

Ben Graydon
Kimberly McColl
ENGL 325

Joyce's *Portrait*: Nationalism, Exile, and the Police

“To be an exile is to be alive.” —Lamming

Our *New Age* keyword searches focused on Irishness and Ireland and resulted in a large number of hits. One series of articles and letters reveal an argument between R.H.C. (a pseudonym of editor Orage) and Ernest A. Boyd that is representative of British and Irish nationalist rhetoric at the beginning of the 20th century: Orage argues that literature written in English should be judged by the standards of English literature and that as an English critic, he has the authority to do so. Those who protest against this criticism behave as a child to the tutor, to paraphrase Orage, a phrase underwritten by Britain's paternalistic justification of imperialism. Boyd argues that Irish literature should be judged on its own merits and that the difference between Irish literature and English literature in dialect is one of nationality. Boyd's cogent argument devolves into an essentialist definition of the chief characteristic of Irish literature: “an aboriginal conviction of divinity” (249). What both critics share is an imagination of the Irish as a separate race.

Joyce's text *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* famously concludes with Stephen's diary, in which he identifies a goal to conceive “the uncreated conscience of my race” (V.2790). Several post-colonial scholars have focused on the race question in *Portrait* (e.g., Vincent Cheng in *Joyce, Race, and Empire*, in which he notes that Joyce uses the word *race* 18 times in *Portrait*). Reading Stephen as a kind of Caliban is compelling, but such a practice fails to reveal the entire picture Joyce presents. It ignores a measure of Ariel, the policeman. Ireland is an idea under suspicion, and part of the work that Stephen does is surveillance, a kind of police work that requires critical distance, a kind of exile.

To explore the issue of exile, we chose two key essays: Pound's polemical essay on the "non-existence of Ireland" and Bechhofer's essay on Irish police. In both essays is the sense that to the extent that Ireland exists, it exiles or exports its best products. Bechhofer and Pound each rhetorically question the nature of Ireland's existence. Pound suggests that those who claim to be Irish could "be imposters from Arran or Skye," that the Irish Papers are produced in an "inferno of blackness somewhere in swamps off Liverpool," and that the politics that bring Dublin and Belfast into the public eye could be "cooked up in England or in Germany or in my own country" (451, 452). To the extent that Ireland exists at all, it is provincial and opaque, an "unclassified slum" that could be in Cardiff (a coal metropolis in Wales) or Birmingham (an English industrial city). Because art is the most important creation of a nation, the nation that denies the works of its people denies its own being. Ireland disavows Singe and Joyce; hence, Ireland is not real. Pound's Ireland is a "creation of certain writers" (451), who are either "driven abroad [or] ... driven into the wilderness": "Joyce has fled to Trieste and into the modern world. And in the calm of that foreign city he has written books about Ireland" (452). Joyce imagines Ireland at a distance, and in that sense, Pound is right in saying that Ireland is the creation of writers, or in this instance, of one writer. Joyce is the central authority in the Ireland of his imagination.

Bechhofer's exported Irish police are akin to Pound's exiled Irish writers. Bechhofer's Ireland contains only fake policemen, "maintained in board and boots and pay to keep them off the parish" (207). When serious trouble happens (e.g., the Easter uprising of 1916), the soldiers are called out and the police sent home. Bechhofer invites the reader to come to several conclusions. First, the abundance of fake police indicates a large number of imbeciles, greater in proportion to the population than in England or Scotland. Second, Ireland sends its most capable

men away, and although the Royal Irish Constabulary is inept, Irish policemen abroad are accomplished at keeping order: “New York groans beneath the rubber heel of an army of Irish constables” (207). Bechhofer observes that insurrections take the Irish police by surprise but that they watch Englishmen in Ireland carefully. Implicit in Bechhofer’s argument is the sense that a condition of Irish policing is geographic *or* political distance. Stephen’s memory of the opening of the Abbey theatre underscores the impotence of Irish police: “A burly policeman sweated behind him and seemed at every moment about to act” (V.1849-1850). Irish police can only control that which is not Irish, whether because they are fake and have no central authority or because the authority they enforce is that of a nation foreign to them.

Surveillance without a central authority is also the activity of Stephen, who aims to imagine a new nation of which he is the author. He knows he must leave Ireland to accomplish such a construction, as when he explains to Davin that “the shortest way to Tara was via Holyhead,” the closest port across Saint George’s Channel (V.2703). By leaving, Stephen will be able to write an Ireland that is not constituted simply by an Irish race. He will be able to resist the essentialized definitions of Ireland (as put forth by Orage and Boyd, for example), represented in the diary by the old man in the mountain cabin: “It is with him I must struggle all through this night till day come, till he or I lie dead, gripping him by the sinewy throat till ... Till what? Till he yield to me? No. I mean him no harm.” (V.2754-2757). Stephen’s reconsideration of his intentions toward the figure of the old man suggests that the way to conquer the specter of an essentialized Irishness is not through violence or disavowal but through multiplicity of representation. Disciplining the construction of Irishness in this case requires recognition of the struggle with essentialism, not an obliteration of the idea itself. This struggle is thematized by Stephen’s relationship to the English language: Statements such as “whatsoever of thought or of

feeling came to him from England or by way of English culture, his mind stood armed against” and “I have not made or accepted its words. My voice holds them at bay” indicate Stephen’s resistance to a British central authority against which he wishes to establish himself (V.254-256, V.257-258). When Stephen is read as a police figure disciplining an Ireland under suspicion of non-existence, his childhood isolation begins to take shape as an early example of surveillance. But for Stephen to survey Ireland as a nation, he must get outside of it. Exile, then, is a crucial element to the disciplining work of the police-author.

Joyce’s anonymous *New Age* reviewer complains that in *Portrait* he “keeps on the circumference of his hero’s mind, and never dives to the centre of his soul,” producing what amounts to a “mere catalogue of unrelated states” (“*Portrait*”). While the reviewer’s astute observation points to the sense in which Joyce’s style enacts a kind of formalized exile, the novel’s most direct engagement with exile occurs on the thematic level. Indeed, the significance of exile in Joyce’s thinking, and perhaps in modernism more generally (à la Terry Eagleton’s *Exiles and Émigrés*), is suggested by its appearance quite early in *Portrait*, presumably before Stephen is capable of mature or sophisticated conceptions of affiliation and alienation. Stephen’s first artistic act, imaginatively reconstructing a ghost story, takes place only after he is completely isolated from the other boys in the dormitory. Completely covered by his bedsheets, “[h]e peered out for an instant over the coverlet and saw the yellow curtains round and before his bed that shut him off on all sides” (I.421-423). Later, a slightly older Stephen realizes that the “hollowsounding voices” of his schoolmates disturb the solitude he prefers and that “he was happy only when he was far from them, beyond their call, alone or in the company of phantasmal comrades” (II. -858). These instances point to a sense of exile operating in both aesthetic and social registers long before Stephen is able to recognize or articulate it as such. Do they also

therefore characterize exile as an originary condition—or *the* originary condition—of modernism?

Perhaps. What's more certain is that focusing on moments of disaffection and alienation in the young exile's childhood offers new possibilities for positioning the novel in relation to the police. More specifically, Stephen's close attention to the clothes worn by priests—disciplinary figures with whom he self-consciously identifies even in his disavowal of their vocation—demonstrates an interest in the uniform of the disciplinarian. Stephen's humiliation at the hands of the prefect of studies for breaking his eyeglasses is marked by the "swish of the sleeve of the soutane" (39) as the priest raises the pandybat high, an odd moment of aesthetic attentiveness that makes sense only later, when his interview with the Jesuit who asks him to consider joining the order begins with the "swish of a soutane" (131) as the priest opens the door to enter the room. Moreover, the priest's preliminary "test" questions (as Stephen thinks of them) during this latter episode relate not to faith or doctrine, but rather to clothing—the "capuchin dress" (131) and its practicality. Like the policeman, the priest wears a uniform that both signals his profession and allows him to perform it by endowing him with the power to discipline others. In two of the novel's key episodes, then, one in which Stephen is the victim of this disciplinary power and one in which it is offered to him, Stephen appears particularly attentive to the uniform of the police-figure. This attentiveness, we want to suggest, is significant not only as a manifestation of Stephen's constant preoccupation with aesthetics, but also as an expression of his fascination with disciplinary power and how it feels both to fall victim to and to wield such power.

That Joyce would put such thoughts in Stephen's head is historically unsurprising, given that one of the most famous "police" forces in Ireland at the time (or a little later, in the early

'20s), the Black and Tans, was notoriously identified by its uniform. It is also thematically unsurprising in light of Joyce's own use of irony as a disciplining force. Indeed, for Joyce irony may even function as a kind of literary soutane: the sign of his linguistic power as well as the means by which it is instrumentalized in order to discipline others. In *Portrait*, irony's disciplining power is demonstrated on two levels, the first being Joyce's ironic treatment of Stephen's self-image as one who has transcended the oppressive regime of the Church. "No king or emperor on this earth has the power of the priest of God," Stephen is told. "No angel or archangel in heaven, no saint, not even the Blessed Virgin herself has the power of a priest of God; the power of the keys, the power to bind and to loose from sin..." (IV.382-). In escaping religion's nets to become "a priest of eternal imagination" (V.1677-), however, Stephen succeeds only in reconstituting himself as precisely the kind of disciplinary figure he rejects. As Cranly reminds him ("your mind is saturated with the religion in which you say you disbelieve" [206]), his attempt to wiggle out from under the thumb of the priesthood fails for lack of an ability to imagine anything other than a priesthood. His liberation from priestly power amounts only to a somewhat ridiculous (in Cranly's eyes) appropriation of that power for himself.

Joyce's ironic disciplining of Stephen is in some ways part of a larger project of using irony to discipline the Irish public. (In this respect, irony cuts both ways on the issue of exile: it "distances" Joyce from Stephen, but also affiliates Stephen with the Irish public and therefore affiliates Joyce with the Irish public as well.) The end of the Christmas dinner scene early in the novel can be seen as a notable example of this project. Throughout dinner, tensions between Stephen's father and Mr. Casey, who idolize the fallen nationalist leader Charles Stewart Parnell, and Dante, who supports the Church's condemnation of Parnell, continue to escalate until Dante grows angry enough to leave the room. Mr. Casey then bows his head to the table, crying "Poor

Parnell...My dead king!" (I.1148). His claiming Parnell as "king" is a sharp ironic twist in what has hitherto seemed a micro-staging of the Parnell controversy strongly sympathetic toward Parnell's supporters. In "king," however, Joyce executes an ironic double move: giving Mr. Casey the last word reinforces the bias toward him that has been shown throughout the scene, but electing to make this word "king" simultaneously undercuts this bias by suggesting that Parnell's supporters have hoped not to free themselves from royal rule, but instead merely to substitute one form of tyrannical power for another. Ostensibly without knowing it, Mr. Casey actually mourns the possibility of submitting himself to authority rather than liberating himself from it.

Research into police forces present in prepartition Ireland would provide a useful historical context for policing, an idea with formal (Joyce "reforming" the English language and novel genre) and theoretical (Foucault, Spivak, and Bhabha identifying colonial disciplining practices) valences. Ireland has always already been a colonized nation and as such, does not quite fit into a post- or neo- colonial paradigm. The proximity of Ireland to its colonizer forecloses the conventional imperial practice of sending young men to the metropole, as British nationalist rhetoric refused to recognize Ireland as anything other than another province. Irish nationalist rhetoric constructed national boundaries on the basis of a mythical, pre-colonized Ireland (e.g., *Ourselves Alone*). Given additional research, one could argue that the colonial pressures in prepartition Ireland give rise both to historical qualities of Irish police at home and abroad and to the kind of policing that Joyce engages in, which we have begun to outline in this essay.

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