

Joyce's Other Portraits

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Abstract

When trying to sublimate James Joyce's thoughts on the conditions of art in his time, critics have mainly approached his novels *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and *Ulysses*. The character to receive a major critical attention on Joyce's discussions on art, artists and Aestheticism has been Stephen Dedalus. This is a logical and expected consequence of the strong autobiographical connection between character and creator. The intention of this paper is, firstly, to provide a theoretical framework from which to discuss the stance of art and artists from the late nineteenth-century onwards and, secondly, to focus the limelight on earlier Joycean portrayals of artists in two stories in *Dubliners*, namely "A Mother" and "A Little Cloud." It will be my point that the artists featuring in these stories account for a materialistic vision of the harsh conditions for artistic production in turn-of-the-century Ireland.

Keywords: the fictional artist, cultural and material conditions, late nineteenth century, "A Mother," "A Little Cloud."

1. Turning to art at the turn of the century

The beginning of the twentieth century was certainly a challenging time for a man who, working on exile, was

unsure of ever being able to return „some day“ with money in [his] pocket and convincing the men of letters that, after all, [he] was a person of talent” (Ellmann 203). James Joyce started creating in an era when several contradictory discourses on the conditions of art were in the public imaginary. The birth of an industry around literature was still fairly recent and artists were treading on a wobbly ground. The Victorian age saw the coexistence of a series of factors which would shift the position culture occupied in society by making it much more accessible for its receivers and, in certain cases, less accommodating for artists themselves. In the case of literature, some of these conditions have been listed by the critic Clive Bloom. Thus, he mentions “the rise in mass readership, fuelled by rising literacy, cheap paper and print methods, fast distribution via rail and new motorized transport, new information-carrying media (radio and cinema), the provision of new public libraries and increasing leisure” (*Literature and Culture* 17). The convergence of these circumstances had an obvious, dynamical effect in art, opening a world of innumerable possibilities for artists in general. Notwithstanding, it also led to a process of rupture and redefinition which affected long-established notions of art and culture.

During the nineteenth century, the effects of the abovementioned industrialization of culture provoked a series of changes in the roles which had been played by authors and their audience up to that moment. The birth of an industry around culture brought a number of new participants into the process of cultural production and reception. Publishers, printers, editors, art merchants and critics became now part of the world of culture, and cultural processes were redefined, in order to allot those new participants a position as intermediaries between artists and their audience. However, the result of this arbitration was not innocuous, since these intermediaries did not become simple mediators but an active third party in the process of creation. Artists had now to cope with new rules, submitting themselves to the directives of the trade and, therefore, accepting the role of editors and critics as

approvers of their work. For their part, the recipients of art, the audience, were now considered as consumers, and the trend was to homogenize this entity and its literary tastes in order to stabilize the market. Works of art became subject to the laws of supply and demand, while the audience, who chose how to spend their money, turned into an indispensable clog in the machinery of the new market of culture.

This transformation of roles affected all fields of culture alike, and led to a questioning of what art and artists stood for and what their significance was in this transformed setting. This situation provoked the first frictions in the relation between artists and their contemporaries, frictions which had to do with the way in which artists were perceived as part of the society. Analyzing this confrontation, Richard D. Altick defines the Victorians' attitude toward the artist as ambivalent.

He ascribes the mixed feelings of the middle-class commercial society to the clash between the inheritance of tradition and their present and unprecedented situation. Thus, they both

“inherited and added substance to the romantic view of the poet (the archetypal artist) as hero and prophet” and, at the same time, the “no-nonsense climate” they lived in forced them to have “little time or tolerance for the „mere“ artist” (278-279).

The period witnessed an actual debate on the question between those who defended art and those who attacked it. Instances of this debate can be found in the literary production of the artists themselves whose role came under scrutiny. These artists chose to write artist novels and to include fictional artists within their work and thus contributed to the debate with novels where the role and the function of art and the artist were questioned. Thus, artists created fictional *alter egos* who would embody their own views of art or those of their antagonists, namely critics and the much feared mass of potential buyers of culture.

Although the audience eventually found its place in the reformulated equation of art, artists were not happy with the space they were left to occupy. There was an obvious appeal in this new world of opportunities. In the case of writers, they had more chances to be published; a wider audience could be

reached; and, with some luck, they could make a living by writing, either sticking to fiction or as journalists or critics. In spite of all this, there were also some drawbacks related to their now being considered professional authors. One of the disadvantages of the commercialization of culture was the realization of having to address an audience which was becoming overcrowded. This fact could be remarkably worrying when taking into account that, although the rates of literacy had grown, this growth did not necessarily point at those new literate readers being at all educated. In this respect, as has been remarked:

serious writers, with those who most seriously cared for literature and the continuance of literature, were confronted with a society which in part relied, half-indifferently, upon the stock literary judgement, the best-seller, and the polite verse-anthology, but which had forgotten that literature could touch life at both its deepest, and its most exhilarating. (Holloway 62)

In order to account for this situation, the audience for literature was swiftly divided into “highbrows,” “lowbrows,” and “middlebrows” and literature itself was considered a purchasable good. Subsequently, writers turned into manufacturers which unavoidably felt obliged to cater for the needs and tastes of a specific audience. Moreover, writers started to be concerned with the idea that literature was progressively becoming a commodity, just an item whose purpose would be to satisfy different tastes, depending on the tendencies of the market in that particular moment. In this respect, it is interesting to recall Clive Bloom's discussion on what was the consideration of authorship at the time:

authorship (...) fell mainly into two categories – either one was an anonymous hack producing broadsheets and chapbooks or one was an

anonymous „lady“ or „gentleman“ whose interest in fiction might be serious but was essentially that of a dedicated amateur [...]. For some, this new authorial freedom and power, which lacked any apparent responsibility to fiction except to entertain and provide escapism, was deeply troublesome. By the end of the nineteenth century all professionally minded authors who wrote for money were, therefore, implicated in the world of trade and commerce. The spectre of the hack still haunted those who wanted to create serious novels– [...]. (*Bestsellers* 10–12)

Under the circumstances Bloom describes, one can deduce that there was no easy way out for the dedicated, passionate artist within the professional writer. Either the artists surrendered to commercialisation or they broke away and left the mainstream where the association of art to market concepts such as product, sale or trade was making them feel uncomfortable. A step in that later direction was first given in the late nineteenth century by the so-called Aesthetes, who chose to escape from these hostile conditions and take refuge within the production of “art for art’s sake.” Instead of providing escapism for the audience, this movement sought escapism for itself, and its members achieved that state by turning to the exaltation of beauty and form over content. Instead of considering themselves a part of society, as Victorian writers did, these artists repelled the middle class, which had not only offended their sense of beauty but also misinterpreted the role of the artist and the function of art in their age. They resented the already mentioned empowerment of the audience, thinking that this sort of power could not be left in the hands of the uneducated and pragmatic masses. As a reaction, they tried to build a new world order where they could “recover” their former power. Since this was virtually impossible, they created a world of their own and retired there to be apart from further offences. Richard Altick best describes the artists’ demeaning

of their contemporaries' taste and their isolation from them in his discussion on Aestheticism:

These artists came to regard themselves as belonging to a separate class, not only detached from the common run of men but superior to them. [...]. The artist, for his part, regarded himself as a man whose interests and skills were so concentrated and rare that he could expect little understanding from those about him, people of coarser grain, little sensibility, and less experience. [...] [T]he artist, renouncing the role of citizen and public man, vacated the marketplace and the forum in favour of the ivory tower [...]. (294-95)

Aesthetes built a religion out of this separation from society, creating an order where they were apart (and above) from the mass which had not deified beauty. Notwithstanding the fact that the movement did not last long and that the number of participants and contributions was scarce, Altick bases the importance of Aestheticism in its undeniable contribution to the age, since they made "the idea of aesthetic experience as an end in itself and of art as an exalted activity independent of social obligation [become] part of the advanced late Victorian creed" (296). Furthermore, their contribution went beyond their age by leaving a seed which relieved artists who were yet to come, with their proving that there was a possibility of having an audience without sacrificing experimentation or having to turn art into a commodity.

Although the aforementioned path leading artists away from society was quite unfrequented, another generation of artists, the Modernists, decided to follow it in the twentieth century. There existed, however, a difference between both movements, since those Victorian values which were not satisfactory for the Aesthetes were now crumbling before society's eyes as well. Values such as truth or beauty had lost

their position as the stronghold of the nation, and were not comforting for the masses any longer. They were powerless in a world which was being shaped by the chaos of war and conflict. This loss of values was disheartening for both artists and society, and although this situation could have built a bridge across the breach between them, it ended up widening the gap even more. Artists and society alike needed a haven where they could shelter from modern life's frustrations, doubts, and disappointments. As in the case of the Aesthetes, modern artists found that haven in art, an art which was still beyond the reach of society's understanding. The modern artist's isolation went a step further, and resulted in what Len Platt has defined as an *aristocratization* of art. Platt takes further Altick's concern about the artist's isolation and thus argues that modern artists now "problematized themselves as a new aristocracy [...], [t]he sole survivors of a tradition that had resisted and withheld the „erosion“ of culture and society"

(100). As a result of the preoccupation with this disintegration, modern art was characterized for its being "self-referential, [...] concerned with the mechanics of reproduction and with the artistic personality struggling to come to terms with the modernity he inhabited" (100). To a certain extent, artists had decided to turn to themselves in order to search for answers; exploring and expressing modernity in their work.

Thus, in the same way that the commercialization of art had brought about a questioning of the nature and function of art thereby provoking a debate between artists and society, the *aristocratization* of art removed that debate from the public arena of readers and market and introduced it in the fictional works themselves. Ironically, as Randall Stevenson argues, this was made possible by the changes within the conditions of publishing and the expansion of the reading public. As the critic maintains,

[It was] financially possible for novels to address specific tastes within the novel-reading public, rather than trying, more or less, to reach

it all. From the time of James, authors found it more possible -and in some cases more desirable- to concentrate not on the likely popular appeal of their work but on its particular status as an artistic form. As the novel came in this way to envisage and value itself more specifically as art, so art came to be more valued and discussed within it. (157)

Authors had now found a suitable medium for representing the conditions, expectations and frustrations of art, and they were able to insert into their writing the actual, ongoing debate. From this point on, all kinds of artists, such as writers, painters or musicians, began to crowd the pages of the novels of the time. The creation of a series of "artist characters" which would experience life and art in the fictional settings provided by their "artist authors" became an answer to the unsettled debate on the conditions of art and artistic production at their time. Literature was used to explore the possibilities and difficulties modern artists encountered in real life; hence, not only did art remain a subject of debate but, furthermore, it actually became its vehicle.

2. Mrs Kearney and Little Chandler

One of Joyce's first interventions on the abovementioned debate can be found in the *Dubliners* stories "A Mother" and "A Little Cloud." Analyzing the significance which the characters of Mrs Kearney and Little Chandler have outside the frame of their own narratives will allow for the exploration of the implications which the stories have for its non-fictional participants: author, readers, and critics. In her article "The Impossibility of Making Writing," Patricia Duncker has pointed out the fact that

[m]any writers produce at least one *Künstlerroman* or include somewhere in their work the figure of an artist. The significance of this artist will not be constant, and the relationship this figure has to the writer herself may well be mediated by other elements in the composition. But the presence of this artist will always have a sinister and resounding echo, and reveal something important about the writer's attitude to her art. They may not be performing impersonators of the writer herself, but they are never innocent characters. (316)

Thus, the strong connection which characters have with their authors is considered to be symptomatic of their being representative of those authors' views on art. Those views can either be faithfully embodied by the characters or introduce some kind of variation with respect to their authors' beliefs.

Nevertheless, the choice to create a fictional artist which shares a similar vital experience to your own indicates a wish, on the authors' part, to communicate something important to them. I believe that the autobiographical link is essential for the message the characters convey to gain force. However, as Duncker affirms, even if that autobiographical link did not exist, the artist characters would continue to be representing, to the last consequences, a statement on art, so that we cannot disregard their contribution to the debate on the status and function of artists. Curiously, an autobiographical link can be somehow established between both these stories and the life of their author.

In "A Mother," a Dublin concert in the Antient Concert Rooms sponsored by the patriotic society Eire Abu is sabotaged by an apparently overzealous mother who will not allow her daughter to accompany the singers to the piano unless she receives full pay for her performance. The autobiographical connection here has been pointed to by several authors, since Joyce himself sang at a concert in the

JOYCE'S OTHER PORTRAITS

same setting on the 27th August 1904 and had no choice but to accompany himself once the pianist left in the middle of the event. Author Bruce Bidwell even provides a helpful key to the characters' real life counterparts, where Joyce would be embodied by the second tenor "who shook like an aspen":

<i>Concert (August 27, 1904)</i>	<i>"A Mother"</i>
Eileen Reidy, accompanist	Kathleen Kearney
J. F. McCormack	First tenor
J.C. Doyle	Baritone
Miss Walker (Marie Nic Shiubhlaigh)	Lady who arranged amateur theatricals
Madame Hall	Madam Glynn, the soprano
Miss Agnes Tracey	Miss Healy, the contralto
J.A. Joyce	Mr Bell, second tenor

1 (Bidwell 102)

Joyce's biography by Ellmann also points to this connection, **and includes a diary entry by the reviewer who was to write** about the event for the *Freemans Journal*, Joseph Holloway.

Holloway's account leaves no room to doubt that the audience at the Antient Concert Rooms that evening in August 1904 experienced the same confusion and anger as the one in the story:

the attendance was good but the management of the entertainment could not have been worse. The Irish Revivalists are sadly in need of a capable manager. At present they invariably begin considerably after the time advertised and make the audience impatient; thus they handicap the performers unwarrantably. Tonight was no

exception to the rule; and after the first item, the delay was so long that the audience became quite noisy and irritable. [...] The substitute appointed as accompanist in the place of Miss Eileen Reidy, who left early in the evening, was so incompetent that one of the vocalists, Mr. James A. Joyce, had to sit at the piano and accompany himself [...]. (Ellmann 168)

There is no account of the reasons why Miss Reidy left early that night, so we will focus on the reasons which kept Kathleen Kearney from completing the signed programme of the Eire Abu Concert in the short story. Since the artist in this story, young Kathleen, acts following her mother's directions, Mrs Kearney –the artist's manager– will be the one to receive our attention. The story tells us that she has directed her daughter's education and career and has procured her entry into the circle of the Irish Revival, where she will count with a larger audience for her music. In consonance with what has been argued above, Miss Kearney would respond to the model of the artist who accommodates to the taste of the majority of the audience. Her approach to the Revival is therefore planned as a means to an end, as the following quotation makes clear:

When the Irish Revival began to be appreciable Mrs. Kearney determined to take advantage of her daughter's name and brought an Irish teacher to the house [...] Soon the name of Miss Kathleen Kearney began to be heard often on people's lips. People said that she was very clever at music and a very nice girl and, moreover, that she was a believer in the language movement. (154-55)

Mr Holohan's proposal that Kathleen plays at the Society's concerts is, therefore, no surprise for the mother, who swiftly draws up a contract ensuring her daughter's salary for her

performances. Mrs Kearney's matter-of-fact and businesslike approach to the preparations for the concert is a clear indication that she understands and embraces the commoditisation of culture. Thus, she is dismayed at the unprofessional attitude of the organising committee when the attendance to the concerts is not as good as expected. Seeing that her efforts as a voluntary organizer will not be rewarded, she can only think of ensuring that her contract with the society will be honoured and her daughter will be paid. Although she realizes she is being put off by the organizers, she decides to postpone the confrontation with the committee, since she knows "that it would not be ladylike to do that" (158). Mrs Kearney feels consequently repressed by gender conventions, which she tries to convolute by getting her husband, who represents an institutionalized masculine legitimization of her defence of her Kathleen's interests, to accompany her to the last concert: "[s]he respected her husband in the same way as she respected the General Post Office, as something large, secure and fixed; and though she knew the small number of his talents she appreciated his *abstract value as a male*" (159, my emphasis). It is there that, abandoning the politeness which has been getting in the way of her negotiations, Mrs Kearney boycotts the start of the concert until her daughter gets her pay. Once again, art figures as a consumable and therefore to-be-sold product, Mrs Kearney is a seller of marketed goods and intends to be paid for them (163). Her sabotage seems to work as she receives less than half of the convened amount and the promise that the rest will be paid during the interval. Although Mrs Kearney is ready to demand to be paid, at least, the full half of her daughter's pay, it is Kathleen who, for the first time in the story, takes a decision for herself: curiously, she decides to go on stage to accompany the shaky Mr Bell. However, when the interval comes, a decision has already been made that Mrs Kearney is not to receive the second instalment of her daughter's pay. Given the cold shoulder by almost everyone in the dressing-room, with the exception of the sympathetic Mr Bell, and condemned for her unladylike manners, Mrs Kearney

leaves with her family –believing her gender to be the hindrance in her negotiation with the committee.

If we are to accept Mr Bell's identification with Joyce himself, it is unquestionable that the author is supportive of Mrs Kearney's plight to enter the market of culture as a negotiator in favour of her daughter. This argument gains strength if we consider Margot Norris's reflection that in 1905, "when he was writing „A Mother," Joyce was characterizing himself to Stanislaus as harboring the political opinions „of a socialist artist" pondering the conundrum of how artists may earn by their labor" as well as her realization that "[t]hese anxieties were prophetic of a future experience when in 1912 Joyce would suffer the indignity and agony of a violated contract at the hands of George Roberts of Maunsel & Company" (88).

Written a year later than "A Mother," "A Little Cloud" features a seemingly different view on art. The autobiographical connection is also present, and critics such as Mary Lazar, John McCourt or Sean Latham have noted the similarities between the paralyzed life of Little Chandler in Dublin and the Trieste experience of a young James Joyce who shared with his character

an aspiration for artistic success, a menial clerkship considered beneath his station, a newly born child at home, and a seemingly endless financial crisis. [...] [B]y 1906 he was working as a bank clerk in Rome, trying to complete a manuscript he would soon abandon in frustration, and attempting to provide for himself, Nora, and their infant son Giorgio. (Latham 781)

In the story, Little Chandler, who has been unable to fulfil his dreams of artistic grandeur, is made aware of his frustration and shortcomings through the visit of an old friend who has, apparently, achieved success as a journalist in London.

Recalling the previous discussion on the attitudes of artists towards art and society at the turn of the century, it is easy to see how Little Chandler will fall on the line of the Aesthetes: he finds solace in the beauty of the lines of poetry he repeats to himself (77); he feels detached from the rest of society, no matter if they belong to the common mass or to the stale nobility, feeling he belongs, as an artist, to a superior class (77); and he rejects the possibility of creating art in his present setting, believing that in order to succeed he must retire from common, stale Dublin (99). However, as he is aware of the conditions of art production in his time, there is also a concern for popularity and recognition, as he wonders whether to appeal to the patriotic and popular by making his name "more Irish-looking," in a strategy which should remind us of Mrs Kearney's approach to the Revivalist movement (80). As the evening progresses, Little Chandler will reach a gradual realization that, although he envies his friend Gallaher's carefree life, he would not be satisfied with his friend's achievements either. Curiously, as Mrs Kearney had done, Little Chandler also seems to believe that gender expectations are somehow an obstacle to his success. Throughout the story, his sensitive nature, soft manners and delicate features, which are to blame for his nickname, have feminized the character, in the same way that the British colonial discourse had feminized Ireland to justify its control over the island and its inhabitants. There is a point in the story where these gender and colonial discourses seem to emerge in Little Chandler's discourse under his resentment towards Gallaher:

He was sure that he could do something better than his friend had ever done, or could ever do, something higher than mere tawdry journalism if he only got the chance. What was it that stood in his way? His unfortunate timidity. He wished to vindicate himself in some way, to assert his manhood. He saw behind Gallaher's refusal of his invitation. Gallaher was only patronising him

by his friendliness just as he was patronising
Ireland by his visit. (88)

Back home, Chandler is still weighing up his possibilities for flight. His house is far from being the desired ivory tower to which the artist can retire to. However, any Icarus-like flight is prevented by the strong gravity of financial need; Chandler can not brave to go anywhere until his house's furniture has been paid for. In a thought which was probably present on the mind of the author at the time as well, Chandler wishes for the possibility of actually earning something from his writing (92).

When he tries to take solace from the day's realizations by retiring in the virtual ivory tower which Lord Byron's poems usually offer, the hardships of his common life are made painfully audible through the cries of his infant son who refuses to be hushed away or obliterated into his father's daydreams of artistic grandeur. As his wife's return restores the fragile equilibrium of his existence, Chandler faces the realisation that he has become the main obstacle in the way to his own happiness and the achievement of an artistic aim. Therefore, the character of Chandler would be an appropriate embodiment of a Victorian or Edwardian writer settled in the old ways, who cannot see any way in which to adapt his aestheticism to the realities of life in the turn of the century. It is there that the connection with the author breaks, since

Joyce's decision to redo his work *Stephen Hero* marked a point of adaptation to modern times which has even been considered as the starting point of literary Modernism:

Over the years, I've suggested various, usually imagined moments as the possible starting point of literary modernism, [...]. The first of my imaginings was the moment when the young James Joyce purportedly threw the manuscript of what we have since come to call *Stephen Hero* into the fire and began work instead on *A*

Portrait of the Artists as a Young Man. (Levitt 202).

As a conclusion, I would like to point out that Joyce's portrayal of Mrs Kearney and Little Chandler introduces a paradox in the coetaneous debate on the conditions of art. Perceiving how the possibilities or impossibilities for art production affect artists makes the reader understand those individuals' need and difficulties to create. We could say that, while these stories reproduce the concept of the *aristocratization* of the artist based on the proud and isolated image of the individual, their approach to the mental processes of the characters allow for a "democratization" of the artist, by offering readers a better understanding of the motivations behind artists' attitudes. Moreover, while reiterating the artists' distance from society, these stories become the bridge which can bring them together, as they show not only the hardships of creation but, most importantly, the apparently insurmountable obstacle of gaining the financial security to create freely. This concern for the matter of fact, unromantic and economic side of artistic production supposed an enlightening contribution to the contemporaneous debate on art, and it came from an author who would eventually not only revolutionize the processes of artistic creation but also, ironically, make his way into Irish ten pound notes.

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