Why James Joyce Celebrated "Ivy Day": Teaching

A Case Study in Authorial Intent

James Joyce seems to have had a lot of favorites. As a boy, his favorite hero was Odysseus (S. Joyce 62). In maturity, his favorite city was Trieste (quoted in Ellmann 389), and the Fendant de Sion his favorite wine.[1] His favorite operatic composer was Verdi (Ellmann 393); his favorite author was "perhaps" Dante (Ellmann 4). Do we care? Does it matter? Probably, if we have enjoyed at least one book by Joyce, we *will* feel a flicker of interest, at least, at learning one or more of these facts. And here comes another: Joyce's favorite story in *Dubliners* was "Ivy Day in the Committee Room". When in 1906 Grant Richards, the collection's prospective publisher, raised an objection about "Two Gallants", Joyce described it as "the story (after 'Ivy Day in the Committee Room') which pleases me most" ("Letters I" 62). Although this dates from before the composition of "The Dead", fifty years later Joyce's brother Stanislaus implied that "Ivy Day" retained its privileged status in his mind all his life: "of all the stories in *Dubliners*, 'Ivy Day' was the one [James] said he preferred" (206). But does this matter? Do we, as readers and critics, care? Was Joyce right? What would it mean to the texts in question, and to us who read and study them, if he was?

Behind these questions, of course, lie issues of authorial intent. To what degree, if at all, does it influence our interpretation of a text to consider what its author intended it to mean? Is the meaning of a text identical with whatever its author "tried to say", or thought s/he wanted "to say"? Is the author's intention regarding her/his text knowable, and, if so, does it delimit or guide or preclude certain responses to it? These questions have, it is well known, long been debated by critics, most famously in texts like W.K. Wimsatt's "The Intentional Fallacy" (1946) and Roland Barthes' "The Death of the Author" (1968). The

general question of the relationship of the author to her/his text has also been debated in, for instance, T.S. Eliot's "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1919), E. D. Hirsch's *Validity in Interpretation* (1967), Michel Foucault's "What is an Author" (1969), and Sean Burke's *The Death and Return of the Author* (1992). In this essay I shall use "Ivy Day in the Committee Room" as the basis for an exploration of these questions in a class. I will argue, apparently naïvely, that Joyce's declared privileging of "Ivy Day" stems from its achieving most perfectly his stated twin objectives in *Dubliners*: formally, a "scrupulous meanness" worked out as a systematic stripping away of the furniture of fiction and the elements of the literary; and a content which composes a "chapter of the moral history of my country" by defining its contemporary political and spiritual condition. Form and content, in this case a rejection of literariness and the dramatized impossibility of the ostensible subject-matter, interweave so completely throughout that they are best understood as aspects of each other.

Analyzing "Ivy Day" under these two headings provided by Joyce, I hope to suggest three levels of argument which could be used in teaching the story to a class: firstly, a richer appreciation of the story in question; secondly, a richer appreciation of *Dubliners* as a whole, since the characteristics studied in "Ivy Day" are seen, prompted by Joyce's own words, as emblematic of the collection; and thirdly, via an intriguing case study, an introduction to or a clarification of debates over authorial intent, and the varying relationships between author, text, reader and/or critic suggested by, among many others, the writers referenced above. On this third level, the twin arguments made below should be read, then, as opening up a class discussion rather than providing any final truth about the issues involved. As well as furnishing material for discussion in themselves, they would seem, as proposed here, to suggest that the meaning of "Ivy Day" is what Joyce expressly put into it for us to find, an extreme, provocative and above all concrete example with which to unpack some rather difficult theoretical positions.

The Vanishing Fiction

I have written [*Dubliners*] for the most part in a style of scrupulous meanness (J. Joyce "Letters II" 134)

"Ivy Day in the Committee Room" enacts its own literary disappearance, achieving an apparent self-erasure before the reader's eyes in terms of its fictive furniture, that is, its narrative, characterization, setting, and the roles it ascribes to its reader and author. Even generically, as a short story it seems to evaporate before us: continuous in place and time, and almost completely jettisoning unspoken thought or feeling, it reduces print narrative to its own skeleton, finally resembling the text of a one-act play (with its stark interior filled by suspicious, competitive men, it anticipates early Pinter; eventless and uneasily concerned with rumors about the outside world, it looks forward to early Beckett). Joyce's ejection of traditional 'short-storiness' from his material shrinks it down toward the most minimal of narrative forms. Moreover, the memoirs of his brother Stanislaus suggest that "Ivy Day" be read as a kind of non-fiction, akin to a sound recording or documentary transcript:

> my father was temporarily engaged as election agent and canvasser for a candidate in the municipal elections in Dublin, and I as his clerk. Writing to Jim in Paris, I described the committee-room and the people who frequented it just as they appeared in 'Ivy Day in the Committee Room'. The old caretaker and his family woes, Mr. Henchy (a sketch of my father toned down to the surroundings), the other canvassers, the unfrocked priest, the wastrel who recites the poem, everything, in fact, except the poem, he got from my letter or from my verbal description when he came home at Christmas… I unwittingly supplied all the material for the story (205-06)

Stanislaus later told James that "Ivy Day" was "accurate, just, and satisfactory" (J. Joyce "Letters II" 115), treating it as a faithful historical record of factual events. Yet it would be too simplistic to see "Ivy Day" as either the degree zero of narrative or as a historical document. These denials of the story's ostensible identity need to be located in a wider strategy of fictive refusal.

The room in which the story takes place, for instance, is devoid of characteristics: “A denuded room came into view... The walls of the room were bare except for a copy of an election address” (J. Joyce “Dubliners” 117). Within what seems an empty space unfolds the non-activity of the narrative. “Ivy Day” is not the only story in *Dubliners* to consist of a static presentation of male discussion, but whereas the men in “Grace” have a program, a goal, here there is no forward thrust to the debate, which is desultory, time-wasting, time-killing. Again, in many of *Dubliners’* tales the absence of event is crucial, such as the anti-climaxes of “Araby” and “Eveline” or the impossibility of action in “A Little Cloud”. Yet the characters in “Ivy Day” are not aware of their ineffectuality or of the absence of drama; they do not suffer from it. They have instead become identical with this plotless vacuum.

They have lost identity. Tierney the candidate, an opportunist ‘“in favour of whatever will benefit this country’” (128), is vague, a blur. He has shady schemes going with Fanning and Cowley. Evasive, and nicknamed Tricky Dicky, he cannot be made to deliver firm promises regarding the men’s payment. Henchy, his most diligent worker, is so out of focus that on many questions he holds two contradictory positions. When he first arrives in the room, Jack offers him his chair, and Henchy says: “‘O, don’t stir, Jack, don’t stir’”, then “sat down on the chair which the old man vacated” (119). This initiates a series of about-turns which constitute him as intractably indefinite: having first “nodded curtly to Mr Hynes” (119) and insulted his manhood and honesty (121-22), he welcomes him heartily on his return and praises his manhood and honesty (130). At one point he interrupts O’Connor’s enthusiasm for Hynes’ poem, uninterested in it (122), but then later on urges Hynes to recite it and sings eulogies to it (130). Elsewhere he offers the boy a drink then deplores youthful consumption of alcohol in the space of thirteen lines (126)! It is impossible to ascribe a fixed point of view to him. Crofton, who has been an ineffectual canvasser, is elusive, cautious, equivocal, as befits a Conservative among Nationalists. Asked to judge Parnell, whom he must have

abhorred politically, Crofton claims to have respected him as '"a gentleman'" (130), sliding from politics to manners. Again, asked to judge a poem glorifying Parnell, he says he considers it "'very fine'", but as a "'piece of writing'" (133), sliding from politics to literature. Jack the caretaker is weak: decaying, disappointed, despised and overruled at home, he is debilitated by alcohol and impotently worried about his son. O'Connor is weak and vacillating: he makes a cigarette, unmakes it, then makes it again. Indeterminate in appearance, his voice is a sexless "husky falsetto" (115), just as he is ageless: "a grey-haired young man" (115). Having stated that Tierney will not support an address to Edward VII, Hynes' mere skepticism ('"Won't he?'") makes him cave in instantly: "'By God! perhaps you're right, Joe'" (119). He is easily swayed. He sympathizes with the enfeebled Jack, and has also been an ineffectual canvasser, unable to elicit an answer from Grimes (119). Indeed, the function of one of the story's minor characters may even be, at least in part, "intended" to parody this prevailing weakness, uncertainty and lack of identity, extending it to near-absurdity. Father Keon, the fallen priest, is introduced with a paragraph of ambiguity: "[a] person resembling a poor clergyman or a poor actor appeared in the doorway… it was impossible to say whether he wore a clergyman's collar or a layman's… He opened his very long mouth suddenly to express disappointment and at the same time opened wide his very bright blue eyes to express pleasure and surprise" (122). After his departure the men, mired in the priest's lack of definition and their own feeble powers of perception, fail to know anything about him at all:

- What is he exactly?
- Ask me an easier one, said Mr Henchy…
- And how does he knock it out? asked Mr O'Connor.
- That's another mystery. (123)

We never see any of the characters from the inside, except for a phrase about Crofton explaining his tactical silence; since they display only a blur to the world, we consequently know little more about them than this lack of focus, albeit in considerable detail.

The story gives nothing to read *for*: it is clearly going nowhere, as not only is there no program in operation but the characters lack the energy and authority to develop one. The absence of plot and character means that there is no excitement, no meaningful action, no reaching of an emotional pitch, and no bonding between these men: in Mary Power's apt phrase, they are "trying to achieve some mutual kind of anonymity in getting together" (228). The men have work, which they are not doing, whose sole interest lies in the pennies paid to reward it; Tierney's campaign, revealed as pure self-interest and opportunism, cannot move either them or us. There is, then, no one for the reader to identify with: the men are too grey, too lethargic, too corrupt, or too often absent, in spirit or in flesh. The lack of a narrative line to follow deprives the reader, as Colin MacCabe argues, of "purchase on the text. The refusal of the narrative to do more than report spatial positions, or give information strictly relevant to what is happening from moment to moment, leaves the dialogue… suspended in a vacuum of sense" (29). There seems to be nothing beyond this committee room, where Parnell is only a subject of conversation, not a historical reality. Nothing in the text indicates which side we should take with regard to the various notions concerning Parnell's legacy. Some critics have placed Hynes in the role of an idealist countering Henchy's opportunism, but this moral dichotomy is overly reductive: Hynes appears to us mostly through the grinding ineptitude of his poetry and his simplistic political analysis, while Henchy's slipperiness is understandable in a man so poverty-stricken he routinely expects the bailiffs at home. Henchy is odious but human; Hynes is morally upstanding but intellectually third-rate. Eschewing explanation of any actions except the inaction of silence, the text provides, as MacCabe notes, only description: "The narrative, in its refusal of a discourse which will explain everything, resists

the reduction of the various discourses to one discourse shared by author and reader… The position we take with regard to the discourses of the text is not mapped out for us" (30-31). Unable to find him or herself within the story, the reader is equally absent here.

This implies, in turn, the absence of the author. Hélène Cixous argues that Joyce's self-identification here with Parnell places him outside its fictive universe (264-75). Removed to continental Europe, Joyce considered the treachery displayed toward Parnell as a reason to turn his back on politics, and on the Ireland who devours her young, as Stephen says to Davin in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*.[2] For Cixous, this self-identification is suggested by Joyce's description of *Dubliners* in a letter to Grant Richards in 1906 as "the first step towards the spiritual liberation of my country" ("Letters I" 63). Cixous glosses: "He felt that it might be he who would save Ireland" (266). In the meantime, self-exiled, he felt betrayed by Ireland, "repudiated" by his own people like the mythologized Parnell (J. Joyce "Letters II" 187). Yet Cixous also sees Joyce, perhaps less self-consciously, as *all* the men in the committee room, such that the text works to denounce himself: he too turned away from the struggle for a free Ireland, looked instead to his own career and prospects, just as the men dream of being paid and receiving stout (271). In this account, Joyce cannot intervene in "Ivy Day" to provide the meta-language Colin MacCabe has seen lacking (152): he is already present in all of the characters. Thus he is both judge and condemned man, a fantasy whose textual expression will be incapable of development.

Like many of the *Dubliners* stories, "Ivy Day" begins with a character who will be entirely peripheral to the plot or at best outside its main drama. Here, however, Joyce does not move inward to focus on a central, analyzed figure: instead, *all* the characters are more or less peripheral, and Jack is as far from the action as everyone else. The important people are all elsewhere: Parnell is dead, Tierney outside, Edward VII's visit only mooted. Those who matter never arrive, and the room becomes a void. The text describing a certain passage of

time in it is drained, and drained again. The formal achievement of “Ivy Day” is gestured toward in almost all of its sister pieces in the collection: to tell the story of the absence of story, the drama of the absence of drama (the famous “paralysis” theme). It succeeds wonderfully in a most difficult and paradoxical task: it makes of its absence of the fictive its fictional subject. It is not only that there is no change, no transformation, no narrative, a simple display of people cooped up for no interesting reason (because it is raining). The story is *about* the fact that nothing occurs; it is about the drifting passivity of aftermath. There is nothing to read in the text, except a dramatization of the absence of anything to read, which is saturated in significance; it is the very lack of people who could change matters which counts. The nothingness of “Ivy Day” becomes increasingly meaningful with each re-reading, as the content in the plot’s displacement and the intelligibility of the characters’ emptiness are disinterred. The story’s own self-erasure comes under fictive scrutiny.

“Ivy Day” therefore betrays a double consciousness: Joyce has written a non-story about the impossibility of story, creating non-characters to indicate the shortage of character. We watch this non-story non-progress; we see the inactivity, the non-canvassing; we survey the non-intervention, the failure of the beer to arrive. All this nothing is absolute: it is not the failure-to-act which obsesses the surface of “Counterparts” or “A Little Cloud”; in “Ivy Day” there is nothing but nothing, an astringent, rich and significant nothingness, truly scrupulous and mean. It is also strategic: each fictive elision marks a political theft, as we shall now see.

The Eradication of Politics

My intention was to write a chapter of the moral history of my country (J. Joyce “Letters II” 134)

Joyce told his brother that “Ivy Day” introduces a trio of stories concerning “public life in Dublin” (“Letters II 111), among which, to simplify considerably, “A Mother” might be said

to be “about culture”, “Grace” “about religion”, and “Ivy Day” “about politics”. I will argue that the latter, however, is not so much about politics as about its absence. It analyses political activity to discover that it is not in fact political at all: its reading of its theme is evacuative, leading beyond a mood of political defeat in the aftermath of Parnell’s ruin to a comprehensive sense of the defeat of politics. A naïve summary of the story would indeed highlight politics – it is “about” a group of political canvassers on an election day – yet it concludes having witnessed the annihilation of politics, which is what is politically significant. Joyce’s political exploration finds only the lack of politics; politics is constantly on show in terms of its non-appearance; if politics is the programmatic activity of individuals grouped together to seek ideologically or socially desirable goals, then “Ivy Day” is “about non-politics”.

The disappearance of politics is multiform here. It is figured in the transformation of Parnell who, when alive, was a political actor with a specific political program, into a religious icon, a surrogate Christ. It is impossible now to make of him a man who might have had a strategy of concrete proposals. The characters imagine him refusing an address of welcome to Edward VII, an empty gesture in the context of the struggle for Irish independence from colonialism. Parnell has become mythical, a martyr, non-human, ahistorical, a transcendent figure who, like Christ, was destroyed by the religious authorities. In speaking of Parnell’s fall, Hynes’ poem systematically echoes the story of the betrayal and crucifixion of Christ, and looks forward to a sort of resurrection. This sacralising of Parnell the man as “‘th’ exalted name’” (132) is greeted with wild enthusiasm by the men in the committee room, who now have a Parnell resembling themselves on a larger scale: a depoliticized one, one who is, as Henchy has said, “‘dead’” (129) so far as the discussion of current political subjects is concerned. Although Parnell’s contemporary irrelevance is argued by Henchy only with respect to the trivial question of the address, the passion the men expend

on this meaningless issue, the only one they have, indicates again the evacuation of real politics.

If Parnell has become a character from religious mythology, it is clear that Tierney will never be, at least for his canvassers, anything more than a businessman. Neither is even a potential politician. The link uniting Tierney, the election and the canvassers is money, an obsession which emerges on almost every page. The men repeatedly refer to their need and desire to be paid by their employer: "'Has he paid you yet?'" Hynes asks (117); "'I wish he'd turn up with the spondulics'" (119); "'No money, boys'" (119); "'Couldn't he pay up like a man instead of [saying]… *I've spent a lot of money*'" (120, emphasis in original); "'How does he expect us to work for him if he won't stump up?'" (120). They assume, and perhaps rightly, that Tierney is also only interested in money: "'This fellow you're working for only wants to get some job or other'" (118). Father Keon comes along because he is interested in "'a little business matter'" (123), and the men's main interest in him is how he survives financially: "'how does he knock it out?'" (123). To gain the vote of Ward, a canvassed gentleman, Henchy assumes he is only interested in money, and assures him Tierney is the same: "'[Tierney's] a big rate-payer… He has extensive house property in the city and three places of business and isn't it to his own advantage to keep down the rates?'" (128). Henchy's sole argument for welcoming Edward VII is the "'influx of money'" (128) it will bring: "'It's capital we want'" (129) – not political independence, then. The reduction of Ireland to a listed company in this manner foregrounds the financial issue of its profit and loss, and elides the political question of its control.

Similarly, each character is defined in monetary, not ideological, terms. Henchy criticizes Tierney for his lack of financial generosity: "'Mean little tinker… Mean little shoeboy'" (120). Hynes too is criticized in terms of money: "'what I can't understand is a fellow sponging'" (121), and defended in terms of his lack of it: "'he's hard up like the rest of

us'" (121). In this he certainly resembles Henchy who "'expect[s] to find the bailiffs in the hall'" when he goes home (120). The Mayor is discussed in terms of his alleged meanness: "'He'd live on the smell of an oil-rag'" (125), and they concur that to become Mayor is a question solely of money: it is a bought position: "'You must owe the City Fathers money nowadays if you want to be made Lord Mayor'" (124). A good holder of the post might be Henchy "'[s]o far as owing money goes'" (124). The obsession with money touches everyone and everything; only the sacred Parnell is not the slave of personal finance, it seems. Even scurrilous rumor and vaguely-aimed slander focus on money: "'I believe half of them are in the pay of the Castle'" Henchy says of the hillsiders and fenians (122), while one individual is "'a fellow now that'd sell his country for fourpence – ay – and go down on his bended knees and thank the Almighty Christ he had a country to sell'" (122). Issues of financial survival and advance have entirely blotted out any political belief or goal. The poverty of the characters, which works here to help see off any political consideration, directly maps on to and interweaves with the fictive bareness, the evaporation of the "literary", of Joyce's technique. Yet there is a loathing too here of the political, one which, in Henchy's mouth, changes the ermine of the mayor's office to "'vermin'" (124); politics is both prevented by the all-engulfing poverty, and actively rejected.

Tierney, Henchy tells Ward – and it is adduced as an advertisement for the candidate, a favorable fact sure to gain him popularity – "'doesn't belong to any party, good, bad, or indifferent'" (128). In a sense, this could be said of most of the men. Party loyalty and, with it, loyalty to the party's chosen candidate, seems non-existent. Henchy insults him continuously, from idle abuse – "'hop-o'-my-thumb'" (124), "'little shoeboy… [m]ean little tinker… little pigs' eyes… Tricky Dicky'" (120), "'[h]e means well, you know, in his own tinpot way'" (126) – to slander of his father's alleged criminality. They concur that Tierney is an evasive, venal, conspiratorial fool; O'Connor burns his card to make a cigarette. This

disaffection is underscored by Hynes and Crofton, whose membership of enemy parties may be overlooked on a first reading: so weak is party affiliation here, the nominally adversarial Hynes and Henchy share the same view of Tierney. Hynes goes unchallenged into his opponents' room, where he satirically points out the absence of a political atmosphere: "'Hello! Is this a Freemasons' meeting?'" (117). In addition, he does not conceal his intruder status, and his attacks on Tierney provoke only agreement or meek submission from Jack, O'Connor and Henchy. Crofton, despite being from a rival party, seems more respectful of Parnell than is Henchy, though they differ, finally, only in the roads down which they choose to expel the fallen hero as a contemporary political force.

This weakness of party affiliation renders the story more complex than it initially appears. It is natural for the reader to assume, when Hynes first comes in, that he is on the same side as the other men, but in fact he is spying on them, and they are too indifferent to politics and too preoccupied with their personal concerns to object. Henchy moves from insulting Hynes and smearing him as a possible traitor to praising his steadfast loyalty to Parnell, and from dismissing Parnell to embracing his memory. The vague lines of attachment constantly dissolve and re-form, like the outlines of shapes in a dense fog.

The only incontrovertible signs of activity with a political objective are the references to spying and to buying office, the former doubtless performed by Hynes and alleged to be rife by Henchy. Office can be purchased, though to no significant end, and enemies can be watched, though they say and do nothing of any importance. There are no signs of a program, of action or aims. This evacuation goes well beyond the "corruption" of civic and national life which Joyce "intended" to show, or said he did ("Letters II" 123): what we witness here is the aftermath of an implosion of political action into an inertia and vacuousness which do not even have the energy of a malaise. Political defeat has been caused first by the removal abroad of all important decision-making regarding colonial Dublin, second by the destruction

of hopes for decolonization by those Irish who brought down Parnell, and third by the poverty which both results from Ireland's imperial exploitation and which allows her thus to be exploited. When control over the political is so lost, people are left only with the personal (money) and the infinite (religion); both are here degraded. Robbed of meaningful connection with the "public life" around them, Joyce's characters find themselves reduced to a sordid personal realm and a superstitious sense of the infinite. Between them lies the gaping impossibility of engagement with the social and national life. Again, "Ivy Day" yields a double consciousness: every word of this story has a profound political significance.

What Joyce "Meant"

Much of the technique and material discussed in the first section of this article also appear elsewhere in *Dubliners*: the inchoate characterization and the significance of physical absence, the anti-narrative devices of bathos, irresolution and authorial silence, as Jean-Michel Rabaté has noted (45-72). Yet only in "Ivy Day" does Joyce lash this formal approach to his content so as to produce a double mutual action: the technical dismantling of the "literary" mimics the eradication of politics which is the story's subject, while the evisceration of politics historicizes and justifies the loss of the fictive. Joyce does not indict or lament Ireland's contemporary political plight; instead, he performs that plight in his act of writing. The stripping away of the fictive structures an evocation of the effects of a theft of politics which has deprived Dubliners of purpose and action in the theatre of their society. Nowhere else in his collection does Joyce give the material context and historical origin of the techniques he was using at this time; only here does he achieve the perfect oneness of style and substance which explains his own preference for the story.

Seen in this way, and drawing on our "knowledge" that it was Joyce's favorite, "Ivy Day" can be read as the pivotal, the central story in *Dubliners*. And yet, and yet… The question of how much a reader should concern him or herself with what an author may have "intended" remains to be answered.

NOTES

(1) This seems a valid conjecture: Ellmann's index entry for "wine… J's preferred wine" references pages mentioning by name only Fendant de Sion (886).

(2) Stephen says: "Ireland is the old sow that eats her farrow." (J. Joyce "A Portrait" 220).

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