June 1986

The Sentence That Makes Stephen Dedalus Smash the Lamp

Frederick K. Lang
The Sentence That Makes Stephen Dedalus Smash the Lamp

by FREDERICK K. LANG

In *Earthly Powers*, among the finishing touches Anthony Burgess puts to his caricature of Joyce at middle age, we find a trace of an earlier portrait of the artist. Hearing thunder, Burgess’s “Poor fearful Joyce” reverts to prayer: “O blessed Sacred Heart of Jesus keep us from harm.”1 In the “Circe” episode of *Ulysses*, Stephen Dedalus, “Choking with fright, remorse and horror,” confronts his dead mother.2 “O Sacred Heart of Jesus, have mercy on him!” moans the apparition: “Save him from hell, O divine Sacred Heart!” (U 582).

The prayer recited by Burgess’s Joyce in 1923 and that recited to Joyce’s Stephen in 1904 both resemble the invocations in “The Litany of the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus,”3 which is contained in numerous prayerbooks and religious manuals, including *Devotions to the Sacred Heart of Jesus*, published in Dublin.4 What makes this particular work significant is that, two pages before the Litany of the Sacred Heart, we discover the origin of the sentence which accounts for Stephen’s famous assault upon the brothel chandelier, the sentence which leaves him “Translating his spiritual into physical rebellion.”5 Preceding the Litany is “An Act of Reparation”—“For the innumerable Irreverences and grievous Offences, by which we and others have insulted the Heart of Jesus” (Dev 304-06). About halfway through the Act of Reparation comes its most explicit reference to the Crucifixion: “inconceivable thy anguish when expiring with love, grief and agony, on Mount Calvary” (Dev 305).

This has been slightly altered in “Circe” and is immediately preceded by another invocation which resembles those in the Litany of the Sacred Heart:

THE MOTHER

(In the agony of her deathrattle.) Have mercy on Stephen, Lord, for my sake! Inexpressible was my anguish when expiring with love, grief and agony on Mount Calvary. (U 582)

There are three changes: “inconceivable” has become “Inexpressible”;6

6. This word begins the sentence from which Joyce took the phrase (Dev 305).
“was” has been inserted to make a sentence; and, most significantly, a second-person pronoun is now “my.” The result of the final change may be obvious, but it seems fitting to quote Anthony Burgess again: “Stephen’s mother . . . identifies herself with the suffering Christ.”

Perhaps Mulligan prophesies this identification on the first page of Ulysses when he invokes not a male victim but a female one—not Christ but “the genuine Christine” (U 3). And perhaps he is again being prophetic when he exclaims, “Blessed Margaret Mary Anycock!” (U 202): this is a blasphemous reference to “the venerable Mother Marguerite Marie Alacoque,” the seventeenth-century French nun who claimed that Christ had revealed himself to her “in order to revive the devotion to his sacred Heart” (Dev 1–2). It was probably on June 16, 1675, during the “great apparition,” that Christ “asked her for a feast of reparation.” In “Circe,” Stephen’s mother is seeking a kind of reparation from her son. Her other appeals having failed, she appropriates a phrase from the Act of Reparation to the Sacred Heart and makes herself seem crucified victim. She appears, in fact, to be mimicking the demanding Christ described by Margaret Mary Alacoque. (If Hugh Kenner is right about Stephen’s confrontation with the “ghost” of his mother—if it is “modelled after the closet-scene in Hamlet”—then Joyce’s manipulation of the devotion to the Sacred Heart may elaborate a single line: “O Hamlet, thou hast cleft my heart in twain” [III, iv, 165].)

It is pointed out in Devotions to the Sacred Heart of Jesus that the Act of Reparation “is recited in the Church of the Conception, Marlborough-street, and other chapels throughout Dublin, on the first Friday of every month” (Dev 306). Apparently, that’s how often Joyce’s mother recited it. In The Trieste Notebook Joyce writes, under “Mother”: “Every first Friday she approached the altar and when she came home drank a glass of water before eating.” (As the editors note, the latter half of this description was incorporated into Ulysses [U 10].) May Joyce, like Mr. Kearney in “A Mother,” “went to the altar every first Friday” to receive communion, for that is the day “consecrated to honour the sacred Heart

10. The church referred to was also called the Pro-Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception. “A pro-cathedral is a parish church temporarily in use as a cathedral in a diocese that does not yet have a cathedral” (Don Gifford with Robert J. Seidman, Notes for Joyce: An Annotation of James Joyce’s Ulysses [New York: E. P. Dutton, 1974], p. 307). In Stephen Hero Mrs. Daedalus says, “I must try and get in to town tomorrow in time for High Mass in Marlborough St. Tomorrow [the Feast of the Ascension] is a great feast-day in the Church” (Stephen Hero, ed. John J. Slocum and Herbert Cahoon [New York: New Directions, 1944, 1963], p. 132). Hereafter SH.
of Jesus" (Dev 13). Perhaps, like Mrs. Kiernan in "Grace," she "believed steadily in the Sacred Heart as the most generally useful of all Catholic devotions ...." (D 158). Margaret Mary Alacoque claimed that Christ had made a series of promises to all those who would consecrate themselves to the Sacred Heart. (A "coloured print" displaying them hangs in "Eveline's" home [D 37].) Of all the promises, this is the most specific: "I promise you that ... the grace of final perseverance shall be granted to every one who for nine consecutive months shall communicate on the first Friday in the month; they shall not die out of a state of grace, nor without having received the sacraments. . . ."13 It seems that, like many other Dubliners, May Joyce was determined to take advantage of this uniquely generous offer.

Images and phrases associated with the Sacred Heart also serve to further link, and contrast, Stephen and Leopold Bloom. Bloom's contact with the devotion seems a prelude to Stephen's experience in "Circe." In fact, earlier in that chapter, Bloom's mother confronts him with similar invocations: "O blessed Redeemer, what have they done to him! . . . Sacred Heart of Mary, where were you at all, at all?" (U 438). But a stronger indication of what Stephen will encounter from beyond the grave is a tombstone discovered by Bloom in Glasnevin cemetery. Opposite the title page of Devotions to the Sacred Heart is a picture of Christ pointing to a large heart in the center of his chest. In "Hades," Bloom studies an effigy apparently modeled upon the same iconography: "The Sacred Heart that is: showing it. . . . Ought to be sideways and red it should be painted like a real heart. Ireland was dedicated to it or whatever that. Seems anything but pleased. Why this infliction?" (U 113). Together with the question he attributes to Christ, Bloom's reaction to the effigy's aspect seems an allusion to Christ's complaint during the "great apparition" on another June 16: "From the greater number [of humankind] I receive ingratitude, contempt, irreverence, sacrilege, and indifference, . . . but what is still more afflicting is, that I receive these insults from hearts which are peculiarly consecrated to my service" (Dev 2).14

Bloom is being accurate when he comments that "Ireland was dedicated to" the Sacred Heart. (In a letter of October 23, 1922, Joyce upholds him by speaking of "the Sacred Heart to whom Ireland is dedicated.")15 Ten other countries would follow suit, but Ireland was apparently the first to dedicate, or, more properly, consecrate itself to the Sacred Heart. That

consecration, which was made on Passion Sunday, 1873, testified to the wide popularity of the devotion in Ireland and to the exceptionally close accord between the Irish State and the Roman Church.\textsuperscript{16}

In psychoanalytic terms, the Stephen we encounter in \textit{Ulysses} "has internalized and preserved [his mother's] image and established it within himself as the voice of his own superego."\textsuperscript{17} And, as such, that image attests a particular creed and a particular culture; it delineates both Mrs. Dedalus's piety and her moral conformity. Superimposed upon "mother" are crucified victim and "Irishwoman, the accomplice of the Irish Catholic Church."\textsuperscript{18} The voice Stephen hears in "Circe" becomes finally that of Christ: it recites, and revises, the most explicit reference to the Crucifixion in the Act of Reparation to the Sacred Heart, "to whom Ireland is dedicated." Stephen has just said, "Break my spirit all of you if you can! I'll bring you all to heel!" after exclaiming "No!" three times (\textit{U} 582). Overwhelmed by the apparitional trinity of family, Church and country—beseeched by "all" at once—he acts: "lifts his ashplant high with both hands and smashes the chandelier" (\textit{U} 583).

He does only a shillingworth of damage (\textit{U} 585), but that's not the point. Stephen's act is symbolic, to himself as well as to us. The Act of Reparation to the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus is made "in presence of the Blessed Sacrament" (\textit{Dev} 304)—the Eucharist, that is: which, Catholics believe, is the body of Christ. In every Catholic church there hangs "a perpetual lamp . . . before the altar where the Blessed Sacrament is reserved."\textsuperscript{19} This lamp is alluded to in "Grace": "the distant speck of red light . . . was suspended before the high altar" (\textit{D} 172). The lamp in Bella Cohen's brothel, though mauve, is a chandelier—a suspended lamp. Wandering through nighttown in \textit{A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man}, Stephen sees "yellow gas flames . . . burning as if before an altar. Before the doors and in the lighted halls groups were gathered as for some rite."\textsuperscript{20} In "Circe," the transfiguration is only momentary. The apparition's final sentence makes Stephen feel "in presence of" the body of Christ; it's as if he were back at the altar of a Dublin church, the chandelier now a perpetual lamp. (Stephen's smashing the lamp, we recall, was prefigured just after he finished his rendition of a prayer sung at the altar before mass [\textit{U} 431-32].)

Only when the Blessed Sacrament has been removed from the altar is


\textsuperscript{17} Mark Shechner, \textit{Joyce in Nighttown: A Psychoanalytic Inquiry into "Ulysses"} (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1974), p. 28.

\textsuperscript{18} "My mother had become for my brother the type of woman who fears and, with weak insistence and disapproval, tries to hinder the adventures of the spirit. Above all, she became for him the Irishwoman, the accomplice of the Irish Catholic Church, which he called the scullery-maid of Christendom . . . " (Stanislaus Joyce, \textit{My Brother's Keeper: James Joyce's Early Years}, ed. with intro. and notes by Richard Ellmann [New York: Viking, 1958], p. 238).


\textsuperscript{20} \textit{A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man} (New York: Viking, 1964), p. 100. Hereafter \textit{PA}. 

http://digitalcommons.colby.edu/cq/vol22/iss2/3
the perpetual lamp extinguished. That happens on Good Friday: "no lights or vestments, the altar naked, the door of the tabernacle gaping open . . ." (SH 116). In "Circe," it is the morning of another Friday—at least according to the Gilbert schema—and the liturgical scenario has been rewritten. Stephen extinguishes the lamp in order to dispel an apparition generated, as we have seen, by associations which are both very private and distinctively Irish Catholic. And in thus reversing liturgy, he discloses its scriptural basis. Soon after his dead mother appeared, the apparition of Buck Mulligan accused him of having been her crucifier: "Kinch killed her dogsbody bitchbody" (U 580). It is this role which he now assumes. Atop "Mount Calvary," a Roman soldier's lance pierced the body of Christ. Stephen, imagining his ashplant Siegfried's sword (U 583), smashes the lamp which signifies that body. It is in a very specific fashion that he has "sinned against the light" (U 34).

In the Portrait Stephen refuses to make his Easter duty; in "Circe" he refuses to make an act of reparation—to "Repent" (U 582). One non serviam entails passive resistance, the other violent action. In each case, though, it is a familiar Catholic ritual that both provokes him to rebel and makes his rebellion meaningful. "I will not serve that in which I no longer believe," Stephen declares in the Portrait, "whether it call itself my home, my fatherland or my church" (PA 246–47). In "Circe" this demanding triumvirate is represented in a single sentence, his refusal to serve dramatized in a single act.

Brooklyn College, City University of New York