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The Sign of Contradiction: Joyce, Yeats, and "The Tables of the Law"

by MICHAEL F. HART

IN THE ESSAYS gathered in *The Critical Writings* and in the early drafts of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, the young James Joyce explored the theme of beauty and truth as it was presented in the literary tradition of European aestheticism.¹ Pater, Wilde, and Symons had struggled with the literary issues surrounding European aestheticism before him, and their writings provided a rich source of ideas in the early stages of his career.² However, it was W. B. Yeats, and not Wilde or Pater, who provided Joyce with a model of how an Irish writer might come to terms with aestheticism in a culture, such as Ireland's at the turn of the century, dominated by the language and morality of Catholicism.

It is easy to overlook the importance of Yeats in this matter simply because Joyce, in *The Critical Writings* at least, expressed such disdain for both Yeats and the aestheticism he represented. In "The Day of the Rabblement" (1901), Joyce dismissed the parochialism of the Irish Literary Theatre for its production of *Diarmuid and Grania*, a play adapted by Moore and Yeats from Irish heroic legend. Instead of echoing the "note of protest" associated by Joyce with the drama of Europe, the Abbey Theatre played to the rabble. Joyce, disappointed, wrote, "the Irish Literary Theatre must now be considered the property of the rabblement of the most belated race in Europe" (CW 70). More importantly, Joyce felt that Yeats was susceptible to such influences because he was an aesthete. His "floating will" and "treacherous instinct of adaptability" are blamed for such a vulgar lapse in taste and "self-respect" (CW 71).

Earlier, in "Drama and Life" (1900), Joyce had condemned the Paterian cult of "Beauty," which he associated with the writers of the Irish Revival. He referred to it as the "swerga of the aesthete" (CW 43). In that essay, as so often in these early essays, the aestheticism associated with Yeats and Pater is contrasted with Ibsen's devotion to truth. "Art is true to itself when it deals with truth" Joyce wrote in "Drama and Life" (CW 43-44). And, to the youthful Joyce, it was the Norwegian writer, Ibsen, who kept the flame of truth alive in the dramatic tradition.

1. See Leon Chai, *Aestheticism: The Religion of Art in Post-Romantic Literature* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1990), 1-45.

2. The nineteenth-century context of Joyce's early work remains to be studied in depth. Frank Kermode's *Romantic Image* (London: Ark, 1986), 1-29, places both Yeats and Joyce within the Romantic tradition of the artist as isolated symbolist, while Jacques Aubert's *The Aesthetics of James Joyce* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1992) studies the aesthetic sources of Joyce's early work within a similar context.

In these early essays Joyce uses this somewhat overworked antithesis of beauty and truth as a dialectical concept dividing the nascent Irish literature of Yeats, Hyde, and Moore from the realism of European writers such as Ibsen, Hauptmann, and Tolstoy. In "The Day of the Rabblement" Joyce unabashedly identifies himself with this European tradition. He writes, "A nation which never advanced so far as a miracle-play affords no literary model to the artist, and he must look abroad" (CW 70). From the perspective of the continent, the plays produced by Yeats at the Abbey Theatre looked timid to the young Joyce in light of the bold social protest of Ibsen's drama.

However, this easy contrast of beauty and truth, Ireland and Europe, reaches a point of crisis in the essay on the Irish romantic poet, James Clarence Mangan. Joyce's defense of Mangan's life, a life lived in devotion to the truth of poetry, seems to contradict his earlier rejection of beauty as the "swerga of the aesthete." Beauty, Joyce admits, is an essential element in poetry and in the life of the artist. Indeed, like Rubek at the end of Ibsen's *When We Dead Awaken*, Joyce implies that beauty may be the form of the highest truth.³ And so he writes at the end of the Mangan essay:

Beauty, the splendour of truth, is a gracious presence when the imagination contemplates intensely the truth of its own being or the visible world, and the spirit which proceeds out of truth and beauty is the holy spirit of joy. (CW 83)

Now this is certainly closer to the aestheticism of Yeats's essay on "William Blake and the Imagination" (1897). It overturns the position taken by Joyce in "The Day of the Rabblement."⁴ The opposition of beauty and truth, or aestheticism and realism, has yielded to a subtle synthesis, expressed in the phrase, "beauty, the splendour of truth." Characteristically, the third element arising from this synthesis is expressed in religious language. Both beauty and truth now proceed out of the "holy spirit of joy." In this example Joyce employs the methods of aestheticism, particularly the adoption of religious language to an aesthetic end characteristic of Pater and Wilde, as a means of transcending the dialectical opposition between beauty and truth established in the earlier essays. Mangan's lonely dedication to the ideal of beauty places him in the heroic tradition of Ibsen while his romantic temperament makes him akin to Yeats. In the figure of this Irish poet Joyce finds a way out of the dilemma he created when he divided Irish literature from the larger context of the European tradition. If Irish literature is to accomplish something, Joyce implies, it must be absorbed into the European tradition.

Joyce applies this concept of values to Yeats in "The Day of the Rabblement" when he singles out "The Adoration of the Magi" for praise as a story worthy of the Russian realists.⁵ This tradition of European realism, and not the rabble of the

3. See Joyce's discussion of this play by Ibsen in "Ibsen's New Drama" in *The Critical Writings*, 48-67.

4. Yeats discusses Blake's religion of art in his essay, "William Blake and the Imagination," in *Essays and Introductions* (New York: Collier Books, 1977), 111-15.

5. This story, along with "The Tables of the Law," was praised so highly by Joyce when he met Yeats that Yeats was persuaded to republish them. Yeats's prefatory remarks indicate this: "I do not think I should have reprinted them had I not met a young man in Ireland the other day, who liked them very much and nothing else that I have written." Quoted by Eilmann and Mason in *The Critical Writings*, 71, n.1.

Irish peasantry, Joyce suggests, should provide the criterion for judging Irish writers. In "The Adoration of the Magi," according to Joyce's judgement, and in the poetry of *The Wind Among the Reeds*, Yeats pursues the line of truth while keeping an eye on the high goal of ideal beauty. This dual perspective allows Yeats to explore the internal contradictions of European aestheticism in an Irish context.⁶ This is the direction Joyce follows in his later works in the character of Stephen Dedalus.

Within the Irish context the question of aestheticism inevitably became involved with the fate of Catholicism in Irish culture. The stories collected in *The Secret Rose*, particularly the three stories "Rosa Alchemica," "The Tables of the Law," and "The Adoration of the Magi," all center around a confrontation between the religion of art, occultism, and Catholic morality.⁷ Through the figures of Michael Robartes and Owen Aherne Yeats explored the theme of aestheticism with the works of European writers such as Villiers de L'Isle Adam in mind but always in the context of fin-de-siècle Dublin. This aspect of his early work distinguishes Yeats's achievement from the European writers Joyce named in "The Day of the Rabblement." Through Yeats's stories the young Joyce could have found a way to reconcile himself to the claims of beauty and truth in a fictional context that paralleled the synthesis he found in the life of Mangan.

This process is most clearly illustrated in the series of semi-autobiographical narratives Joyce wrote between 1904, when he wrote an essay titled "A Portrait of the Artist," and 1914 when the final version of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* was completed in Trieste.⁸ This includes the abandoned manuscript of *Stephen Hero* (1904-06), which contains a detailed discussion of Yeats's story, "The Tables of the Law." As Joyce refines his vision of the growth of the artist's imagination, he also comes to terms with Yeats. For this reason a comparative reading of Joyce's most sustained autobiographical portrait and Yeats's story is necessary to understand how Joyce incorporated his struggle with Yeats into his fictional universe. This can be accomplished most effectively by comparing Yeats's story "The Tables of the Law" to Joyce's critique of it in *Stephen Hero*.

In chapter twenty-three of *Stephen Hero* Stephen Daedalus has a long discussion on the topic of Dante and Bruno with Father Artifoni, his Italian teacher. This introduces the theme of Stephen's interest in Italian literature and prepares us for the breakthrough that follows. Directly after this discussion the narrator describes Stephen's discovery of Yeats's story, "The Tables of the Law":

6. See Michael F. Hart, "The Spirit of Reconciliation: James Joyce, Catholicism, and the European Romantic Tradition," unpublished dissertation (Rutgers Univ., 1992), 69-168, for a detailed discussion of the European context of both Yeats and Joyce's relation to aestheticism.

7. According to an unsigned note in a private edition, these three stories were originally intended for publication in *The Secret Rose*. See the introduction of the Variorum Edition for a detailed account of the publishing history. *The Secret Rose, Stories by W. B. Yeats: A Variorum Edition*, ed. Phillip L. Marcus, Warwick Gould, and Michael J. Sidnell (Ithaca and London: Cornell Univ. Press, 1981), xiv-xv. All quotations are taken from this Variorum Edition.

8. See The Viking Critical Library Edition for the text of Joyce's 1904 essay, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Text, Criticism, and Notes, ed. Chester G. Anderson (New York: Penguin Books, 1977), 257-66.

He had found on one of the carts of books near the river an unpublished book containing two stories by W. B. Yeats. One of these stories was called *The Tables of the Law* and in it was mentioned the fabulous preface which Joachim, abbot of Flora, is said to have prefixed to his *Eternal Gospel*. (*SH* 176)⁹

Stephen is inspired by this discovery to continue his "Franciscan studies" which he began in Marsh's Library.¹⁰ These studies included the prophecies of the same Joachim of Flora whose ideas figure so largely in the fate of Owen Aherne. Enthralled with Yeats's story, Stephen memorizes it and walks "through the streets at night intoning phrases to himself," a Yeatsian monk meditating on his sacred book.

Stephen consecrates Yeats's story while he systematically misreads it. He ignores the narrator's misgivings and extracts the first principle of artistic economy ("the isolation of the artist") from Aherne's esoteric ruminations:

The atmosphere of these stories was heavy with incense and omens and the figures of the monk-errants, Aherne and Michael Robartes strode through it with great strides. Their speeches were like the enigmas of a disdainful Jesus; their morality was infrahuman or superhuman: the ritual they laid such store by was so incoherent and heterogeneous, so strange a mixture of trivialities and sacred practices that it could be recognized as the ritual of men who had received from the hands of high priests, [who had been] anciently guilty of some arrogance of the spirit, a confused and dehumanised tradition, a mysterious ordination. (*SH* 178)

Readers of *A Portrait of the Artist* know that this "mysterious ordination" will transform Stephen into a "priest of eternal imagination." However, in "The Tables of the Law" the narrative is divided into two parts that reflect a conflict between the aesthetic and religious claims made on Aherne. This conflict, which reflects the antinomianism prevalent in the decadent literature of the period, is echoed in the narrative structure of the story. However, Stephen ignores this conflict as he reads Yeats's story as a myth concerning the prophetic function of the artist in history.¹¹

For example, the aestheticist gospel of beauty proclaimed by Owen Aherne in the first part of "The Tables of the Law" is interpreted by Stephen as a book of prophecies. "Civilization," Stephen tells Cranly, "may be said indeed to be the creation of its outlaws" (*SH* 178). Both the artist and the outlaw transgress the laws of society in order to renew the spiritual life of civilization. This is the way Stephen reads Joachim of Flora through the medium of Yeats. However, "The Tables of the Law" is less concerned with a prophetic view of history or of the

9. All quotations from *Stephen Hero* taken from edition edited by Theodore Spencer (New York: New Directions, 1963).

10. While in Dublin I had the opportunity to visit Marsh's Library in St. Patrick's Close. My visit was enhanced immeasurably by the generosity and kindness of Ms. Muriel McCarthy, Keeper of the Library, who allowed me to peruse the *Vaticinia de Summis Pontificibus*, the text attributed to Joachim and read by Joyce in Marsh's in October 1902. I am also indebted to Ms. McCarthy for bringing to my attention Joseph Voelker's detailed discussion of this Joycean source, "'Proteus' and the *Vaticinia* of Marsh's Library: Joyce's Subjunctive Selves," in *Eire* Winter 1979: 133-41.

11. Brief critical discussions of Joyce's use of Yeats's "The Tables of the Law" can be found in Eitel Timm's *W. B. Yeats: A Century of Criticism* (Columbia: Camden House, 1990), 22-23, and in William H. O'Donnell's *A Guide to the Prose Fiction of W. B. Yeats* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1983), 119-20. Also of note is the full-length study of the nineteenth-century reception of Joachim's ideas, *Joachim of Fiore and the Myth of the Eternal Return in the Nineteenth Century* by Marjorie Reeves and Warwick Gould (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987). See "A Note on James Joyce and Joachim," 27-78.

priestly function of art than it is with the contradiction between the aesthetic and religious realms as a central drama in the fate of Owen Aherne.

The story is divided into two parts, each reflecting the divided soul of the hero, Owen Aherne. In the first part Aherne tells the story of the *Liber Inducens in Evangelium Aeternum*, the strange book of prophecies Aherne has in his possession. Previous owners of this book have included the family of Aretino and the father of Benvenuto Cellini. It is, according to Aherne, the lost book of the Franciscan visionary, Joachim of Flora. The key to its mystery is the doctrine of the three kingdoms of divine revelation, "The Kingdom of the Father was past, the Kingdom of the Son passing, the Kingdom of the Spirit yet to come." According to Aherne, the coming of the kingdom of the spirit will be heralded by the triumph of the "spiritualis intelligentia," a method of reading that substitutes spiritual meaning for the "dead letter."

As Aherne describes this Pauline hermeneutic, he also proclaims the aestheticist gospel of beauty. Surrounded by paintings from the Italian Renaissance, gothic doorways, and Pre-Raphaelite drawings, Aherne lives in a hermetic world reminiscent of the hero of Huysmans' novel, *A Rebours*, *Des Esseintes*.¹² As he describes the sacred mysteries of Joachim of Flora's prophecies, he tells the narrator that the "secret law" yet unwritten on the ivory tablets hanging on the wall will be inspired by "poets and romance-writers" and will condense the wisdom and beauty expressed by the world's great poets, painters, and musicians.

Now this vision seems to parallel the one proclaimed by Stephen in chapter twenty-three of *Stephen Hero*. However, in the second part of Yeats's story the narrator catches up with Aherne ten years later and finds him a broken man. "Has the philosophy of the *Liber Inducens in Evangelium Aeternum* made you very unhappy?" he asks Aherne. And Aherne replies:

At first I was full of happiness, for I felt a divine ecstasy, an immortal fire in every passion, in every hope, in every desire, in every dream. . . . Then all changed and I was full of misery; and in my misery it was revealed to me that man can only come to that Heart [of God] through the sense of separation from it we call sin, because I had discovered the law of my being, and could only express or fail to express my being, and I understood that God has made a simple and an arbitrary law that we may sin and repent. (SR 162)

The narrator's misgivings, and his suspicions of Aherne's heresy, voiced at the end of part one, are realized. Aherne, like Faust, has been damned through his search for secret knowledge. Rather than discovering the key to liberation, he has uncovered the truth in the form of a contradiction.

The sign of this contradiction is manifest in the "tables of the law." In part one the blank state of the tablets represents the expectancy of the prophetic moment, the moment when the new revelation of the kingdom of the spirit will be revealed. In part two the narrator notices that the tablets have been inscribed with "an elaborate casuistry" in Latin, implying that the Eternal Gospel of beauty written

12. There are many suggestive parallels between Huysmans' hero and Stephen Dedalus that still need to be examined. See J. K. Huysmans, *A Rebours* (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1977).

by the great artists of the past has been replaced by the moral imperatives of Catholicism. The narrator underscores this interpretation when he says of Aherne that he “understood how Catholicism had seized him in the midst of the vertigo he called philosophy.” Aherne’s acceptance of the aestheticist doctrine of beauty proves, unwittingly, to be the instrument of his apostasy. Beauty and truth, at least in Yeats’s story, appear to be irreconcilable.

If we return to *Stephen Hero* we can see that this is the central paradox in Stephen’s attempt to construct a theory of the artist. Like Aherne, Stephen searches for a new revelation, a religion of art. It appears, at first, that he finds the source of that revelation not in the lost prophecies of Joachim of Flora, which turn out, in the end, to be a “Fractura Tabularum” (an empty slate that may represent the contradiction of writing itself), but in Yeats’s attempt to construct a myth of the artist. However, at the center of Yeats’s myth an abyss opens: the abyss separating the law of individual being from the law of God. And in the process of substituting one for the other Aherne realizes that the two laws are tragically opposed. The aestheticist quest for beauty has turned out to be a wandering in a dark wood, rebellion has turned into error.¹³

The Dantean theme in Yeats’s story reappears at the end of chapter twenty-three of *Stephen Hero*. After listening to Stephen’s discourse on the artist as outlaw, Cranly examines Stephen much in the way the narrator interrogates Aherne. “The Church believes that in every act a man does he seeks some good,” Cranly tells Stephen. “I understand the good which these men seek but what do you seek?” (*SH* 179).

The answer to this question and Joyce’s recognition of Stephen’s confusion is indicated by the fact that he gives the last word to Cranly and not to Stephen:

- The Church differentiates between the good which this man seeks and the good which I seek. There is a bonum simpliciter. Then [sic] men you mention seek a good of that kind because they are impelled by [direct] passions which are direct even if they are menial: lust, ambition, gluttony. I seek a bonum arduum.

- It might be a bonum very much simpliciter. I don’t think you know, said Cranly. (*SH* 180)

Cranly accuses Stephen of confusing the aesthetic claims of beauty with the moral desire for the good. In the same way, in Yeats’s “The Tables of the Law” the narrator damns Owen Aherne for his pursuit of the alchemical rose. The two acts are not identical—they are parallel. And in the space created by this intertextual parallel, Joyce and Yeats are united.

In “The Tables of the Law” Joyce discovered a fictional model of a dialectical method, a method for rendering the accounts of the quest for beauty while telling the truth about the claims of Catholicism in the context of Irish culture at the turn of the century. European writers, such as Tolstoy and Flaubert, also addressed this dilemma: how to reconcile the claims of art with the moral claims of a religious culture. The theme appears again in *Ulysses*.¹⁴

13. See Dante Alighieri, *Inferno* I, 1-3, trans. Charles Singleton (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1970).

14. See the first three chapters of *Ulysses* where Stephen is torn between his desire for beauty (“Who goes with Fergus?”) and his gnawing inner conscience (“Agenbite of inwit”).

This contradiction, as I have defined it in this essay, is the central preoccupation of European aestheticism at the end of the nineteenth century.¹⁵ As a young writer Joyce obviously learned a great deal about this theme from the example of the many European writers he read during this formative phase of his career. And yet it is in the early stories of Yeats that we find the clearest example of a fictional portrait of the artist divided between these two warring worlds, art and religion. Within the Irish context, with its peculiar combination of romantic, symbolist, and Catholic elements, Yeats wrestled with the theme of aestheticism in a way that is close to Joyce's concerns as an Irish writer. And, as he admitted many times much later in his life, the example of Yeats proved to be invaluable to him in his search for beauty and truth.¹⁶

15. See Jaques Aubert, *The Aesthetics of James Joyce* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1992), for an interesting discussion of this topic.

16. See Richard Ellmann's biography of Joyce for details concerning Joyce's admiration for Yeats. As Ellmann notes, Joyce was fond of reciting Yeats's poetry to his friends in Paris, an act many French writers in the thirties found baffling. Richard Ellmann, *James Joyce* (Oxford Univ. Press, 1982), 661.