and "cold violence." This is a subject about which Stephen feels passionately. Ireland is portrayed as an unnatural phenomenon just like the sow that eats her own offspring, but it has produced him and he has the right to express himself as he is, be it acceptable or not to society. He has freedom of self-expression, that very romantic concept. This very powerful image of the sow eating her young reveals more to us of Joyce's complex relationship with Ireland. Ireland, Mother Ireland, like the sow, devours her offspring. Joyce's expression of himself as an artist, his artist's soul is stifled and killed by his continuing presence in his native land. But even though he condemns Ireland by using this image he, perhaps consciously or unconsciously, chose to portray it as a mother, albeit an unnatural one. And to this mother, to this nation, he is tied by bonds which are strong and difficult to break. He is angry at the fact that his ancestors allowed "a handful of foreigners" to conquer them (P 184). One is always angry about something that one cares about, whether it be love or hate or both. Certainly one is not free of that to which one reacts with such passion, but bound to it by the bonds above-mentioned. Here is another net which the protagonist finds it difficult to fly.

Dedalus's is a curious type of patriotism, that of defending a country against itself, yet it is patriotism all the same. We shall now see that Joyce's concept of the patriotic hero and of heroism in general has been influenced by his reading of the Romantics and by nineteenth-century popular literature. R. B. Kershner speaks of how Joyce's reading of popular literature is observable in his work.⁴ We see in *A Portrait* that the young Stephen imagines meetings with Mercedes, the heroine of *The Count of Monte Cristo*. Perhaps he imagines himself like the hero of this book, except that his heroic task is to defend his country against itself and its people. But the Irish Romantic movement also influenced Joyce as I shall try to make clear when I identify a connection between Joyce's idea of the patriotic hero and his reading of the poems of James Clarence Mangan.

Mangan is one of the most interesting figures to arise from the Irish Romantic movement and, in the opinion of some, the best poet. The biographical details we have of him tell us that he was the archetypal

romantic poet both in the poverty of his short life, his bad health and even to the eccentricity of his dress. He contributed poems to the newspaper the *Nation*, the official organ of the patriotic Young Irelanders. But in his biography of Mangan J. D. Sheridan tells us that this poet's patriotism although "intense enough at times . . . was at best a shadowy and unstable emotion."⁵ He was one of the first to freely translate from the Irish language and to use Irish folklore as a source of inspiration. Again this did not really originate from any patriotic fervour but was simply another characteristic of the romantic writer. He mined the depths of his native folklore. This happened in Germany in the nineteenth-century and English folklore was also a source of inspiration for Wordsworth and Coleridge. Although he was a literary rather than a purely political figure, he wrote what came to be considered almost an anthem by the nationalist movements in Ireland. This was his most popular and most widely read poem "My Dark Rosaleen," a translation from the Irish in which the Gaelic poetic device of personifying Ireland as a dark woman, *Roisín Dubh*, is used. In the poem she is in danger and the poet/hero offers to rescue her. The poem is in ballad form, a poetic mode which does not lend itself to complexities and indeed there is no complexity of thought or feeling in this poem. It is an incitement to action, to patriotic action in defence of a helpless nation. This incitement is all the stronger because it is uncomplicated and so appeals to the greatest number of people. J. D. Sheridan comments in his biography of Mangan that this poem was transformed "into the marching-song of a resurgent people."⁶ It expresses cultural clichés which were acceptable as truths in Ireland and the poem itself became emblematic of patriotic feelings in Ireland afterwards. One of these cultural clichés was the belief that help would come to the Irish from Catholic Europe. We see this in the poem in the following:

There's wine from the royal Pope
Upon the ocean green;
And Spanish ale shall give you hope,
My Dark Rosaleen!
My own Rosaleen!⁷

Mangan and a few other poets formed a part of that flimsy thing, the Irish Romantic movement. He is now almost forgotten in Ireland except for the occasional debate as to his literary worth. Unlike our generation, Joyce and his held Mangan in great esteem. From an early article entitled "James Clarence Mangan," published in *St. Stephen's* in May 1902, in which Joyce gave sympathetic appraisal of the artist's worth, to a later more critical lecture given in Italian in 1907, we can observe a lasting interest on Joyce's part in this romantic poet (CW 73-83, 175-86). Even as late as 1932 Padraic Colum tells us of Joyce's undying belief in this forgotten poet's artistic merit. He quotes Joyce as saying "there is more intensity . . . in a single stanza of Mangan's than in all Swift's writing."⁸

If we take a look at his earlier, less critical essay on this writer we will find Joyce clearing stating his admiration of Mangan's writing. Mangan wrote about Ireland but was as equally fascinated as the writers of popular fiction of his time by the exotic. He wrote a lot of poetry with Turkish, Arabic, Coptic and Persian themes (he was using his imagination because he never visited these places). Joyce wrote of this ability to compose imaginative poetry, whether it be of Ireland or abroad:

Though even in the best of Mangan the presence of alien emotions is sometimes felt the presence of an imaginative personality reflecting the light

of imaginative beauty is more vividly felt. East and West meet in that personality (we know now); images interweave there like soft, luminous scarves and words ring like brilliant mail, and wheter the song is of Ireland or of Istambol it has the same refrain, a prayer that peace may come again to her who has lost her peace, the moonwhite pearl of his soul, Ameen. (CW 78)

The marked influence on Joyce of his reading of popular literature is evident if only in the language he uses in this piece of vague criticism. It is similar to that found in so many nineteenth-century popular Romance novels. Joyce appreciates Mangan's ability to imagine Ireland as part of that exotic world so often described in popular fiction where "East and West meet." Joyce sees Ireland as being a part not only of Europe but also the world. So it is obvious that if Joyce is attracted by this in Mangan's writing he will be as equally repelled by the insularity he finds in his fellow countrymen, their lack of imagination especially as regards the world which lies beyond the shores of Ireland.

To return to *A Portrait* we will see another example of the protagonist's abhorrence of this insularity and ignorance. Dedalus is told by Mulrennan of an old man the latter has met in the West of Ireland. Mulrennan spoke to him "about universe and stars" to which the old man replies "—Ah, there must be terrible queer creatures at the latter end of the world." This provokes both an angry and fearful response from Stephen:

I fear him. I fear his redrimmed horny eyes. It is with him I must struggle all through this night till day come, till he or I lie dead, gripping him by the sinewy throat. . . . (P 227)

In my opinion we can see a marked influence of his reading of Mangan's most famous poem, "My Dark Rosaleen" in this passage.⁹ The attitude of the protagonist is similar to that of the poet/hero of this poem in the exaggerated violence of his reactions. In "My Dark Rosaleen" the poet promises to "scale the blue air" for his country and that "the earth shall rock beneath our tread" or that the river Erne "shall run red" with blood.¹⁰ This, the attitude of a romantic hero, is seen earlier in *A Portrait* when, inspired by *The Count of Monte Cristo*, Stephen imagines himself living through "a long train of adventures" (P 58). Yet in the passage quoted above Stephen's attitude is more complex than that of a romantic hero because what he wishes to struggle with that which he is also defending, his country and its people. It is more complex in that it is the stance of the romantic hero who fights for his people by struggling with them.

I suppose it is necessary to add that a writer will always be influenced in what he writes by all the previous books he has read and we see examples in *A Portrait* of Joyce's reading of popular fiction, for example. But the cultural context which produced this writer will also leave its mark. We have said earlier that it was an accepted truth in Ireland, while it was still a British colony, that liberation would come from continental Europe. We see this in the poem "My Dark Rosaleen." Joyce appreciates Mangan's awareness of Ireland as part of the world, as part of Europe and abhors those who are not aware of the outside world. If the reader keeps this in mind he or she will not be surprised by the last page of *A Portrait*. Dedalus is speculating on what the world outside his country will be like:

The spell of arms and voices: the white arms of roads, their promise of close embraces and the black arms of tall ships that stand against the moon, their tale of distant nations. They are held out to say: We are alone. Come. And the voices say with them: We are your kinsmen. And the air is thick with their

company as they call to me, their kinsman, making ready to go, shaking the wings of their exultant and terrible youth. (P 228)

This is really a romantic's fascination with faraway lands, as we see in Mangan's poetry and the language used has a romantic turn of phrase about it. The outside world is holding its arms out to him and he is under its spell. The mention of the moon reminds us of the references to Shelley earlier in the book.

There are more complex levels than this in the passage, however. He is a "kinsman" of this world and not of his native land, he identifies more with the outside world than with the stifling atmosphere of this homeland. The outside world will bring liberation and salvation to his artist's soul, freedom to fly, freedom to express himself as he is. Europe is bringing artistic freedom to him just as patriots in an earlier time hoped that it would bring political freedom to Ireland. I would suggest that it is part of his consciousness and of the consciousness of the Irish race to look to Europe, to look abroad for salvation. It is something like a dogma, strengthened by poems such as "My Dark Rosaleen" that help will come from abroad. Only in this case it is salvation for the artist, it will bring him freedom but not freedom in any patriotic sense of the word.

Indeed we can ask ourselves the question: was the writer interested in his own freedom of self-expression only or was there a patriotic element in his readiness to flee Ireland and look for help from abroad? He says in the last page of *A Portrait*:

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. (P 228)

Perhaps he sees himself as an intellectual, artistic saviour of Ireland, of his "race," helping them to save themselves from themselves, from their own ignorance and narrow-mindedness. It could be suggested that just as he wants to achieve personal self-expression as a creative artist he also wants to help his race to "forge" their "uncreated conscience."

It is a fact that throughout his artistic career Joyce wrote about Ireland and was obsessed by it. Was this due only to the "difficulty" he had in flying "those nets" of nationality and religion? Could it also be due to an implicit patriotic impulse? Perhaps he wants to save the soul of his nation and help his fellow countrymen to develop both emotionally and intellectually, so freeing them from their ignorance and insularity. This is a romantic use of the word "soul" referring to the emotional and intellectual nature of man, part of which is the freedom to develop without inhibitions or restrictions. And Joyce, like the Count of Monte Cristo or the poet/hero of "My Dark Rosaleen," will bring this freedom to his nation.

To sum up, it is always interesting to notice the influence of the Romantic movement on such a writer as Joyce. Here we see two main features in *A Portrait* which are directly traceable to it: Joyce's idea of "soul" and the concept present in his work of the patriotic hero fighting for his country. What is interesting about the latter is how Joyce changes this concept of the romantic hero and gives it a depth of meaning and complexity characteristic of his work in general and as evidenced here in *A Portrait*.

Notes

1. James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (London: Granada, 1977) 103-14. Henceforth quoted parenthetically.

2. P. B. Shelley, *Poetical Works*, ed. Thomas Hutchinson (London: Oxford UP, 1905) 603-604.
3. We could say the same for language but this is a topic which requires a far more in-depth treatment than is possible here.
4. R. B. Kershner, *Joyce, Bakhtin and Popular Literature: Chronicles of Disorder* (Chapel Hill and London: U of North Carolina P, 1989) 195-209.
5. J. D. Sheridan, *James Clarence Mangan* (Dublin: Talbot, 1937) 9.
6. Sheridan 9.
7. James Clarence Mangan, "My Dark Rosaleen," *The Oxford Book of English Verse: 1250-1918*, ed. Arthur Quiller-Couch (London: Oxford UP, 1900) 792.
8. Padraic Colum, "Portrait of James Joyce," *The Dublin Magazine* 7.2 (1932): 43.
9. It goes without saying that Joyce would have been familiar with Mangan's famous poem "My Dark Rosaleen." Colum tells us that Joyce spoke to him of this poem. Joyce did not consider it to be Mangan at his best ("Portrait of James Joyce" 43).
10. *The Oxford Book of English Verse* 794-95.