IMAGINING THE MODERN CITY: JAMES JOYCE'S DUBLINERS

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Abstract*: The purpose of this paper is to examine the image of the modern city as represented and conceptualised in James Joyce's* Dubliners. *The main focus will be placed on the ambivalent attitude displayed by the modernist writer in relation to his native city: on the one hand, the city is perceived as a cold and violent place of entrapment annihilating identities; on the other hand, the artist living and creating in such an environment is perfectly aware of the cultural richness that it may offer. Thus, the present paper builds a perspective on Joyce as both dissatisfied with and fascinated by the city.*

Keywords: modern city, entrapment, culture.

This paper aims at commenting on the manner in which an artistic sensibility - shaped by the broader context of modernity/modernism - deciphers the code of the modern city. "No city stands in bricks and mortar which is not also a space of the imagination or of representation"[1], and since the respective city borrows some of the features of its overall setting, things complicate further. The *modern* city is highly illustrative of the mentalities of an age of rapid change and industrialisation; with its architecture, tumultuous life and self-involved individuals, it has often been conceived in terms of envisaging a typically modern spatial entity that "affords an infinity of meaning"[2]. The multiplicity of significance ascribed to such a reality chiefly originates in a peculiar blending of conservatism, innovation and human agency that shapes the modern metropolis, particularly through the human beings' response (both on a mental and on a spiritual level) to its substance.

No city deprives its inhabitants of the ability of imagining or representing it. Imagination is the most adequate manner of experiencing or understanding the modern city, a process that is to be mediated by metaphor and symbolisation; the city is a text. In an essay entitled *Semiology and the Urban*, Roland Barthes stated that "The city is a discourse and this discourse is truly a language: the city speaks to its inhabitants, we speak our city, the city where we are, simply by living in it, by wandering through it, by looking at it"[3]. A world of significance is constructed by means of a symbiotic relation established between the metropolis and the human agents; the latter become spectators of the urban drama unfolding before their eyes on a daily basis, and therefore interpreters of the discourse of the city.

At the beginning of the twentieth century a young writer of Irish origin demonstrated an original understanding of his status of spectator/interpreter of the discourse of the city and resorted to imagination as a means of rendering his experience

[1] Bridge, Gary, Watson, Sophie, *The Blackwell City Reader*, Blackwell Publishing, London, 2002, p. 3
[2] Harding, Desmond, *Writing the City: Urban Visions and Literary Modernism*, Routledge, London, 2003, p. 31
[3] Leach, Neil ed., *Rethinking Architecture*, Routledge, New York, 1997, p. 165

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of the Real – specifically, the Real of the city. Consequently, the artist in question transformed it into a subject matter for fiction. In 1914, James Joyce published a collection of fifteen short stories revealing the need of an artistic consciousness to come to terms with both the spiritual and the geographical coordinates of its native environment. The collection 'enjoyed' a history of publication attempts that was as dramatic as the history of the people and places it described with such mastery. Although the collection was completed in 1904, it was not released until 1914. The delay was caused by the fact that all fifteen short stories making up the volume dealt with "the moribund lives of a cast of mostly lower-middle-class characters through pointedly undramatic events chosen to illustrate the crippling effects of family, religion, and nationality"[1]. The boldness of shaping a not very favourable image of Dublin and of Ireland in general was sanctioned by the publishers who refused to release the volume on account of its being offensive and immoral. Having been asked to re-define some of his stories, Joyce insisted that to alter even the smallest detail of the collection would be to "retard the course of civilisation in Ireland by preventing the Irish people from having one good look at themselves in my nicely polished looking-glass"[2]. In his letters to one of the publishers in 1906, Joyce stated his loyalty to the governing idea of the collection: "My intention was to write a chapter of the moral history of my country and I chose Dublin for the scene because that city seemed to me the centre of *paralysis*.... I have written it for the most part in a style of scrupulous meanness and with the conviction that he is a very bold man who dares to alter in the presentment, still more to deform, whatever he has seen and heard".[3]

There is little doubt regarding Joyce's intention to create a piece of art resembling a mirror by means of which his fellow countrymen should become aware of their political, economic and cultural condition. At the time when it made the subject of Joyce's description, Ireland was still a colony of the British Empire and Irish political, social, religious and cultural life was dominated by the Roman Catholic Church. "If the Catholic Church had the souls in its grip, then the British Empire had forced these same souls into political and economic submission. There were psychological repercussions as well. After centuries of foreign invasion, the Irish learned to oppress themselves"[4]. Ireland was paralysed under foreign political and cultural domination; all areas of human existence were corrupted by the individuals' failure to take action against the British Empire. The Dublin Joyce knew was a city that lived in the shadow of the (self-) imposed oppression that the author despised so much. Some three hundred thousand citizens lived at that time in a Dublin that had gone through a century of decline (mainly launched by nationalistic struggles for independence) and confronted with such issues as poverty, need and entrapment on a daily basis.

The fictionalised image of the city does not differ from its actual condition. All fifteen stories making up *Dubliners* were meant to reproduce the life of the city and of its inhabitants at a particular historical/cultural moment; therefore it is rather difficult to establish clear-cut boundaries between imagination and reality. Just like other native towns reconstructed in literary landscapes (Eliot's London or Proust's Paris), Dublin is

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[1] Scholes, Robert, Litz, Walton, *Dubliners – A Reading Group Guide*, Penguin Books, London, 1996, p. 1
[2] Idem, p. 1
[3] Ibidem, p. 1
[4] Bulson, Eric, *The Cambridge Introduction to James Joyce*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2006, p. 33

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revealed to the reader first of all through its outer appearance reproduced with an abundance of realistic details. It seems obvious thus that Joyce conceived *Dubliners* as a cohesive sequence of stories that would create a realist impression of the city of Dublin and its inhabitants in that particular setting.

The fact is that there is more to *Dubliners* than faithfully recording a part of the life of the city at the beginning of the twentieth century. It is important to note that the collection is called *Dubliners*, not Dublin. The geopolitical unit is the setting of the collection and plays a fundamental role in adequately decoding the text, but there is also an enormous impact provoked by the manner in which Joyce describes the identities that live and work in this environment. Due to conceptualising a symbiotic relation between the individual and the world, Joyce is noted to have brought a modernist sensibility to the form of the short story. He was preoccupied not only with the material corruption, but with the emotional and intellectual degradation as well. From this point of view, the collection could be interpreted as a modernist reaction against a particular type of literature that resorted to euphemism or to a set of religious or romanticized ideals and values in order to conceal the unpleasant realities of life at the turn of the century.

The strong impact of *Dubliners* is mainly produced by the association Joyce operates between Dublin on the one hand and the four stages of human life on the other: childhood, adolescence, maturity and public life. Consequently, the stories are organized into a framework chronicling the common evolution of human existence: younger protagonists populate the streets of Dublin in the first stories, to be replaced in the following stages with increasingly aged men and women. There is one constant element that confers unity to the four cycles: the perception of Dublin as a labyrinthine entity corrupted by one of the worst aspects of urban industrialism: *estrangement* both from the others and from oneself. Isolation, alienation, poverty and corruption of human ideals and principles are definitely not something Joyce would sketch in a positive light. But, at the same time, the writer is aware of the intrinsic value of the town as a place where "life and art intermingle to both celebrate and resist the city"[1] – *Dubliners* is highly illustrative of this ambivalent essence of Dublin.

The overall image of the metropolis is constructed through the altered sensibilities of the individuals, be they private or public identities, children, adolescents or grown-ups. Even the supposedly innocent age of human life appears as 'diseased' in the hopeless environment of a paralysed Dublin. The first series of stories are meant to describe the experience of childhood lived in the dark streets of the Irish capital. The story that opens the collection "not only fixes a chilling evocation of a particular literary landscape – the symbol of Dublin as a *house of mourning* on Great Britain Street – in our memories, but also provides literature with a landmark inscription of landscape-as-memory/memory-as-landscape in modernist art"[2]. There is a general atmosphere of decay and physical / material corruption that pervades this story and, as we might easily assume, the entire collection. A little Irish boy experiences the loss of an acquaintance, Father Flynn, whose death reasserts the dominance of paralysis as a "maleficent and sinful being" (*Dubliners*, 1) that attacks the dignity and the integrity of the human being. A visit to the mourning house of the deceased does bring the young character to a cruel awareness of the presence of death and paralysis that cannot be neutralised, not

[1] Harding, Desmond, *Writing the City: Urban Visions and Literary Modernism*, Routledge, London, 2003, p. 33-34
[2] Idem, p. 33

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even by a walk along the "sunny side" of the street. Joyce's intention to portray Dublin and its inhabitants as the centre of paralysis (understood here as absence of epiphanic revelation) becomes immediately visible in the story, and equally visible is the cause of the paralytic condition: in this particular case, the restraints of the Church function as the main cause of the failure to live. Father Flynn has been a paralytic, a living dead, because of the fact that he had failed in his vocation. This is the message of the first story included in *Dubliners*, and its being placed in the opening stage of the volume offers it a sense of hopelessness and degradation in an environment dominated by paralytic failure to act and to communicate. We are suggested that paralysis represents the existential condition of both Dublin and Dubliners, and we expect the stories to come to sustain this point of view.

The young characters of *An Encounter* yearn to live not only physically, but spiritually as well by re-reading tales of American adventures that "opened doors of escape" (*D*, 11). The need of "wild sensations" (*D*, 12) leads to the courageous impulse to leave their familiar places, even if temporarily, and to set out on a trip to unknown territory. Their trajectory allows us a virtual tour of the places encountered: "(…) the geography which had been scantily dosed to me at school gradually taking substance under my eyes" (*D*, 15) and, consequently, under the readers' eyes. The boys' short incursion into their 'imagined' world of adventures would apparently receive a simple explanation, but on a closer look it launches the question of whether education at that time in Ireland was equivalent to discovery and exploration or just to impersonal instruction and information. The answer can be deduced from the boys' decision to acquire knowledge through an actual, direct contact with the realities taught in school by the Jesuits, with no mediator to alter the integrity of their experience. The contact cannot last long, however; the hope to create a world of adventures and romance fails the moment when a strange adult re-establishes the boys in their original paradigm and they return to their familiar places defeated. The idealised world of Wild West is to be replaced with the same cold landscape of a diseased Dublin.

The nameless narrator of *Araby* talks about life on North Richmond Street populated by individuals inhabiting houses with "brown imperturbable faces" (*D*, 21). He lives in one himself, but somehow manages to transcend the physical barriers of his home through his love of books (Walter Scott's novels). In this we discover a need to escape from the outer darkness and coldness and to take refuge in the imagined world of romantic passion and ideals. Just like a romantic hero, the boy wanders through the dark city in search of a gift for his loved one, permanently carrying with him a personal vision of the world. The moment he enters the world of the bazaar marks a terrible coming to awareness of the young character who finds his world of romance and adventure shattered into pieces. A mundane conversation exchanged between some of the young vendors forces him to come into contact with the harsh realities of living in Dublin and the boy sees himself as "a creature driven and derided by vanity" (*D*, 28). In such a dark and dystopic world, there is little room left to innocent love and romantic ideals.

Adolescence in Dublin is not deprived of the same corrupting forces as the ones encountered in the childhood series. In *Eveline*, Dublin exerts its suffocating influence over a young woman trapped in the tedium of the familiar experience. The story has been thought of in terms of "a domestic drama"[1] wherein a female

[1] Harding, Desmond, *Writing the City: Urban Visions and Literary Modernism*, Routledge, London, 2003, p. 40

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consciousness is caught in the web of meditation on the cultural and social oppression of home. The eponymous character is a young woman who struggles with common responsibilities in Dublin at that time: having a job, keeping the house clean and enacting the mother for her younger brothers. Her life, just like the lives of the other Dubliners, is unfolding in a little "brown house with imperturbable face". Our first contact with Eveline announces her connection to the past, and we watch her remembering things about the past. An important one has to do with the development of urban industry, bringing along the dangerous urbanization of the city: "One time there used to be a field there in which they used to play every evening with other people's children. Then a man from Belfast bought the field and built houses in it – not like their little brown houses but bright brick houses with shining roofs". (*D*, 29)

The dramatic potential arises from the fact that paralysis takes possession of Eveline right when she was on the point of leaving Dublin and starting a new life far away In Buenos Ayres. Frank, Eveline's exotic "Other", is the one who gives her hope to escape from the constraining environment. The home and the city however have considerable influence on the way she decides to act: when she was on the point of joining Frank at the station, Eveline fails to take action. The memory of her dying mother's request to remain loyal to the family deprives her of the right to freedom. She chooses to remain imprisoned in a familiar, yet hope-killing environment that had destroyed her mother as well. Eveline chooses to repeat her mother's life. The ties of her nationality, as well as the demands of her family take precedence over romantic involvement.

In *After the Race*, Dublin unfolds in front of our eyes as a European capital: "that night the city wore the mask of a capital" (*D*, 39), a statement that, however, triggers connection to a counterfeit appearance of things: the city only **wears** something, and that something is a **mask** – the **accessory** that could conceal the true face of things. There is an all too present richness in this particular story, the characters no longer belong to the typical, lower-middle class, but are rich and powerful individuals who can afford the pleasures of speed and motion. The main focus is laid on the character of Jimmy Farley, an intellectual who has studied law at an English university and hoped to reach emancipation on international rather than Irish standards. At the end of the story, he loses a large amount of money as a result of his inability to understand the world he is living in; once again, city life manages to degrade and demean the citizens.

Dublin preserves the same diseased face in *Two Gallants*, where even human passions are decayed and corrupted in a city "swarmed with a gaily coloured crowd" that lived "in the memory of summer" (*D*, 43). The story is obviously rooted in Joyce's refusal to present city life in a positive light. In creating this multifaceted portrait of Dublin life, the author used this particular story to comment on the aimlessness of many young urban men. Neither Lenehan nor Corley has a good job, and neither man has many opportunities of climbing up the social ladder. So all their energy is focused on searching money for a few drinks, and easy women for sexual relations. A meeting between Lenehan and a lady results in the latter's giving the man "a small gold coin" (*D*, 55) in response to the former's romantic behaviour. It is not surprising that in such a generally corrupted environment, love is reduced to the instinctual level and even given a secondary importance in favour of the pursuit of money.

"Dublin is such a small city: everyone knows everyone else's business" (*D*, 61). This is Mr. Doran's lament in *The Boarding House*, and one of the many laments that contribute to the overall image of the city. Once again, paralysis and corruption

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become evident from the first lines of the story. Having divorced her husband, Mrs. Mooney establishes a boarding house that progressively 'gains' a kind of ill-fame in Dublin. After several unsuccessful attempts to live independently, Mrs. Mooney's daughter gets involved in a relation with Mr. Doran, one of the inhabitants of the house. 'Reparation' must be done; otherwise the news of his deed will spread. Doran feels trapped. Though over thirty-years old, he seems to have done little progress in life. Dublin re-asserts its power over people: all of them will remain genuinely paralysed. In this particular case, Doran is paralysed by the web of social conventions and he will inevitably choose a hypocritical marriage with a woman he does not love.

A Little Cloud is rather unique in the overall framework of the collection: Joyce demonstrates that escape from Ireland does not necessarily mean salvation. On a first level of analysis, the story opposes the remarkable career of an 'ex-Dubliner' to a Dubliner's paralytic state. The plot is conceived around Ignatius Gallaher's return to his native Dublin, with a new and enriched life experience that would definitely arise others' envy. Gallaher had left Dublin eight years before and "had become a brilliant figure on the London Press" (*D*, 65). Little Chandler, one of Gallaher's childhood friends, is anxiously waiting for his meeting with Ignatius whom he admired for having escaped from the spiritual paralysis of Dublin. At some point, Chandler thinks that "There was no doubt about it: if you wanted to succeed you had to go away. You could do nothing in Dublin" (*D*, 68). At the meeting scheduled, Little Chandler is an unfortunate bearer of the burden of his innocence and failure to assert his creativity. On the other hand, he sees Gallaher as a symbol of the glamour and sophistication of London life. The Dubliner's mental imprisonment becomes evident in his insistent questions about Gallaher's travels. He keeps asking if Paris is a "moral city", a question that unveils a provincial's need to appreciate a city's morality after his own standard. The standard is provided in this case by the supposed ethical superiority of Dublin – a challenging view, since in the preceding stories the Irish capital encompasses a broad spectrum of manipulation, cheating and deceit.

Chandler judges his friend's success from the position of a man who has failed to respond imaginatively to Dublin, a failure that in fact extends to include his status of failed artist, father and eventually citizen; he does not respond to the "grimy children that squatted like mice upon the thresholds" (*D*, 66) and ragged boys and girls: he gives them "no thought" (*D*, 66). The meeting with Gallaher, however, makes him understand that Gallaher had succeeded only in a superficial way. Despite having a tumultuous life, Gallaher is shallow, unpleasant and alone. Just like other characters of the collection, Chandler returns home defeated and dissatisfied. His experience makes one wonder about the truth of the sentence that a flight from Ireland might be the solution to all problems.

Maturity and public life seem also to be caught in an inescapable web of despair. Chandler finds a *replica* in the figure of Mr. Farrington, an individual who is not allowed to develop and whose only moment of triumph is inevitably followed by a feeling of powerlessness and entrapment. There is one sentence that sums up Farrington's paralytic condition and betrays the source of his paralysis: "He had done for himself in the office, pawned his watch, spent all his money; and he had not even got drunk" (*D*, 89). Family can no longer offer any refuge to this Dubliner, and the violent treatment of his son in the end of the story betrays his inability either to ameliorate or to escape his paralytic condition.

Farrington's mental reaction to the outer world is projected against the background of the foreign influence in Ireland. *Counterparts* describes Dublin as

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impersonalised by the presence of the British. One of the clients says “Pardon! in a London accent” (*D*, 91), and on his way home Mr. Farrington passes by the “barracks” (*D*, 93) where the English soldiers live. There is an obvious feeling of discomfort caused by the awareness of the Other’s presence on Irish soil that might justify Farrington’s unusual behaviour and impossibility to cope with the world.

In *Clay* another Dubliner shares with the reader her life in the dystopic city. Maria, a spinster who works at a laundry for reformed prostitutes, is planning to go to the Donelly house for a Hallow Eve party. The reunion she attends to is an occasion to introduce us to even more Dubliners who try to live their brown piece of life. The woman is invited to play a traditional Hallow Eve game with objects invested with a prophetic significance. When her turn comes, Maria’s fate is conceived in terms of death (clay). The game symbolizes their ludic abilities to imagine a better life and a brighter world; their joy is altered by the lines of a traditional song that are rendered incompletely by Maria. On a first level of interpretation, the lines sound utterly opposite to their current status: “I dreamt that I dwelt in marble halls/With vassals and serfs at my side/And of all who assembled within those walls/That I was the hope and pride” (*D*, 102). A second stanza of the song might prove useful when trying to decipher its meaning: “I dreamt that suitors sought my hand,/That knights upon bended knee,/And with vows no maiden heart could withstand,/They pledg’d their faith to me./And I dreamt that one of that noble host/Came forth my hand to claim;/But I also dreamt, which charm’d me most,/That you lov’d me still the same”.(*D*, 234). The stanza speaks about the suitors that Maria had never had in her life; human communion is threatened by the insensitivity of city life.

After Eveline’s opportunity to leave Dublin with Frank, another protagonist of Dubliners is given the possibility to connect with a human being, Mrs. Sinico. In *A Painful Case*, Duffy is paralysed by fear that his ordinary existence will be irreversibly altered by the intrusion of passion. We learn that Duffy was at peace with his decision of living “as far as possible from the city of which he was a citizen” (*D*, 103), even though, or precisely because, “his face was of the brown tint of Dublin streets” (*D*, 104) - there is an obvious connection between the outer world and his entity. Separating from the noise and the crowd of the metropolis, Duffy is satisfied with the routinised existence, with “no companions nor friends, church nor creed” (*D*, 105) and “abhorred anything which betokened physical or mental disorder” (*D*, 104)

The beginning of the story describes a Dubliner that had built himself that particular type of existence because of a painful awareness of his inability to live in or to detach himself completely from the city. The hypothesis of an emotional bondage with a lady is perceived as a threat; therefore Duffy cuts off all ties with the woman. Four years later, a newspaper article objectively relates her death and the inquest that follows it.

The series concerning public life, *Ivy Day in the Committee Room, A Mother* and *Grace* transmits the message that paralysis has affected the political, artistic and religious life of the Dubliners. In *Ivy Day in the Committee Room*, the characters are guiding their actions in view of financial success, rather than out of any particular interest or enthusiasm on behalf of the candidate they support. In *A Mother*, any nationalistic impulse is overshadowed by the same pursuit of money that prohibits art from manifesting freely in a concert organized by the *Eire Abu* Society as a celebration of Irish culture and language. The participants in *Grace* express their wish to attend a religious service in order to clean up their lives and to repent of their sins. As the men speak of Church and Catholicism, it becomes possible that the drinking buddies have a

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firm faith in God, but they fail to understand this experience properly. The renewal of the vote of piety is celebrated by drinking whisky, another moment that makes Joyce pronounce the following statement through one of the men: "we may as well admit we're a nice collection of scoundrels" (*D*, 165).

In *The Dead*, the last story of the collection, which has also been received as the finest, Gabriel Conroy and his wife Gretta attend the Christmas party of their aging aunts, Misses Morkan. The reunion is a source of tension for Gabriel, who hardly relaxes or enjoys himself, even though he is in his native environment and he attends a reunion that had already become a tradition. A discussion with Miss Ivors, a woman involved in the movement meant to restore Irish language and culture is meant to indicate the general disapproval of Gabriel's actions and behaviour. We learn that Gabriel writes a column for a newspaper opposed to Irish nationalism; he tells Miss Ivors, "Irish is not my language" (*D*, 189). He also tells her that he is not interested in a vacation to the west of Ireland, preferring a holiday in Europe. In response, she calls him a "West Briton" (*D*, 188) – i.e. an Irishman who identifies with England and not with Ireland, a traitor of his culture - and Miss Ivors's opinion does not seem to be false. Gabriel has left Ireland behind since he perceives it as a country that finds it hard to move into modernity; rejecting all that is tied to his place of origin, the young man and has already adapted himself to the culture and civilization of the English. He wears galoshes, fashionable in Europe, though more or less unheard of in Ireland. He plans to quote in his after - dinner speech from the work of the poet Robert Browning (an Englishman); when he finally delivers the speech, it includes remarks criticizing the "new generation" of Miss Ivors and her associates. The end of the story reveals its cataclysmic conclusion: paralysis conquered the whole of Ireland; in such a world, even the dead seem more alive than the living. Gabriel finds himself unable of true passion, of real emotion: "He had never felt like that himself towards any woman but he knew that such a feeling must be love" (*D*, 224). He feels his own identity "fading out", yet he feels nothing. The only thing he can do is to stare at the snowflakes that hit his window, without entering his "impalpable" world. The final image of white, deathly snow is Joyce's final word on the paralysed Dublin/Ireland.

The collection as a whole proposes a modernist treatment of the city. At one level of interpretation, Joyce's fictional strategy is one of documentary realism: we know exactly where the Dubliners live and walk, what buildings they pass etc. At the same time, the city of Dublin functions as a symbolic setting. The writer uses this urban *locale* as a device by means of which the reader is made aware of the paralytic state of each and every inhabitant. Joyce's modern city of Dublin is a place where true feeling and real emotion do not exist, where cruelty and selfishness are the major coordinates of human behaviour. Yet, the city does not annihilate the artistic potential of the individuals. Even though Little Chandler did not succeed in preserving it, Joyce's talent stands as an illuminating proof of that.

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