December 1994

Stephen Dedalus in Paris?: Joycean Elements in Julia O'Faolain's Three Lovers

Antoinette M. Mastin

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.colby.edu/cq

Recommended Citation
Colby Quarterly, Volume 30, no.4, December 1994, p.244-251

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Colby. It has been accepted for inclusion in Colby Quarterly by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Colby. For more information, please contact m fkelly@colby.edu.
Stephen Dedalus in Paris?:
Joycean Elements in Julia O'Faolain's
Three Lovers

by ANTOINETTE M. MASTIN

In his now famous vehement interchange with Davin in James Joyce's A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, Stephen Dedalus declares that "Ireland is the old sow that eats her farrow" (203). Fifty-some years later, in the world reflected in Julia O'Faolain's Three Lovers, Ireland continues to evoke the same criticism and be wrapped in the same strictures. When O'Faolain's Fintan McCann sees the "squat little map" of Ireland on a letter addressed to him, he sees a "foetally folded Ireland, stretching out embryo arms" to his Paris haven, threatening to consume him in its "all-devouring Irish muck" (17-18, 19).¹ For O'Faolain's characters, Ireland is not just the "old sow that eats her farrow," it is even more inimical, a "suppurating womb of a place, [a] soggy bog of lies and loneliness" (197). Stephen's misogynist image is here replaced by one that carries particular poignancy in a country where abortion and contraception are illegal and where a mother's life is secondary to her child's.² This image suggests a land that not only destroys its people but that also jeopardizes its reproductive future. In O'Faolain's fictional world there is no easy escape from Ireland's "embryo arms."

Published in 1970 as Godded and Coddled, Julia O'Faolain's first novel was republished in the United States in 1971 under the title Three Lovers. In this work O'Faolain has transformed the character of Stephen Dedalus into one Fintan McCann, an Irish painter in Paris, and thus adds an interesting coda to Joyce's Portrait. While Fintan is not an exact replica of Stephen, as the Irish artist in Paris he does re-enact a significant part of Stephen's quest to "forge in the smithy of [his] soul the uncreated consciousness" of the Irish race (Portrait 253). Fintan makes no bones about his reasons for leaving Ireland: "I don't have to remind you that there's hardly an Irish artist left at home, yez missed the boat badly with a number now dead and have a lamentable record generally for yer treatment of those of us living abroad" (39). Joyce would heartily concur.

¹. I am using the New York edition of O'Faolain's novel Three Lovers (New York: Coward, McCann and Geoghegan, 1971), which is more accessible for American readers.
². See Section 17 of the Criminal Law (Amendment) Act of 1935 forbidding the sale, advertising or importation of contraceptives. That law, included in Ireland's 1937 Constitution (Bunreacht na hÉireann), remained intact until 1973. The Irish Constitution also upheld the 1861 Offences Against the Person Act which outlawed abortion. This prohibition against abortion was further strengthened in 1983 when Article 40.3.3 was added to the Constitution. This eighth amendment "acknowledges the right to life of the unborn, and, with due regard to the equal right to life of the mother, guarantees in its laws to respect, and as far as practicable by its laws to defend and vindicate that right."
Stephen Dedalus’ Ireland flung nets of “nationality, language, [and] religion” at the souls of Ireland’s citizens to hold them “back from flight” (Portrait 203). For O’Faolain, as well, the religious net, in the form of Irish Catholicism, is one of the most repressive that threatens Irish men and women. As Seamus Deane has noted, Catholicism “disallows life, it disavows freedom and it is a friend to imperial oppression and an enemy to the desire for liberation that even a maimed nationalism retains” (3).

Fintan does not fare very well in Paris because he is unable to fly high enough to escape the nets of language, religion, and nationality. For this thirty-five year old Irish artist, Paris initially represents freedom: “There was Paris for you. You could yell your frigging head off and who gave a damn” (19). Yet he carries with him the mannerisms and belief system of Ireland, “partly a countryman’s habit” (21). His own weapons are those with which Stephen Dedalus armed himself as he went forth on his journey: “silence, exile, and cunning” (Portrait 247). Fintan is “an odd creature: a mixture of ingenious cunning and naivete” (250). Steeped in neo-colonialism, he is determined to escape colonial domination, to throw off the mores of a post-colonial society.

What is troublesome and somewhat ironic from the perspective of Three Lovers is that Fintan’s refusal to take on the dominant Irish male role of colonial hegemony leaves him in an ambivalent position with Irish women. None of the Irish women Fintan encounters are able to respond to him appropriately and recognize a masculine presence not built on domination and usurpation, the acceptable norms of masculine behavior for characters living in Ireland’s neo-colonial society. As he himself tells Sally Tyndal, the female protagonist of the novel: “I’m harmless and who thinks the better of me? Tell me that now. Honestly. You make use of me, right? ‘Poor Fintan, a harmless, decent skin’ can be called in to decant another man’s bottle. That’s about all he’s good for” (215). Sally admits that she does not think of Fintan as “a man. Men are the enemy” (115). Instead she wants their relationship to be filial: “Let’s be brother and sister like the pair in the old fairy story who lay in the wood comforting each other and for whom the birds made a coverlet of leaves” (115). Sally is willing to share a bed with Fintan but not have sex. As Fintan tells “Miss Tyndal, I’m not a conventional man,” she seems further perplexed (24). In effect, she becomes Fintan’s Emma Cleary.

The women Fintan ends up involved with are all Irish, just as repressed as he is, and they ironically judge him by the standards set up by a patriarchal, post-colonial society. It is Fintan, nonetheless, who tries to point out to Sally that Irish patriarchy places her in a secondary, subservient role. He tries to make Sally recognize the myopic manner in which she views her Algerian revolutionary lover Mesli. As she continues to tease Fintan, he recounts that:

They used to make a holy man, a hermit usually, anyway a sex-starved poor bastard, sleep with a pointed breasted virgin. . . . The virgin was risked to test the man’s resistance. His virtue was judged in the morning by her condition. A favorite game of the early Celtic church we’re told. They did it in Glendalough to St. Kevin if I remember aright and he threw her over a cliff. The point was she didn’t count. The matter at issue was his sanctity. (115)
The role of colonizer and colonized is played out in relationships in the novel, with men typically being the colonizer. However, to underscore how Ireland has warped her children, O'Faolain includes the attempted seduction of Fintan by Letty, an Anglo-Irish friend of Sally's mother, thereby reversing the usual male/female patterns established in the novel. Full of bathos, this episode's subtext nonetheless personifies Letty’s position as colonizer and Fintan’s as the colonized. The Anglo, or British, part of Letty’s heritage is emphasized in this scene. She becomes England, the usurping aggressor, and Fintan becomes identified as the passive colonized Irish, “a servant of...[t]he imperial British state,” as Stephen Dedalus remarks of himself (Ulysses 17). As England then, Letty quite literally sucks the life from Fintan through oral sex. Having unwittingly been lured into the position of sharing a bed with Letty, he is left helpless as she takes full advantage of the situation:

[To his horror [he] felt her reach for his penis... . He tried to remove her hand but it was firmly clamped and it would be ludicrous to wrestle with her... . Stiffly, he lay with hands plastered to his sides. Suddenly, Letty put her head beneath the sheets, dived, dolphin-like, doubling on herself. He felt her satiny breasts against his thighs and—Oh, Holy Saint Michael-Mary-Joseph-and-Patrick! No ‘No, Letty,’ he implored, pinned by her considerable weight... ‘Come up outa that! STOP! For God’s sake stop that! Stop, stop. STOP!’ Vice, he thought. THIS IS VICE! Evil. Of the Devil. Wrong. Why is she doing it... .

Damning and humiliating me... . The whoor of hell, he thought... . Head back, teeth bared like a mad horse’s, released, overwhelmed and limp, he lay staring sightlessly at the ceiling. (154)

Fintan is heir to rather disquieting relationships with women, seeing them, as Stephen Dedalus tends to do, as saints, virgins, or whores. 3

As he reflects on the one-sided sexual encounter with Letty, Fintan berates her: “Damn and blast her, wasn’t it because he liked and respected her that he couldn’t... because with some whore he might, oh he might have enjoyed the plunge into debauchery and the rich, boiling cauldron of the rabid flesh. With some she-devil whom afterwards he could deny himself, some lost—though recuperable—creature who would burn him clean” (154). Fintan can only think of Letty, in her role as seductress, as a whore from Hell, rather than as a lonely woman who finds him sexually attractive. He must invoke the power of Catholic saints to protect himself from the evil power attributed to sex. When he thinks of his other lover, a woman in Dublin whom he may have impregnated, he castigates himself endlessly about the episode. “Ah, the flesh was weak, the foul treacherous flesh, pale and harmless without, rabid-red within” (35). But then, the woman becomes the temptress, the whore figure from Joycean days, “so beguiling, mindless, kittenish, wanton” (35). Progressively the image of woman as saint creeps into Fintan’s mind, and he inevitably experiences the guilt bequeathed by Catholicism, “the supplementary guilt at leading another soul

3. See Bonnie Kine Scott, ed., Joyce and Feminism (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1984), 7, 9, 13-15, 54, 128, 135, 140, 143, 156, 185, 192, 203, for discussions of Joyce’s attitudes toward women, specifically his concept of woman as virgin and whore and the way in which those attitudes are reflected in his fiction.
astray” (35). On the other hand he calls Sally “Saint Sally,” and the reader suspects that part of the reason for Fintan’s exile to Paris is to get away from the young Irish woman whom he suspects is now pregnant (137). Unable to deal with this guilt, Fintan decides to try to avoid women and takes to telephoning them, in lieu of meeting them face to face, as a distorted means of self-defense. “A telephone call? Wasn’t it the very instrument of spiritual communication? It disembodied, as no convent grills could do. Dante would have hailed Beatrice on the phone if he’d had the convenience of it” (37). While Fintan can see the marginalization of women in Irish society, he can’t consistently extricate himself from the webs that ensnare him in the same knee-jerk repressive response to women.

The confusing and contradictory image of woman, both as virgin and as temptress, that the Catholic church inevitably sets up for its flock, catches Fintan in a net that is thickened by his practical relationship with the church. Ironically, Fintan is on a “bishop’s scholarship to study at the School of Art” in Paris (21). This scholarship has been awarded by a country that had removed all nude sculptures from its principal art gallery, the Municipal Gallery (Carlson 10). Even in art, as in Irish life, sexuality is masked and suppressed. When Fintan takes part in an art session, paints a rather blasphemous Madonna figure, and gives the artist the status of “seer,” a clerical/biblical role and one that Stephen Dedalus shares, the session is abruptly terminated by an Irish priest, “a member of some Irish Arts Committee,” who tries to re-establish the status quo (233). Fintan finds himself caught in the snare of Irish censorship. Paralleling Sally’s father, the clergy serve as the parental figures who apply the cosmetic of silence and conformity to deny and thwart the realities of Fintan’s attempted nonconformity. Fintan’s exile and freedom are threatened by the loss of his scholarship. If he fails in his artistic endeavors, he will have to “teach drawing in a monks’ school down the country” (182). In the end, as he sees the clergy closing in, as it were, Fintan decides to flee Paris for another European haven, leaving an anonymous guest with a hurley stick at his art exhibition to remark that he had enough material to do a thesis “to the effect that the worst thing that could have happened to Ireland was the coming of St. Patrick” (239).

The art exhibition reverberates with the emotional turmoil and montage effect created in the “Circe” chapter of *Ulysses* when Stephen smashes a lamp. Fintan attempts to paint a picture of the Madonna, never one that he can envision without getting lost in a labyrinth of emotion, and in his mind it is replaced with images of Sally’s aborted fetus and his guilt at assisting her with the abortion. The images of woman as saint and as whore become fused in his drunken stupor. Feeling the claustrophobic inhibitions of Ireland closing in on him, unable to smash any lamps and free himself from the ghosts that haunt him, Fintan flee Paris for Barcelona. Like Stephen Dedalus, he is also haunted by his relationship with his mother, similarly associating her with washing and with the domestic sphere, and within his equally ambiguous feelings toward her:
His mother had washed for him once. Poor Ma. Poor stranger. He thought of her with—Christ, to be truthful nothing. Not even guilt, though he was good at that, more with a sort of wonder that she should exist: feeling of the be-gilled and agile fish for an amoeba. Did I, with my fins and mouth and speed and lively eye, come out of you? And what can I do for you? . . . You had a deadening life and, as we were eight, it was one-eighth my fault. (95)

Although the allusion to eight children may remind us of the Dedalus family and Stephen’s mother’s hard life in Drumcondra, it also underscores that little has changed since Joyce wrote Portrait. Irish women, burdened with too many children, with no control over their reproductive futures, have bleak lives.

Fintan McCann’s inclusion in this narrative does more than simply allow O’Faolain to add an interesting coda, A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man in Paris, or to provide the needed peer mentor for Sally as the female protagonist. Additionally, Fintan throws the reader back into the images of colonial Ireland that Joyce painted. The stifling air of Dublin’s capital carries itself to Paris in the person of the Irish Ambassador with the “thin gombeen man’s face” (232), the Irish priest who stops Fintan’s art exhibit, and the “rosary beads of green Connemara marble” hanging in the apartment of Shewawn Donnelly to exclude men and sex (7). The reader finds in these Joycean comparisons that post-colonial Ireland and her citizens act and think very much like their predecessors. The yoke of England may be gone, but the legacy of colonialism lingers on. Fintan McCann finds it impossible to fly free of the nets described by Stephen, and there is still no room for the Irish artist in Ireland. Fintan reminds us that “He’d never used a real handkerchief or a flush lavatory” (21), while Joyce would have reminded us that the lavatory was an English invention, and an English word.

However, to trace the Joycean influences in O’Faolain’s work is not to suggest that she, or other Irish women writers, write in the shadow of Joyce, but rather to suggest, as Elaine Showalter and Adrienne Rich do, that women writers (re)Joyce, translating, adapting, and expanding Joyce to fit their stories, and even filling in the gaps in stories, whether those gaps be caused by gender, culture, or other realities (Showalter 19). As Catherine Stimpson points out:

The fact that Stephen Dedalus is male is no mere contingency but a crucial element of his identity—his relations to literature, country, and church; his relationships to others. A portrait of the artist as a young Catholic woman in late nineteenth-century Ireland might have a family likeness to Joyce’s work, but at most only a family likeness. What, for example, would her dreams be of priesthood? Delirious fantasies? (260)

Conscious, then, of Joyce’s literary innovations and thematic concerns, O’Faolain forges her own novel’s course by doing more than just filling in the gender gaps that a mere rewriting of A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Woman might entail, such as the possible re-visioning of Emma Cleary as Sally Tyndal, or of Stephen as a female sensibility.

The portraiture of Fintan is, in many ways, a portrait of Sally’s male counterpart, “whelped by the same Holy Mum,” Catholic Ireland, as Fintan notes, and it adds contrast to a novel whose emphasis falls heavily on exploring the impact of post-colonial Ireland on its women (88). By re-visioning Joyce,
O’Faolain takes advantage of the vehement outspoken voice of Stephen Dedalus wrestling with the nets of cultural repression to provide her female protagonist Sally Tyndal with a needed mouthpiece, a voice that can see the nets and name their oppressive, stifling reality. Sally is unable to give voice to her repression throughout much of the novel, so colonized is she by Irish patriarchal hegemony that she can only speak to herself or Fintan McCann and not to her oppressors. With Stephen Dedalus’ character, Joyce provided an Irish male voice capable of producing, in Seamus Deane’s view, “a native statement free of the trappings and prevalent ideological assumptions of the colonizer” (3). In choosing to adapt this voice for her purposes, O’Faolain is neither myopic nor repetitious. Nor is she reticent to employ formal Joycean structures, including interior monologue, pastiche, propaganda, and a myriad of literary allusions, for her contemporary perspective on Ireland. After all, “Words,” she tells the reader, “words were [Fintan’s] strength” (23).

O’Faolain weaves an intricate narrative web where Cromwell, the Shan Van Vocht, the Famine, Simone DeBeauvoir, Sleeping Beauty, Alice in Wonderland, Sweet Afton cigarettes, the Bronte characters of Heathcliff and Rochester, and Camus are beaded into an intricate web of meaning, the slightest touch of any strand producing a reverberation of narrative significance. For example, invoking the winged man of mythology, Stephen Dedalus’ namesake, O’Faolain intertwines the image of flight with an Alice-in-Wonderland reference to remind the reader that the nets O’Faolain’s characters have flung at them are decidedly male. These nets and webs have not been spun by Penelope. As Sally dreams, she remembers that it is her colonized Algerian lover, inseparable in identity and value from her Father, symbol of puritanism, xenophobia, and authoritarianism, who was pulling me into a mile-deep well—like Alice falling. I was happy until I noticed the bottom crawling with reptiles. I’m petrified by snakes, I suppose because we have none in Ireland. I kicked him away and began to soar. I could fly but, as I was reaching the top, the power left me and I began to fall again. At the last moment I saved myself from the reptiles who were spitting white poison from below. I started to rise but again, as I was gaining confidence that I’d made a getaway, I began to fall. And so on: up and down. . . . (40)

O’Faolain shows the interconnection between repressive Irish Catholicism and sexual relations, and the inevitable guilt that haunts both Sally and Fintan regarding sex. Both genders’ view of each other is distorted, most especially when it comes to sexual relationships. Sally struggles to get away from the “all-devouring Irish muck” (34) of Irish Catholicism, which “equates sex with shame” (12), yet sees herself as a “sort of mud creature . . . whose native habitat is a swamp of undefined guilt” (34). While Sally finally breaks free from the grips of these repressive nets, Fintan is not so successful.

If indeed Seamus Deane is right, and all of Joyce’s novels “formally . . . enact the liberation of a voice from paralysis, silence, suppression” (4), then the many Joycean elements in O’Faolain’s Three Lovers can be attributable, in part, to her desire to enact that same liberation. Ultimately, however, O’Faolain elects not to rewrite Joyce totally; instead she agrees with him that there is no room for the
male artist in Ireland and leaves Fintan McCann very much as Joyce left Stephen Dedalus in both Portrait and Ulysses, walking off in search of a self that never seems to achieve self-actualization. We remember Stephen’s parting words to Cranly in Portrait: “I will try to express myself in some mode of life or art as freely as I can and as wholly as I can, using for my defense the only arms I allow myself to use—silence, exile, and cunning” (247). Those weapons are not enough for O’Faolain’s Dedalus to battle through the nets of language, religion, and nationality. Indeed, in many ways, they seem to have made him even more vulnerable. Suspicious and cunning like Stephen, Fintan “would not try a new language [French]. He had come [to Paris] to be alone. Incomprehension was to have protected him. Or so he had planned it” (17). Like Stephen, who declares to Cranly at the end of Portrait that he does “not fear to be alone or to be spurned for another or to leave whatever I have to leave” (247), Fintan initially thinks that he too can survive alone without human intercourse. However, when he recognizes that “no one had accepted him into the fellowship of ordinariness” (17), Fintan discovers that he misses that “fellowship and the odd bit of friendly contact he could get in tearooms at home” (138), and he pines for a woman’s affection. At first, his sometime Irish drinking companion’s rechristening of Fintan as “Singularis McCann . . . the boar who lived apart from the herd” does not perturb him (157). However, by the end of the novel Condon’s appellation serves to haunt the artist as he flees Paris, alone and exiled once more.

When it comes to the woman artist (Sally is after all a writer, although not an active one in this book), O’Faolain holds out more hope. Although she too has walked away from Ireland, Sally demonstrates that she can cut through the nets of cultural patriarchy. She breaks away from silence, marginality, and oppression. Unlike Fintan, Sally is able to let go of her Irish identity, and in so doing is liberated to an embryonic state of growth. “She would nurse herself” later to a level of maturity and peace (253). The end of the novel leaves the reader with a glimpse of Sally in the process of reassembling the “ragwoman’s barrow of oddments” into something acceptable to herself, although not to Ireland (21). In contrast, our last word from Fintan, that with a cryptic lack of specificity echoes Portrait’s closing paragraph, is a note on his door that reads: “Gone to Barcelona” (248).

4. There is also an obvious echo of Yeats’s lines in “The Circus Animal’s Desecration,” when he considers the “Old iron, old bones, old rags, that raving slut / Who keeps the till. Now that my ladder’s gone / I must lie down where all the ladders start / In the foul rag and bone shop of the heart.” O’Faolain seems to find hope in the consideration of things of the “heart,” and will certainly turn again and again to Yeats’s poetry in her 1986 novel No Country for Young Men.
ANTOINETTE M. MASTIN

Works Cited and Consulted


IRELAND. GOVERNMENT PUBLICATIONS. *Bunreacht na hÉireann (Constitution of Ireland)*. Dublin: GPO, 1937.


