THE DEDALUS DREAM

Reflections on Irish Society with the Help of James Joyce's Fiction

Thomas G. Casey

Stephen Dedalus is a central figure in two of James Joyce's novels, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and *Ulysses*. Both works convey harsh criticisms of what, for Joyce, was the constricting narrowness of Irish society at the time he was writing. Joyce, and Stephen, dream of something quite different.

If we look at contemporary Ireland, it might indeed seem as though what Joyce yearned for has come to pass. Ireland is now among the ten richest nations on earth, with a vibrant culture, a newly discovered self-confidence, and a thriving cosmopolitan society one in ten of whose members were not born in Ireland. Across the border in Northern Ireland there has been a peace agreement since 1998, as well as a pledge by the IRA (Irish Republican Army) in July 2005 to end its campaign of violence, though deep religious and political divisions will take a longer time to heal. In many ways Ireland is flourishing. The economic boom has surpassed all expectations, though several economists are predicting its imminent demise. However there is also something unsettling about contemporary Ireland—it is in serious danger of losing its soul.

The Christian religion is no longer an important force in the public sphere. Certainly Irish people continue to believe in God and regard themselves as religious. However, their religion has become a private matter, and for society as a whole there is now a moral vacuum where faith used to be. For the moment, the vacuum is being filled with materialistic pursuits. But it is difficult to find a sense of moral direction in this soulless void—a fact reflected in rising rates of suicide, marriage breakdown and violent crime. The consumption of alcohol and drugs is increasing alarmingly: over the last ten years public intoxication by underage drinkers has risen fourfold. The figures for drug abuse are even more astonishing: over the last six years the use of cocaine has increased

The Way, 47/4 (October 2007), 71–83

tenfold. Irish people are leaving tradition behind, abandoning their Christian heritage. By forgetting this crucial tradition that shaped their culture, Irish people are losing an essential aspect of themselves.

The word 'tradition' often arouses negative reactions. It is regularly dismissed as the doomed adherence to outdated customs, allied to the stubborn refusal to accept what is new or different. But tradition also possesses a more liberating meaning. In this more expansive sense, tradition is not about making the present into a replica of the past, or blindly resisting progress and development. Instead, tradition is a matter of learning from experience; it is a question of allowing the wisdom of the past to enter the life of the present in such a way that people can deepen their sense of identity and discover how they ought to live. Ultimately tradition is at the service of a more authentic future.

Viewed in this way, tradition is both a beacon that illuminates and provides continuity and an anchor that gives security and identity. Thanks to tradition each new generation can benefit from the accumulated experience of preceding generations that is handed down in beliefs, practices, laws, stories and symbols. This positive attitude toward tradition is difficult to find in Ireland today. The hugely successful stage show 'Riverdance' is emblematic of the tendency to erase large swathes of the Irish past. Amidst all the great spectacle and razzmatazz, it is telling that, as the show sweeps its way through Irish history from the primordial Celtic past to the multicultural present, the only acknowledgment of Ireland's Christian heritage is the momentary sight of a little church. Is that how unimportant Christianity has really been for the Irish?

Traditions embody and communicate a vision of goodness. Not simply the goodness of self-discovery, but also the goodness of discovering who we can be. Different people have different visions of goodness, and debate and discussion regarding these differences is an essential part of tradition. In Ireland today the discussion is open enough to accept novelty and change, but not always ready to retain the past. There is a fear that anything traditional is rigid and fossilised.

Joyce and Tradition

The novels of James Joyce in many ways look forward to this new Ireland. They tend to deny that tradition has anything positive to offer. Joyce's characters espouse and incarnate the kind of epistemological

scepticism that doubts that tradition has a coherent and valuable ethos to impart. Joyce presents tradition within a chaotic, anarchic, fragmented series of events that do not quite cohere into a single narrative or story. In *Ulysses*, and above all in *Finnegans Wake*, plot and pattern, though present, are difficult to discern. In common with contemporary Ireland, Joyce's fiction offers an excitingly plural vision of the world. But both descend at times into a chaotic chorus of voices—though with Joyce there is always pattern and structure beneath the apparent chaos.

Certainly it is right to be wary about the claims of tradition. Tradition, like the past itself, is not wholly positive; it has deep ambivalences. And there are terrible elements in the past of the Irish Church. In his speech to the Irish bishops at the end of their *ad limina* visit to Rome on 28 October 2006, Pope Benedict XVI raised a profoundly disturbing issue: the clerical sex-abuse of children.

> The wounds caused by such acts run deep, and it is an urgent task to rebuild confidence and trust where these have been damaged. In your continuing efforts to deal effectively with this problem, it is important to establish the truth of what happened in the past, to take whatever steps are necessary to prevent it from occurring again, to ensure that the principles of justice are fully respected and, above all, to bring healing to the victims and to all those affected by these egregious crimes.

Apart from the commission of these obviously atrocious acts, there was also a stultifying atmosphere to Irish Catholicism in the past, a cheerless moralism. In his short-story collection, *Dubliners* (1914), Joyce described the paralysis of his native city, which he attributed to the

Belvedere College, where Joyce was educated before Clongowes

suffocating power of the Church and the slavish mentality that it, alongside British rule, had propagated. Joyce wanted to offer a critique of Ireland that depended upon a careful and realistic description of social reality, allied to an intimate description of the subjective responses of his characters. Joyce was so convinced of the value of his approach that, while he was composing *Dubliners*, he stubbornly resisted the call of the English publisher Grant Richards to erase certain controversial passages. In a letter to Richards of 20 May 1906, Joyce wrote:

> I believe that in composing my chapter of moral history in exactly the way I have composed it I have taken the first step toward the spiritual liberation of my country.[1]

There is nothing wrong with the desire to liberate Ireland spiritually. But what is questionable is Joyce's grandiose confidence, shared with his creation Stephen Dedalus, in the fact that he was the one who could initiate this liberation. Joyce was undoubtedly a genius. He had extraordinary vision (despite becoming increasingly blind over

[1] James Joyce, *Collected Letters*, edited by Richard Ellmann (London: Faber, 1966), 134.

the course of his life). But there is something excessive in his belief that he was destined to be the redeemer of Ireland, the bearer of some special insight to which others were not privy. We can learn from him that tradition should reflect and do justice to the little stories of individual lives and should not ignore them. But we should not follow Joyce, or other writers, in a tendency to dismiss tradition as rigid, arrogant, self-deceptive or tyrannical.

Enmeshed in Tradition

Although Ireland was under British rule in the period that Joyce writes about, it was Ireland's self-oppression that concerned him more than anything else, its collusion in its own victimisation. Joyce wanted Irish people to see themselves more clearly through his fiction, and to gain an insight into their own cowardice and inertia. To this extent Joyce's goal corresponds with that announced by Stephen Dedalus at the end of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*:

> I go to encounter for the millionth time the reality of experience and to forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race.[2]

But Stephen Dedalus is too arrogant and too absolute in his claims. One man cannot create a conscience for a whole people *ex nihilo*, or discover a conscience that has not been created. It is not simply that Stephen had achieved so little himself in *A Portrait*: though he had grand aspirations, Stephen was still a student, intellectually immature and uncertain of the direction that his life would take. Nor is it a matter of the limits of his own conscience, his inflated ego or his sheer conceit. Stephen cannot wipe away the past and start from the beginning again. He is unable to free himself from tradition, however much he would like to believe that this is within his power.

There are social commentators in Ireland today who resemble Stephen Dedalus. Like Stephen, these people who mould public opinion are highly intelligent and articulate. But they lack self-awareness and dismiss the positive value of tradition, deliberately distancing themselves from the father- and mother-figures in their

[2] James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, edited by Seamus Deane (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992), 275–276.

culture. The Irish media, although not hostile to Catholicism, are convinced that the Catholic Church is an outdated, albeit benevolent, institution, in serious need of modernisation and a radical overhaul. Journalists portray the Catholic Church as vainly battling against the inevitable progress of reason and tolerance in Irish society.

Joyce realises that we are enmeshed in tradition, and he also knows that we can and should try to liberate ourselves from its negative, oppressive and inhuman aspects. Perhaps because these negative aspects are in the foreground of Joyce's mind, his fiction displays an antagonistic stance towards tradition. Although Stephen Dedalus the character is ultimately imaginary and fictional, it contains an autobiographical element; his rebellion against the past resembles Joyce's own dismissal of significant aspects of his cultural heritage. Stephen, like Joyce, is resolutely against anything that fetters his freedom or smacks of parochialism and provincialism. In *A Portrait of the Artist*, Stephen proclaims to his friend Cranly:

> I will not serve that in which I no longer believe whether it call itself my home, my fatherland or my church: and I will try to express myself in some mode of life or art as freely as I can and as wholly as I can, using for my defence the only arms I allow myself to use—silence, exile, and cunning.[3]

But just because faith, family and fatherland do not explain everything, it does not follow that they therefore explain nothing. Stephen Dedalus is a 'young man', as the title of Joyce's semi-autobiographical novel suggests, and he is possessed by a youthful arrogance that is blind to the power and value of tradition. His very name suggests the immature conviction that he can transcend tradition.

Joyce gives Stephen Dedalus a Graeco-Christian name. 'Stephen', of course, is the first Christian martyr, stoned to death because of his faith. And indeed the character Stephen does perceive himself as a persecuted figure, victimised by tradition. More significant, however, is his family name, 'Dedalus'. This surname recalls the Greek myth of Daedalus and Icarus. In order to escape the labyrinth in which he and his son are imprisoned, Daedalus makes two pairs of wings. Against his father's advice, Icarus flies too close to the sun. The heat melts the

[3] Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist*, 268–269.

wax in his wings, and the boy plummets into the sea and drowns. Stephen, like Icarus, rejects his father and imagines that he can fly too high, free of the labyrinth of history.

Statue of James Joyce in North Earl Street, Dublin

The German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer highlights the fact that to be human is to exist within a historical context and within a tradition. We inherit our 'prejudgments' or 'prejudices' (*Vorurteile*) from tradition, and it is by virtue of them that we can make sense out of what would otherwise be disorder or chaos in our thinking. They provide a lens through which we perceive reality. In Gadamer's view, prejudgments are not necessarily negative; in fact, they enable us to give shape to our world. Tradition shapes Stephen's choices in more decisive ways than he ever wants to admit. Thus, in *A Portrait of the Artist*, his friend Cranly's comments are completely justified:

> It is a curious thing, do you know, Cranly said dispassionately, how your mind is supersaturated with the religion in which you say you disbelieve.[4]

In certain ways, Stephen's beliefs are more rigid than the tradition he rejects. He will not budge in his convictions, irrespective of the suffering he imposes on others. Cranly pleads with Stephen to make his Easter duty, even if he does not believe, in order to put his mother's mind at rest. Stephen refuses. In *Ulysses* Buck Mulligan also remonstrates with Stephen:

[4] Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist*, 261.

> You could have knelt down, damn it, Kinch, when your dying mother asked you, Buck Mulligan said. I'm hyperborean as much as you. But to think of your mother begging with her last breath to kneel down and pray for her. And you refused. There is something sinister in you ….[5]

Ireland has been flying high in recent years because of its extraordinary economic success. Because wealth and affluence are new to Ireland, some people have taken to them with the zeal and energy of fresh converts. Yet not everyone is fooled by the trappings of money and success. There is a growing awareness that Ireland may be losing something of itself. Irish people are increasingly realising the truth of the prophetic remarks Pope John Paul II made on his visit to the country in 1979:

> The Irish people have to choose today their way forward. Will it be the transformation of all strata of humanity into a new creation, or the way that many nations have gone, giving excessive importance to economic growth and material possessions, and neglecting things of the spirit?

Despite his rejection of Ireland at the end of *A Portrait of the Artist*, Stephen is back there once again in *Ulysses*. The adventurous émigré is once again in the fatherland he so resolutely rejected. Furthermore, in the course of *Ulysses*, this young man full of literary pretensions and images of beauty is brought down to earth, at least temporarily, by his encounter with a father-figure in the form of an ordinary everyday man called Leopold Bloom, an unconventional Dublin Jew.

Arriving at a New Tradition

In the 'Nestor' episode of *Ulysses*, Stephen Dedalus argues about history with Mr Deasy, the anti-Semitic, Anglophile and misogynist headmaster of the boys' school in which he is teaching. 'History, Stephen said, is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake.'[6] Stephen, so brash and boastful at the end of *A Portrait*, now realises that neither history itself nor personal history can be glibly dismissed. In the context of the novel, Stephen's fearful remark acknowledges how

[5] James Joyce, *Ulysses* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992), 4.
[6] Joyce, *Ulysses*, 42.

difficult he finds it to free himself from the weight of his own personal past.

The pompous Mr Deasy smugly asserts: 'All history moves towards one goal, the manifestation of God'.[7] But neither Stephen nor James Joyce would agree. Stephen points his thumb toward the window, announcing, 'that is God … a shout in the street'.[8] Though provocative, this remark is not as dismissive as it might appear. The street in *Ulysses* has a vast range of reference: it contains the whole kaleidoscope of human experience that Joyce describes on 16 June 1904, the day when all the action of the novel unfolds.

In the streets of Dublin today you are as likely to hear Polish, Chinese or Romanian as the familiar Irish brogue. And this new multicultural Ireland is not to be found solely in Dublin. Tourists walking through the village of Gort in County Galway are regularly astounded to discover that one in every three inhabitants is Brazilian. Ireland is no longer a monolithic culture. It is not a nation coming to terms with an influx of foreigners. Instead, it is already a hybrid culture, an eclectic ethnic mix. The challenge for Ireland today is to create some order and cohesion, to create a society that cultivates common values while cherishing pluralism.

A society that cultivates common values while cherishing pluralism

The hero of *Ulysses* is himself a hybrid product, an exotic mix: Leopold Bloom is a secular Jew of Hungarian ancestry who is a nominal Catholic but was baptized in a Protestant church. In making Leopold Bloom the protagonist of his masterpiece, Joyce was struck by the parallels between the Irish and Jewish experiences: oppression, exile and exodus. Mr Deasy is full of contempt for the figure of the wandering Jew, but Joyce affectionately traces his journey in the person of Bloom, as he makes his way around Dublin on 16 June 1904. One of the reasons Joyce chose a Jew as the hero of *Ulysses* may have been because he had been rescued from a mugging in Dublin during June 1904 by a Jewish acquaintance called Alfred Hunter. Leopold Bloom comes to the help of Stephen Dedalus in a similar way.

Though Joyce saw similarities between the Irish and Jewish experiences, he did not create a new Irish or Hebrew tradition in *Ulysses*. Certainly, from a literary point of view, Joyce inaugurated a new

[7] Joyce, *Ulysses*, 42.
[8] James Joyce, *Ulysses*, 42.

tradition through his innovative use of language and narrative techniques; in fact, his stunning achievement has changed literature forever. However, Joyce cannot be construed as constructing a new tradition in the wider sense. For a tradition is more than just the transmission of words, even if these are the words of a writer as accomplished he was. A tradition entails a whole complex of attitudes and ways of behaving, and no single individual, despite Stephen Dedalus' ambitions, is capable of making a new tradition unaided.

Nevertheless, Joyce contributes one ingredient that is vital for the credibility of any tradition today: a sense of the value of the individual and of individual experience. The tradition against which Joyce reacted he perceived as authoritarian, as imposed from without and above without any respect for the importance of individuals. In his writing he emphasized the value of inner experience through the use of interior monologues and stream of consciousness, depicting the flux of images and jumble of ideas that run through each mind and heart. The interiority of the individual may be chaotic but it is also life-giving—a fact that some traditions can neglect, imposing external values that do not respect subjectivity.

Joyce was convinced that mainstream cultural traditions did not tell people who they were. Although they contained fragments of truth, he

'Bloomsday' reading in Dublin

believed that they offered facile and unhelpful answers to complex questions. Instead of looking for the God of dogma, the omniscient and powerful one, Joyce searched the labyrinthine layers of the psyche and emerged with something more modest and humble. He did not proclaim it to be sacred, but he did believe it was truly human in every sense, from the sordid to the sublime. Despite all the squalor and mockery in his writings, there is something curiously redemptive and affirmative in the truth and affection of Joyce's vision, and in the wonderful humour and perennial musicality of his prose. *Ulysses*, after all, ends with the word 'yes'.

Moreover there is something still contemporary about his celebration of the private murmurings of the kinds of individuals that tradition once consigned to silence. In figures such as the secular Jew Leopold Bloom and his wife Molly—who is of Mediterranean and also possibly Jewish origin—Joyce resurrected marginalised voices into literary discourse. He highlighted the value of personal stories, all those frustrating and fascinating little narratives that a rigid tradition had consigned to insignificance.

Because of immigration, Ireland, like many countries in the West, has new voices. Many are still marginalised. It is revealing that the native-born Irish tend to speak of the new immigrants as workers rather than citizens. The implication is that immigrants are welcome in terms of their contribution to the labour market and the economy, but not considered as serious contributors to Irish culture. Ireland has not yet faced up to what these new Irish will mean for the Irish notion of citizenship, or addressed Leopold Bloom's equivocal assertion that 'A nation is the same people living in the same place'.[9]

Of course it is difficult to welcome immigrants into a culture about which Irish people are themselves so uncertain. Until native-born Irish people can reclaim the best elements in their own tradition, they will find it difficult to know what kind of Ireland they want to invite immigrants to enter. And immigrants will remain bewildered and confused about the identity of their newly adopted country.

The challenge for Ireland, as for other Western cultures, is to identify what is unique to it, and what it wants to do with this uniqueness. What kind of citizenship does it want to espouse? What

[9] Joyce, *Ulysses*, 430.

St Patrick's Day Parade, Dublin, 2007

sense of belonging does it want to create? What type of identity does it want to pursue? James Joyce raised these kinds of questions in an implicit way almost a hundred years ago. It is high time for his compatriots to come up with some convincing answers. This process will require genuine soul-searching. Believers as well as unbelievers need to look beneath superficial arguments and polemical positions in order to grapple with deeper questions, such as where Irish people can find meaning in their lives today and how they conceive of the good life for themselves and their society.

There is no point trying to turn back the clock; it is not a matter of returning to the past. The Irish past was too insular, too Jansenistic, too devoid of the joy of living. Instead of either wallowing in nostalgia or ignoring their traditions, Irish people need to discover how to live a good life at this moment in history. Ireland is possibly coming towards the end of its unprecedented economic boom. But Ireland's prosperity has done little to improve, for instance, its health-care and education provision. Hospitals and schools were traditionally provided by the Catholic Church, and were run by it for much of the twentieth century. But a vital opportunity has been missed to develop these public services to meet the needs of today's Ireland. Ireland lacks a healthy infrastructure to sustain it through the lean years ahead. Once the economy begins to stutter, competition for employment might change the current benevolent attitude towards new immigrants.

James Joyce was an immigrant himself—in Italy, France and Switzerland. And in *Ulysses* he portrayed many of the difficulties

encountered by the Jewish immigrant Leopold Bloom. Joyce was inspired by Jewish history. In *The Generation Game*, the cultural commentator David McWilliams makes the intriguing suggestion that the Irish today should emulate the example of Israel, and reach out to their global diaspora, inviting these exiles back home. According to McWilliams this would make the Irish both more Hibernian and less insular:

> As the returning Jews have done in Israel, the Diaspora will inject vibrancy and enthusiasm into both our contemporary and traditional culture while at the same time opening up economic opportunities all over the world.[10]

The Irish today certainly need to reinvent themselves: the challenge is to find a vision that embraces what is positive in Ireland's past and simultaneously opens it up to a more inclusive future. In order to achieve this, the Irish need to ask who they are and what they want to make of themselves. Many Irish people are proud of the novel *Ulysses*, though few have read it. Many also take pride in the new Ireland, though few take the trouble to 'read' it, in the sense of reflecting on it in a deep and sustained way. The challenge ahead is as great as the one Stephen Dedalus gave himself when he set out 'to forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race'.

Thomas G. Casey SJ is an Irish Jesuit and professor of philosophy at the Gregorian University in Rome. He has a special interest in Jewish thought, contemporary culture, Kierkegaard, and the Chelsea Football Club. His third and latest book is *Music of Pure Love* (Springfield, Il: Templegate, 2006). His articles have appeared in *The Way*, *The Tablet*, *New Blackfriars*, *America*, *Review for Religious*, *Gregorianum*, *La Civiltà Cattolica*, *The Furrow* and *Studies*.

[10] David McWilliams, *The Generation Game* (Dublin: Gill and MacMillan, 2007), 268.