

Sexual Terror and Forced Initiation: "An Encounter"

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If Joyce portrays in "The Sisters" the paralysing interaction between the agent and victim of corruption, as symbolized in the decline of Father Flynn and his moribund sisters, he dramatizes in "An Encounter" a full-fledged effort to escape from the depressing atmosphere of Dublin. If we confer on the boy-narrator the same identity of narrator of the previous story, his dream of escape is quite understandable, because he, feeling frustrated by elliptical language as much as by the stuffy conventionality of the adults, had already suggested "Persia" to himself as a positive alternative to the suffocating reality of Dublin. Of course, that does not necessarily mean that he has fully recognized the dynamics of paralysis permeating all the aspects of sordid Dublin, nor does his attempt for escape provide a practical outlet from the psychological, mental and emotional plight in which Dubliners are supposedly trapped. His dream of escape turns out at best to be a boyish adventure, an one-day picnic, a way to get fresh air by getting away from a boring school and routine home. It is, however, significant because, unlike many other stories in *Dubliners*, escape *does* occur in "An Encounter." Even if the boys, out on adventure, eventually return home in the evening, completing their attempt to escape on a

limited scale, their impulse to escape makes a sharp contrast with that of adults of living death. Also, it is significant, in that this, like other boyhood stories, is concerned with the protagonist's growing awareness of reality, for better or for worse, through a succession of "encounters" with reality. Such a process of adaptation to society and the internalization of its value system should provide a proper framework for initiation stories like "An Encounter."

The whole narrative of "An Encounter" can be divided into three parts: the first part provides a literary and mimetic preparation for the coming adventure, the second part is the execution of the one-day outing, and the last part includes an unexpected encounter with a strange man. The beginning part of the narrative depicts how the dream of escape developed in the protagonist and what kind of materials stimulated the lively imagination of the boy. At first, we hear that the literature of the "Wild West" such as *Union Jack*, *Pluck* and *The Halfpenny Marvel* opened to him "doors of escape" (D 11). Soon enough, however, he finds that those British magazines of adventure are not to his taste, because he feels more fascinated by American detective stories packed with "unkempt fierce and beautiful girls," which were "circulated secretly at school" (D 12). So, even if he participates in Indian battles and sieges, he does so lest he should "seem studious or lacking in robustness," which he truly is. What is remarkable here in relation to his seminal identity as a male signifier is that the boy finds himself torn between the expectation of the male society and his own real desire of himself.¹⁾ A keen self-consciousness and duality of behaviour

1) The continual conflict between what society expects and what he really

characterizes his response to outer reality as much as it determines his internalization process in the narrative. The boy's job as a narrator, armed with hyper-sensitivity and intelligence, remains the same from the first to the third initiation stories in *Dubliners*, although the agonizing symptoms of growing up from childhood into adolescence can hardly be missed. His poignant sense of the body, of his budding sexuality, grows more and more intense as he matures from the first to the third story. Therefore, the narrator in "The Sisters" who showed keen interest in such metaphysical topics as death, paralysis and simony proves much more interested in the following stories in participating in boyish action and narrating what is happening to him, physically and mentally. In the following analysis, we will try to grasp the disturbing reality of his experience in relation to the politics of the adolescent body and understand what sort of repercussions such a bodily awakening brings about in his soul and what sort of refraction does it result in his fragile mode of identity.

The first sign of awkward age is betrayed by the protagonist's hunger for "wild sensations, which takes the form of "an escape from "restraining influence of the school" (*D* 12), "a day's miching" (*D* 13) in his slangy language.²⁾ The boy's restless soul, feeling "the

is is concretely dramatized in Stephen's early days at Clongowes Wood in the *Portrait*, the significance of which should not be missed because the formation of his character is to be accomplished by the interaction with his surroundings.

- 2) The repressive element of institutionalized education is vividly dramatized in the atmosphere of classroom when Leo Dillon is discovered with *The Halfpenny Marvel* by Father Butler who – Bunsen Burner as Mahony calls him – betrays the narrow and stuffy perspective of Jesuit educators. He regards the children's magazine as "rubbish" and "wretched stuff." (*D* 12)

riot of blood" (*P* 187) like that of Stephen in his pubescent stage in the *Portrait*, wishes a "real adventures to happen" to him, because he is fed up with literary ones. (*D* 12) In addition, his feeling of superiority makes his adolescent psychology much more complicated. He separates himself from the peer group whom he despises as little Indians preoccupied with a "mimic warfare" (*D* 12) he no longer feels interested in. Finally, he plans to play a truant from the weariness of school-life. Hence the arrangement of the Pigeon House project.

The night before, he sleeps badly, perhaps out of excitement, or perhaps in a foreshadowing of the nightmarish experience he will encounter the next day. The next morning starts with a sense of fresh freedom and joyful anticipation: "I was happy." (*D* 13) The project, however, looks like a failure from the first, because Leo Dillon does not show up.³⁾ (They cannot even arrange a siege on the way, because they need at least three.) Despite the first sign of frustration, they carry out the expedition. What can be the "real" motivation for the narrator's going up to the Pigeon House? Circumstantial evidence betrays that he possibly expects some sort of amorous affair. His fashionable preparation for the project, i.e. whitening of his canvass shoes, supports my argument. Mahony also brings a catapult. When questioned by the protagonist, he

3) It should be noted here that the most victorious brothers in the mock-battle, Joe and Leo Dillon, drop out of the project of escape. Fritz Senn attributes their disappearance to Joe's priestly vocation and Leo's hesitation and fear. (Hart 29) We can add to that the middle-class complacency and religious prejudice of their parents, because they would not allow their children to do anything that might disturb the "peaceful orduer" of their house. (*D* 11)

casually retorts that he brought it for fun, i.e. "to have some gas with the birds" (*D* 14). If we recall that "Mahony used slang freely" (*D* 14), however, the catapult becomes a signifier highly charged with sexual meaning, a strong metaphor for phallic power. It certainly becomes an appropriate tool for masculine prowess for his age. So, Mahony would like to test his masculine power by chasing "a crowd of ragged girls," not shooting this time but brandishing his catapult because it turns out to be "unloaded" (*D* 14). It will take time for him to be fully "loaded" physically and to wield freely the real catapult, his phallus. We should notice here that the narrator has shown keen interest in the catapult by asking Mahony "why he had brought it" (*D* 14), and also observe the bulging of the phallic signifier from the "inside" pocket.

Hanging out as their wayward meandering leads them to, from the North Strand Road, through the Vitriol Works and the Wharf Road, they finally come near the river Dodder. The topographical details of their journey simply underscore the depressing atmosphere of Dublin. Even the commercial scene at the harbor, according to Senn, looks static without any movement except for "curls of woolly smoke from a barge far away."⁴ The monotonous stillness of the waterfront is interrupted by Mahony's impulsive proposal to "run away to sea on one of those big ships" (*D* 15). Underlining the narrator's belief that "real adventure" is something that should be sought abroad, both of the boys enjoy, although momentarily, the freedom snatched for the day: "School and home seemed to recede from us and their influences upon us seemed to

4) See Hart, 36.

wane" (*D* 15). The narrator's search for something exotic, a boyish form of escape, however, seems to be quite disoriented because the green eyes the narrator is looking for are not to be found among the Norwegian sailors. Immediately, he admits to himself the drawbacks of his romantic quest for escape by saying that he "had some confused notion" (*D* 15).⁵⁾ It is natural, therefore, that he should fail in deciphering the mysterious "legend" of the Norwegian vessel, and he is to find the green in the eyes of a pervert later on.

Tired of wandering around the wharf on a sultry June day, they at last find it too late to arrive at the Pigeon House, their destination. Instead, they seriously consider going back home, resuming their routine school and homework. The gay sun in the morning is now going behind the clouds. Their mounting frustration is clearly felt when we observe Mahony look "regretfully at his catapult" (*D* 16). As is often the case with Dubliners, regardless of age or gender, they leave their project of escape uncompleted, not because it was too difficult for them but because their minds have been distracted so much by trivialities *en route*. The desired destination, whatever form it may take, is never reached in *Dubliners*.

Little, however, did they expect what sort of encounter is in store for them. Left alone in the darkening field, they suddenly see a man

5) The boy definitely has an impulse to escape, but his notion of escape turns out to be quite vague or disoriented as we see in his seeking for "green eyes" an exotic alternative to drab life. Such a confusion of orientation is not rare among the characters in *Dubliners*. In "Araby," the boy-narrator defines his romance with Mangan's sister as "confused adoration" (*D* 23), while Eveline feels "pleasantly confused" (*D* 32) when she hears Frank sing a sailor's song.

approaching from the far end. At first glance, his appearance is simply grotesque. He wears a shabby suit of greenish black and a jerry hat with a high crown. With one hand on his hip, he walks slowly to and fro in the field, tapping the turf with his stick. He looks much older because of his ashen-gray moustache. Such a shabby deportment and repetitive movement strongly suggest the man's mental and emotional irregularity, which relates him to Father Flynn, who exhibits similar eccentricities of speech and behaviour. Bodily motion frequently proves to be, in the works of Joyce, a powerful signifier that reveals the hidden problematics of a character when other codes remain highly opaque.

The first topic the man picks up is his regressive wish "to be young again," saying that "the happiest time in one's life" is "school boy days" (*D* 17). He also adds his predilection for authors such as Thomas Moore, Sir Walter Scott and Lord Lytton, although he warns that some of Lytton's works should not be read by boys. So far, so good. Nothing particularly reveals his abnormality. His perversion betrays itself when he starts asking the boys if they have girl friends. A boy of egocentric sophistication, the narrator remains silent because he does not want to reveal that he is disturbed by the sexual implications. He pretends anger by keeping silent, although he feels strangely fascinated by what the man is supposed to say. Such an ambivalent feeling of seeming revulsion and secret fascination recalls the attitude of the boy in "The Sisters" regarding the death of Father Flynn. He even regards his liberal utterance as "reasonable."

His attitude on this point struck me strangely liberal in a man of his age. In my heart I thought that what he said about boys and sweethearts was reasonable. (*D* 17-18)

He conceals his inward feeling of agreement, however, by saying that he dislikes "the words in his mouth." Here he deftly replaces "what is said" with "by whom it is said," a highly parenthetical restriction on what he has secretly admitted. The narrator wishes to cover his awakening sexuality by distracting readers from the main discourse to marginal signifiers such as the disgusting image of the man's mouth and the great gaps between his yellow teeth.

Noticing that the man's accent is good, the boy feels more and more enchanted by his second topic. The man confesses that he likes to see "nice white hands" and "beautiful soft hair" of a young girl. (*D* 18) With no clinical "karte" available, it is hard to tell the nature of the man's perversity, although his symptoms betray a serious fixation at some stage of sexual development⁶⁾ Chances are that he might have had some problems in the phase of centralization, which resulted in his obsession with tactile desire for parts of female body. He naturally prefers vulnerable young girls to full-fledged female body. Before the narrative starts, he might have lost his phallic power, which he would like to regain through the surrogate-satisfaction of telling the boys the stories of his fixation.

6) In terms of repressed sexuality, we can easily point out phenomenal similarity between the old man and Wing Biddlebaum who, in "Hands" of Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg Ohio*, shows another case of sexual fixation because of his irresistible tactile desire as an exhibition of his homosexual impulse.

He seems to be enjoying the innocent response of the boys by arousing in them some sort of amorous desire. He thus repeats his personal anecdote as if charmed, like an "Ancient Mariner," by the power of logos, which is a strong substitute for his sexual desire:

He gave me the impression that he was repeating something which he had learned by heart or that, magnetized by some words of his own speech, his mind was slowly circling round and round in the same orbit. At times he spoke as if he were simply alluding to some fact that everybody knew, and at times he lowered his voice and spoke mysteriously as if he were telling us something secret which he did not wish others to overhear. He repeated his phrases over and over again, varying them and surrounding them with his monotonous voice. (*D* 18)

The discourse he reproduces is simple enough. For that matter, even the narrator knows more than that: "[the man] was simply alluding to some fact everybody knew" (*D* 18). The depravity of the man's desire, it seems, lies not in what he says but in how he says, i.e. the rhetoric of his story-telling. He wraps his discourse in such an enigmatic way, sometimes lowering his voice as if he were saying something secret. He truly is mesmerized by his own repetitive speech, so much so that he seems to be circling on and on without stopping. He seems to be completely enclosed within himself by his own performance of story-telling.⁷⁾ The onesidedness of his speech

7) The hypnotic effect of the circular movement, either in motion or in speech, can find corresponding example both in Johnny's circling around King Billy's statue in "The Dead" and in Stephen's dream-epiphany which is a nightmarish reenactment of the "hellfire-sermon" in the retreat. See *P* 148-49. Both cases are

should be noticed here since Joyce's description of the old man's monologue, like most of the speech in *Dubliners*, underscores the self-absorption of the character.⁸⁾

The most illuminating moment is casually reported by the narrator when he notices the convulsive movement of the man while he was talking.

I wondered why he shivered once or twice as if he feared something or felt a sudden chill. (*D* 18)

If we pay attention to the man's replacement of his sexuality with verbal repetition, such a behaviour shows the climax of his sexual/verbal excitement. This is truly an epiphany for readers, grotesque as it is. It can also be a revelatory instant for the narrator, although he pretends not to remark the sexual implications of the man's current action. The next thing the man should do, therefore, is to go somewhere and take care of his own desire, which has already reached the point of no return. It is not clear whether the old man was urinating or masturbating, although it is strikingly clear that he at least has exposed his genitals in full view of the boys.⁹⁾ For the first time, the boy confronts the stark reality of adult sexuality, all the more startling for its perversity. The wild, disorderly sensations the adolescent narrator has been vaguely

unmistakable symptoms of paralysis.

8) See Werner, 44.

9) Autobiographical data confirms that Joyce and his brother Stanislaus actually had "encountered" a homosexual in 1895 when Joyce was thirteen years old. See *My Brother's Keeper*, 79.

seeking finally become real in the form of an unexpected encounter with depravity that can refract the boy's phallic consciousness in any direction whatsoever.

The next epiphany, mutually significant for both reader and narrator, is reported by prosaic description of the narrator side by side with Mahony's terrible exclamation.

After a long while his monologue paused. He stood up slowly, saying that he had to leave us for a minute or so, a few minutes, and, without changing the direction of my gaze, I saw him walking slowly away from us towards the near end of the field. We remained silent when he had gone. After a silence of a few minutes I heard Mahony exclaim:

- I say! Look what he's doing!

As I neither answered nor raised my eyes Mahony exclaimed again:

- I say ... He's a queer old jossler!

- In case he asks us for our names, I said, let you be Murphy and I'll be Smith. (*D* 18)

The sharp difference between the boys' reactions to the same topic betrays the different cast of their minds. Mahony, an extrovert with naïve innocence, responds spontaneously to the terrifying scene he witnesses. It might seem childish, but his exclamation sounds more natural and even healthier than the narrator's. The introverted narrator, on the other hand, shows a sophisticated and more self-conscious response, consistent to his behavioral pretension. The most remarkable feature of his behavior is that he continually tries to repress what he has really heard and seen. He

pretends, for instance, not to hear the man's story by gazing "towards the foot of the slope," while "listening to him" (*D* 18). He does not even raise his eyes at Mahony's terrified outcry, even if he has been gazing at what the man was doing in the distance. The most strategic thing to be mentioned is that, for a few minutes, there falls a sheer silence in the narrative. Such an "imposed" silence can be read as a telling signifier by which the narrator completely sweeps away the devastating reality his eyes have witnessed. It is too shocking for him to make a report.

Two more things can be added to the ambivalent feelings of the narrator toward his encounter with the man. First, the ellipsis inserted in Mahony's second utterance is significant: "I say ... He's a queer old josser!" (*D*18). This expression could reflect Mahony's inability to understand or to verbalize what he has seen. Going deeper, it could be the signifier of repression employed by the narrator who would like to erase from the narrative surface what he has seen. Or the boy-narrator would like to allow himself some space of time, long enough to come to terms with the terrible sensation he felt himself. Second, the boy suggests to Mahony that they change their names. On a naturalistic level, the suggestion to use pseudonyms could be a childish gesture to cope with the fear he feels at the moment. On a symbolic level, however, he would like to put on "presumed" maturity by throwing away the original name of childhood. Hence his being "Smith" from that point on. Through the deceptive coinage of a new signifier, he wants to cope with the "josser," an inverted phallic symbol for the adult sexuality he himself will soon develop into.

The return of the pervert brings about a drastic change in the narrative. Mahony goes away from the scene, out of boredom or for a new adventure, i.e. cat-chasing. (Can we detect here an unconscious desire of the narrator to monopolize the disturbing narrative of the man?)¹⁰⁾ The narrator, with a false name, establishes a peaceful complicity with the "jossler" when they together see Mahony pursuing a cat across the field: "The man and I watched the chase" (*D* 19).¹¹⁾ Concealing his identity behind the pseudonym, "Smith" continues, much relaxed, to listen to the man's bizarre story. The man resumes his monologue, but he picks up another subject of "chastising boys" for chasing attractive young girls. He thus deconstructs his former discourse of liberalism. (Readers of *Ulysses* may recall how "sexual release" affects the theme and tone of the narrative.)¹²⁾ He at first says that unruly boys ought to be "whipped and well whipped," which sounds quite normal. If we note, however, the shift from "a good sound whipping" to "a nice warm whipping" the man so badly wants, we reasonably

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- 10) Actually, the boy-narrator feels uncomfortable in sharing the tale of the pervert with Mahony, because he would like to keep its amorous nature from Mahony and because of the boyish straightforwardness of the questions and answers Mahony puts to the pervert. The boy fears that the man will think him "as stupid as Mahony." (*D* 17)
- 11) The boy-narrator's complicity with the pervert should be noted here not only because the boy blends his speech with the pervert's through indirect discourse but because he "knowingly" wants not to watch the pervert's act, probably out of "shared guilt."
- 12) In "Nausicaa" episode, Leopold Bloom shows a similar shift of mood before and after the auto-eroticism stimulated by Gerty MacDowell's exhibitionism on the beach. This scene is much more vividly captured than that of the jossler. See Hart, 31.

suspect the “pretended” intention of his disciplinary whipping. Moreover, his confession of desirous whipping sounds more like that of a sadist: “there was nothing in this world he would like so well as that” (*D* 19). What is surprising is that his mind seems “to circle slowly round and round its new center,” as if “magnetized again by his speech” (*D* 19). This kind of hypnotic state into which he frequently lapses is a sure sign of emotional, mental and sexual paralysis. His abnormal sexuality continually seeks a verbal enactment as a wish-fulfilment, looking for a “new centre” to turn around.

The moment the boy senses the contradictoriness of the pervert’s “mysterious” preoccupation with whipping, he is awaked from the mesmerizing power of language. He feels disillusioned because the expedition he has been looking for is completely shattered when he recognizes in the pervert “a pair of bottle-green eyes.”¹³⁾ The “real adventure” (*D* 12) he so wanted does happen to him at last, and it turns out to be a nightmarish horror. He also discerns, for the first time ever, the intent of the insinuating look of the pervert.

He described to me how he whip such a boy as if he were unfolding some elaborate mystery. He would love that, he said, better than anything in this world; and his voice, as he led me monotonously through the mystery, grew almost *affectionate* and seemed to *plead* with me that I should understand him. (*D* 20, italics mine)

13) Identifying a sign of “particular form of paralysis” in the bottle-green color of the pervert’s eyes, Senn connects him to Father Flynn, who also exhibits the general image of a corrupt priest. (Hart 32)

That the "queer old jossler" actually tries to make some sort of advance toward the boy, a practical execution of what he has insinuated thus far, is quite clear when we see his "affectionate pleading" with him. A sudden sensation of impending danger urges the boy to stand up abruptly. Despite the boy's ambivalent response to the pervert's story-telling, epiphany betrays for him the hidden motive of the man as well as the dubious nature of the monologue which is, as it turns out, no more than a winding process of seduction to the sadistic game of whipping. Together with epistemological revelation, epiphany also brings about changes in emotional dimension. He feels contrite for his previously arrogant attitude towards Mahony. Such a feeling of humility can be read as a positive sign that he has already started the journey for self-recognition, which will become a recurrent motif in the following stories.

– Murphy! (*D* 20)

He loudly calls Mahony for help, feeling "an accent of forced bravery" (*D* 20) in his voice. He truly is trembling with fear. The desperate call for help is the genuine voice of the narrator, who has so far preoccupied himself with disguising his true identity and repressing his true voice. He is a boy of terrible intelligence, horrendous susceptibility and undaunted egotism, but that is not sufficient to make him an adult. Even though it is a painful wound to his self-esteem, he must admit the futility of his "palty strategem" (*D* 20), when confronted with a situation of fright and terror. The boy should recognize the importance of the other being who, with

positive qualities such as directness, simplicity and spontaneity, comes to his rescue, complementing his sensitivity, intelligence and timidity. He should realize that this different mode of being is not something to be despised, but something to be respected.

In this context, the boy's last confession is not, as some critics argue, all too abrupt and even the word "penitent," seemingly too strong for the situation, proves appropriate, if we consider how much the boy tried to repress his own pubescent consciousness at the cost of sacrificing Mahony.¹⁴⁾

And I was penitent; for in my heart I had always despised him a little. (*D* 20)

"An Encounter" is an initiation story, a story of boy-narrator's initiation into adult sexuality as much as into communal fellowship. The boy's one-day rebellion against the sordid trivialities of childhood, both at home and school, ends up with an encounter with a pervert, leaving him terrorized in the face of stark reality. The

14) Even if the boy-narrator continually looks down on Mahony's behaviour for its childishness, it should be noted that his robust spontaneity always brings fresh air into the paralysing world of Dublin. It is Mahony who reassures the wavering Leo Dillon by asking "very sensibly" that "what would Father Butler be doing out at the Pigeon House" (*D* 13). The momentary sense of freedom the narrator feels at the harbour is also stimulated by Mahony's suggestion "to run away to sea" (*D* 15). Most significantly, Mahony early enough gets out of the mesmerizing trap of the pervert's amorous story by chasing a cat into the wild field. In this sense, the narrative function of Mahony can be more effective in offering a resistance to the repressing atmosphere of Dublin society. Even if the narrator would like to look more mature than he actually is, he should not despise the positive quality inherent in the radical innocence of Mahony.

appearance of "queer old josses," however, is more than a report of a sexual perversion. Other implications can be considered here. First, it suggests the general nature of human endeavours, which end mostly with a mixture of "moderate successes and sharp disappointments."¹⁵ Second, the old man's longing for the days of his lost youth as much as his obsession with young girls shows a nostalgic overtone of weary adult disillusionment. This is not unrelated to the general atmosphere of the depressed city of Dublin. Third, the elderly man conducts an initiation, both sexual and social, for the narrator, who realizes the poignant reality of his budding sexuality as well as the significance of other human beings. An encounter with the pervert thus provides an opportunity of socialization for the narrator, who eventually comes to recognize the importance of a fellow being, yet in a limited sense. In this respect, granting that the original plan of visiting the Pigeon House was not fully achieved, it still makes possible an awakening on the part of the narrator, which turns out to be a true encounter with himself. The

15) In this context, Senn proposes a mature perspective on the symbolic significance of the perversion of the elderly man:

Perhaps the most important thing about the man is the aura of mystery that surrounds both him and his words even after we have understood the nature of his perversion and its possible symbolic significance. He seems to contain more than can be rationally grasped. Joyce always refers to him simply as 'a man' or 'the man.' This makes it likely that above all he is meant to portray something generally human – fallible, corrupt, disappointed humanity, not simply someone to despise (as most critics seem to do), but also someone in whom we may recognize ourselves. The man's longing for contact is not solely a homosexual overture, but a very human desire to be accepted and understood. (Hart 28-29)

theme of initiation is picked up again in "Araby" and reexamined in a "normal" situation, where the narrator finds in Mangan's sister a "sweetheart," according to the older man's exhortation.

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