March 1994

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Recommended Citation
Colby Quarterly, Volume 30, no.1, March 1994, p.25-32
The Erotics of Heaney’s Joyce

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There is an image I have often used of Joyce. He is like an immense factory ship that hoovers up all the experience from the bed of the Irish psyche. If you open Ulysses or A Portrait, or Dubliners, you are reading yourself.

Seamus Heaney, *Irish Times*, 13 September 1984

When James Joyce first made an appearance in Seamus Heaney’s work, in the early poem “Gravities,” Joyce’s rootedness in Dublin and in Irish subject matter (despite his prolonged voluntary exile) was celebrated as an example of how the imagination—like a kite, or a homing pigeon—is importantly connected to a point of origin to which it will inevitably return: “Blinding in Paris, for his party-piece / Joyce named the shops along O’Connell Street” (*Death of a Naturalist* 43). Thus the Joycean aesthetic was seen as a rejection of transcendence in recognition of the “gravities” which condition and weight one’s subjectivity, which pull you back to your origins. The later, more well-known image of Heaney’s Joyce, the shade of the author in “Station Island” XII, would seem to constitute a revision of this trope of the artist as rooted, freighted, and nostalgic in his advice to Heaney to abandon the Nationalist “subject people” theme, to defy gravity, to “Take off from here ... Let go, let fly, forget” (*Station Island* 93). If the 1966 image of Joyce as nostalgic suited the younger Heaney, whose early poetry was deeply conditioned by childhood memories of farm and barn, the 1984 image of Joyce reflected his ambitions for a more visionary and less community-based poetic. Many critics have discussed the burden, or the lightness, of Joyce’s advice in “Station Island” XII, and have examined the importance for Heaney of the tundish episode in *Portrait*, what Heaney calls “The Feast of the Holy Tundish.” The poet has himself discussed the passage in the novel as an anti-colonialist defiance by Stephen of the marginalizing influence of the English language (particularly British English) in Ireland—“Damn the Dean of Studies” says Stephen—and as a recognition of strength and uniqueness in Irish English as an enabling indigenous characteristic, one which could be seen not as a humiliation but, as Heaney says, as “a native weapon”

In this way Heaney has recorded his admiration for Joyce as a "regional redeemer," an anti-colonialist liberator of Irish writing from its accustomed inferiority complex in the face of English writing ("The Regional Forecast" 13). However, a neglected aspect of Heaney's interest in Joyce, neglected both by critics and by Heaney himself in his public pronouncements, is the image of Joyce as the sexually liberating novelist of the libido, as the enemy of anti-erotic Irish Catholic sexual prohibitions. Heaney comes to terms with the erotics of Joyce in a poem in Station Island called "A Bat on the Road," which is (among other things) a meditation on the lesson which Stephen Dedalus derives from Davin's story of the seductive peasant woman: that sexual repression is fundamental to an understanding of the various kinds of imperial domination witnessed in Ireland (Station Island 40).

The poem uses as epigraph a fragment from the passage in Portrait in which Stephen ruminates upon Davin's story about stopping at a remote cottage on a dark road in the Ballyhoura hills in County Cork on his way home from a hurling match, having missed the last train. A pregnant peasant woman invites Davin to spend the night with her since her husband is away, and he flees in fear: "I thanked her and went on my way again; all in a fever" (Portrait 182-83). Stephen is moved by the anecdote, and by the fever: "The last words of Davin's story sang in his memory and the figure of the woman in the story stood forth, reflected in other figures of the peasant women whom he had seen standing in the doorways at Clane as the college cars drove by, as a type of her race and his own, a batlike soul waking to the consciousness of itself in darkness and secrecy and loneliness, and, through the eyes and voice and gesture of a woman without guile, calling the stranger to her bed" (Portrait 183). William York Tindall once remarked that for Joyce bats represent secrecy, and the bat in Portrait represents secret night-flight and night-thoughts—dark, amorous emotions which the lonely woman harbors and which she wishes to act upon. However, the "batlike soul" is transformed in Stephen's imagination into the essence of Irish womanhood and of Irish identity itself—an identity troped as female, desirous, unsatisfied, repressed, but slowly awakening to self-knowledge and to a knowledge of her own sexual desires. And the female body is imagined as the vehicle through which this national "batlike soul" will consummate its powerful passions.

Thus Joyce appears to use the essentializing racial language which characterized the work of Renan, Arnold, Yeats and the Revival—that very language of

2. Heaney comments on the anti-colonial meanings of Joyce's work in "English and Irish," "John Bull's Other Island," "Forked Tongues" 20, and "The Regional Forecast" 17-19. See also his remarks on Joyce in interviews with de Bredun, Druce 33, Kinahan 407, O'Toole, and Randall 12.

3. Alternatively, the epigraph may refer to the later passage in which Stephen expresses the anger he feels towards Emma: "He had told himself bitterly as he walked through the streets that she was a figure of the womanhood of her country, a batlike soul waking to the consciousness of itself in darkness and secrecy and loneliness, tarrying awhile, loveless and sinless, with her mild lover and leaving him to whisper of innocent transgressions in the latticed ear of a priest" (221). I will focus on the first passage in which the "batlike soul" is that of the woman as seductress.

4. Tindall wrote: "In Joyce's iconography the bat implies darkness, secrecy, blindness, and loneliness. For that reason it is associated at times with the artist" (Joyce, Chamber Music 217).

5. For Patrick Parrinder, the "batlike soul" is not only Ireland but Ireland's readers: "Davin's woman is made to stand for Stephen's potential audience, the type of person for whom he is to go out and 'forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race'" (82).
Revivalist Romanticism which Joyce surely wished to eschew in favor of a more realistic and demythologizing mode of writing. And Joyce appropriates but extends the conventional trope of the Celtic race as essentially feminine, imaginative, spontaneous, childlike, and the symbol of Ireland as the Shan Van Vocht, with his image of the race as post-pubescent but blind, hungry, desirous, unfulfilled, repressed, and half-asleep, though waking up gradually, as Stephen understands it, from a nightmare of cultural, political, and sexual repression. “Consciousness of self” will therefore entail a full recognition of those libidinous impulses which puritanical Irish Catholicism discourages and prohibits. And therefore Joyce offers a critique of Ireland’s anti-erotic cultures, couched, apparently, in those Revivalist, essentialist terms which he would eschew. He thus revises the popular sacred image of the Shan Van Vocht or Cathleen ni Houlihan in two ways in Portrait: first, she is, in Stephen’s words, “the old sow that eats her farrow” (the cannibalistic mother), but finally, and more kindly (though equally anti-feminist in implications), she is an impoverished female whose hunger for sexual companionship is gradually emerging after a nightmare of institutional and hegemonic repression. Therefore, although the passage in question imagines the female as hungry, she is not the cannibalistic mother who eats her farrow: indeed, to Stephen, she is an object of pity, but she is also the reflection of himself, whose own covert but turbulent sexual life has been a central focus of the novel up to that point. It is a commonplace that Joyce subverted Revivalist aesthetics, but it is instructive to bear in mind the continuities between his vocabulary in this passage and those essentializing vocabularies which it is often claimed he sought to replace.

Joyce appears to have been fascinated by bats. There are 13 occurrences of the word “bat” or words which contain the word “bat” in Ulysses and 11 in Finnegans Wake (only one or two of these occurrences refer to the cricket bat). While it may be true that, as Gifford notes, “in the Middle Ages the bat was symbolic of black magic, darkness and rapacity and was a portent of peril or torment,” the connotations of the bat in Joyce’s work are more benign than this would suggest, although the traditional association of the bat with secrecy and mystery is certainly present in Joyce’s treatment of it (Gifford 1988, 62). In general, however, the image of the bat in Joyce is associated with the romantic and amorous, as in the Wake, where we see the vampire-like “pretty Elizabess Hotel des Reines—she laid her batsleeve for him two trueverse till love” (Wake 289); and over half of the occurrences in Ulysses are associated with Bloom’s and Gertie’s romantic fantasies about each other. Both characters feel a sense of affectionate communion with the bat: Gertie sympathetically watches a bat fly “from the ivied belfry through the dusk, hither, thither, with a tiny lost cry” (783), and the reader might associate the pathos of the bat with that of the crippled Gertie herself. On the twilit beach, Bloom observes the same bat (“Twittering the bat flew here, flew there” [815]), and like the twittering, wandering Bloom in a

(nominally) Christian country, the wandering bat is somewhat of an outsider in the church’s belfry, where he sleeps—Bloom thinks: “There he goes. Funny little beggar. Wonder where he lives. Belfry up there. Very likely. Hanging by his heels in the odour of sanctity” (813). And after the autoerotic climax of Bloom’s gazing at Gertie, the narrator makes the association of sexuality and secrecy which has been established in the “batlike soul” passage in Portrait: “That was their secret, only theirs, alone in the hiding twilight and there was none to know or tell save the little bat that flew so softly through the evening to and fro and little bats don’t tell” (789).

We see an early appearance of the erotic, Joycean bat in “Chamber Music” XXXI, which Joyce dedicated to Norah in November 1904, a few months after he first met her:

O it was out by Donnycarney
When the bat flew from tree to tree
My love and I did walk together;
And sweet were the words she said to me.

Along with us the summer wind
Went murmuring—O, happily!—
But softer than the breath of summer
Was the kiss she gave to me. (Chamber Music 169)

William York Tindall considers the woman addressed in the poem to be a parallel to the “batlike soul” of Davin’s peasant woman, and of Emma as Stephen describes her in Portrait (Chamber Music 85). As in Portrait, the woman of “Chamber Music” is a symbol of Ireland, but also, for Tindall, she is a bat and a vampire. Joyce was familiar with Pater’s comparison of the Mona Lisa to the vampire in his essay “Leonardo da Vinci” (1869)—“like the vampire she has been dead many times, and learned the secrets of the grave”—and Pater’s vampire is not so much predatory as radiant with the wisdom of the walking dead (cited in Gifford 1982, 259). Pater notwithstanding, however, Joyce’s interest in the vampire may also be attributable to the fin de siècle popularity of Bram Stoker’s Count Dracula; as he writes in Finnegans Wake: “Let’s root out Brimstoker and give him the thrall of our lives. It’s Dracula’s nightout” (Wake 145, cited in Chamber Music 218). However, not all readers will agree with Tindall that the woman’s soft kiss in “Chamber Music” XXXI is that of a vampire, a bloodsucking and enthralling moment, in which a thrilled and thrallled Joyce gives to Norah “the thrill” of his life. And as I have said, we might also resist the idea that the “batlike soul” of Irish womanhood constructed in Portrait is a vampire, since she is described by Stephen, crucially, as being “without guile.” Indeed, she bears a resemblance to the erotic-angelic bird-girl in Portrait, capable of flight, and capable of assisting and inspiring Stephen to flight: hardly an image of death (Portrait 171–73).

Seamus Heaney appropriates and revises the Joycean image of the bat in his poem “A Bat on the Road,” which was originally entitled “Davin on the Broagh Road,” which implies that on one level the poem concerns (or is addressed to) Davin, and highlights the poet’s sense of affiliation with Davin, since the Broagh
Road is presumably a road near the townland of Broagh in county Derry, where Heaney lived as a child. Therefore he playfully imagines Davin as a version of his earlier self. While many authors have regarded Joyce’s Stephen Dedalus as an exemplary, liberating figure, few have identified with the humbler Davin who, in his enthusiasm for nationalism and the Gaelic League, is quite clearly caught in those nets of language, nationality, and religion from which Stephen flees. However, in dedicating his poem to Davin, Heaney avoids the dismissive, Parnassian (and Modernist) stance of Stephen Dedalus, and asserts the integrity of Davin and of the world of Irish rural labor from which he has emerged, though not in the sentimental heroizing way of the Irish Revival—rather, by recognizing that a part of Heaney himself is the ingenuous and repressed culchie to the Thomist, Joycean jackeren, and in his own unsophisticated, rural origins he sees the image of those peasants (“the moustached / dead” he calls them in Wintering Out) Stephen felt so distant from (Wintering Out 14).

So much for the poem’s title. What about the epigraph itself—“A batlike soul wakening to consciousness of itself in darkness and secrecy and loneliness”? In the fragmentary epigraph, the sexual implications of Joyce’s metaphor of gradual wakening to self-consciousness are submerged, although they remain as an important subtext to the poem, and emerge strongly in the quotation in the poem of Davin’s words “So close to me I could hear her breathing” (Portrait 183). For Heaney, as for Joyce, the aesthetic and ethical implications of the image of wakening and of flight are very urgent—after all, the notion of waking up is inscribed in Joyce’s proverbial construction of history as a nightmare from which he must awake, and in the vision of Daedalus in flight Stephen receives a premonition of his artistic destiny. Furthermore, the ghost of Joyce in “Station Island” XII advises Heaney to seek asylum from nonaesthetic claims in terms of flight, and to escape—“take off from here... Let go, let fly, forget” (Station Island 93). But the sexual dimensions of Stephen Dedalus’ escape cannot be denied; for Stephen, sexual freedom and artistic freedom are inextricably related and conflated in the image of the erotic-angelic bird-girl on Dollymount Strand. We can justifiably speak of the erotic implications of Joyce’s artistic freedom, as Heaney has himself suggested, when in “Station Island” Joyce’s shade offers artistic advice in strikingly erotic terms: “The main thing is to write / for the joy of it. Cultivate a work-lust / that imagines its haven like your hands at night // dreaming the sun in the sunspot of a breast.” The process of writing is portrayed here as a kind of lovemaking, where the writer’s hands fondle an imagined breast, and where the authorial imagination constructs an image of a desired female body, as though remembering John Donne’s roving hands, which were those of lover and penman at once.7 Given the highly sexualized nature of Heaney’s trope of imagining here, the word “work-lust” ambiguously suggests simultaneously the passion of both lover and writer, but the imagined haven of “your hands at night” compounds the ambiguity by suggesting that the pleasures of the text may

be autoerotic, masturbatory, self-delighting, and of course nonreproductive. Whether or not we construe the author’s hands as masturbatory, the crucial point remains that writing and self-delighting sexuality are conflated in the image, and this notion of self-delight is crucial to Joyce’s advice to the poet, based as it is upon the rejection of communal demands—both sexual and artistic—and a dedication to writing not for one’s community but “for the joy of it,” as Joyce says. Heaney’s Joyce in “Station Island” XII is not just a jeerer, nor does he recommend writing as a form of transcendence of community and of the body. Rather, he recommends an erotics of writing, conflating his aesthetic advice with an erotic vision of the artist’s task, and with a sense that writing itself is erotic in its self-delighting way. In “A Bat on the Road,” Heaney’s allusion to the Joycean pre-text in the epigraph would seem to align Heaney’s with Joyce’s aesthetic of celebrating sexuality as a countermove in the Joycean battle against the puritanical force of Irish Catholicism, in the colonized landscape of what Heaney has called the Irish psyche, and what Joyce might have considered the inchoate and turbulent material which would come to form the “conscience” of the Irish race. Yet that is perhaps too heavy-handed a gloss on the poem itself: despite the intertextual invitations of the epigraph and original title, “A Bat on the Road” is written in the low-key, conversational, if slightly elegant manner of many Heaney lyrics of the early 1980’s. The speaker is addressing a particular person in the opening stanzas, maybe a friend, or his own childhood self, or perhaps even Davin:

You would hoist an old hat on the tines of a fork
and trawl the mouth of the bridge for the slight
bat-thump and flutter. Skinny downy webs,

babbynails clawing the sweatband... But don’t
bring it down, don’t break its flight again,
don’t deny it; this time let it go free.

That phrase “bat-thump and flutter,” the keenly observed “Skinny downy webs,” and the later reference to “the Midland and Scottish Railway” register the bat as no imaginary figment, no mere symbol, but an animal known, heard and observed in its natural habitat. If the epigraph urges a symbolical reading, Heaney’s own poetic of detail seems (at least in the opening stanzas) to resist it, and in this resistance the poem occupies its own artistic space, and refuses to be subsumed into the voice of the precursor, who is invoked but controlled in the poem’s paratext. The urgent, repetitive plea that the bat should be allowed to fly freely “this time” would suggest that in the past it has not been able to, that the friend has tried to catch it with his hat on a fork. The speaker wants his friend to “lose it there in the dark,” and proceeds to address the bat itself, puzzled (like Bloom and Gertie) by its erratic movement—“You keep swerving off, / flying blind over ashpits and netting wire”—spectacularly eluding the burnt remains and detritus of culture, its nets of language, religion, and nationality. At this point, the poem’s meaning itself swerves, as its grammar forces the reader to accept that the bat is “invited by the brush of a word like peignoir, // rustles and
glimpses, shot silk, the stealth of floods.” And immediately the bat becomes the poet’s imagination, seduced by the jouissance of a word borrowed from Wallace Stevens’ “Sunday Morning”—“peignoir” (a woman’s dressing gown)—and by the “rustles and glimpses” of the silk negligee which also appears in a companion poem in Station Island, “La Toilette”—“But vest yourself / in the word you taught me / and the stuff I love: slub silk” (Stevens 5; Station Island 14). The language of underclothing and night-clothing becomes a seductive invitation to the bat and to the poet; the erotic imagery of the poet is conflated with the erotic thrill (to the poet) of the language which renders that imagery: both signifier and signified are erotic to the speaker, as to the bat, and as to Stephen as he listens to Davin’s narrative. At this point in the poem, the voice of Davin interjects for the space of one line—“So close to me I could hear her breathing”—his awe mediated through the sympathizing authorial voice of Heaney, on the Broagh Road as it were, and the poem comes to a close with the vision of the bat at bay (“it hangs in creepers matting the brickwork”), compared suggestively to that most genital of plants, “the convulvulus.” The poet’s final, comforting words seem to blend the voices of sympathy and consolation with that of the strong poet who revises a Modernist, essentialist trope of national anxiety and libidinal repression to produce a new narrative of flight and erotic free play: “Cling there / as long as you want. There is nothing to hide.”

Heaney’s poem is erotic in the sense that it celebrates Joyce’s bat of desire but also in that it relishes the language of desire (those “rustlings and glimpses” which recall his other poems of desire, “La Toilette” and “The Skunk” [Field Work 48]). Its Joycean paratext invites an intertextual reading, though one is finally aware of the distance between Joyce’s and Heaney’s aesthetic as much as of Heaney’s sympathy with Joyce as Heaney swerves, like the bat, away from the strong precursor in the manner of Harold Bloom’s paradigmatic poets (Bloom 19). If Joyce’s “batlike soul” was the site of a struggle with Jesuit conditioning and puritanical repression, Heaney’s bat pays tribute to Joyce’s achievement, while also recognizing that fear, anxiety, repression, and desire remain encoded in the cultures which we make.

Works Cited


