

James Joyce, Oscar Wilde, and Punitive Child Loss in the Modern Bureaucratic State

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The intense ambivalence of James Joyce's references to Oscar Wilde throughout Joyce's literary career poses a riddle to which scholars have proposed an array of answers. This article seeks the basis for Joyce's simultaneous identification and disidentification with Wilde in the strata of painful affect that informs collective subjectivity in the modern nation-state. In late 19th century Britain, two nebulous new crimes, coined at the urging of the Social Purity movement—gross indecency, and custodial neglect—rendered families and communities newly vulnerable to punitive child loss. The enforcement of these new laws created conditions under which one might lose custody of one's children based on a charge that could be brought by anyone, based on anything, or nothing. Gross indecency and child neglect were both ill-defined and highly stigmatizing. Both were difficult to defend against, while their most terrible consequences were often extra-judicial. In *De Profundis*, Oscar Wilde conveys the dehumanizing anguish of extra-judicial punishments that could be indiscriminately imposed on a new kind of *moral* criminal by depicting the loss of his children as a figurative crucifixion. This article charts accounts by social historians describing the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children's early years in Dublin, and the organization's impact on socially precarious families, alongside episodes from Joyce's biography, and his literary reinventions of these episodes. Using passages from *De Profundis* that influenced Joyce's writing, historical accounts of moral policing introduced by the Social Purity movement, and Joyce's biographical materials, letters, and published writing, this article connects changing affect in Joyce's childhood family to the intense aversion, outrage and empathy that color his recurrent allusions to what he termed Oscar Wilde's 'civil death.'



The little supper with his companions; ... and the magistrate of civil justice calling for water in the vain hope of cleansing himself of that stain of innocent blood; ... the crucifixion of the Innocent One before the eyes of his mother; ... the soldiers gambling and throwing dice for his clothes; the terrible death by which he gave the world its most eternal symbol...

Oscar Wilde, *De Profundis* (1905: 74–6)

Introduction

Many Joyce scholars will recall some version of this story: in the fall of 1902, when the young James Joyce introduced himself to W.B. Yeats, his grandiose parting assessment was, ‘I have met you too late. You are too old’ (Ellmann, 1982: 103). Yet, few are likely to remember the part Oscar Wilde played in authorizing the young upstart’s dismissal of his powerful and influential elder. Yeats’s unpublished account of the exchange clearly states, however, that it was Joyce’s surprising invocation of Wilde that changed his impression of Joyce, leading him to enjoy and preserve the young artist’s outrageous parting shot. Yeats was clearly taken aback by the ferocity of the young man’s verbal attack, which soon rendered him the captive audience to a reading of Joyce’s ‘little prose descriptions and meditations’ (Ellmann, 1982: 102). He remained ‘puzzled’ as Joyce went on to list ‘all his objections to everything [Yeats] had ever done’, until he concluded, presumably based on the substance of Joyce’s criticisms, that he understood what kind of aspiring artist he was dealing with. Joyce, Yeats decided, was ‘from the Royal University... and he thinks that everything has been settled by Thomas Aquinas’ (Ellmann, 1982: 102). Just as Yeats was feeling ‘confident’, Joyce brought up Oscar Wilde’s rumored conversion to Catholicism before his death in late 1900. This initial gambit would only have confirmed Yeats’s pigeonholing of Joyce as the educated but indoctrinated product of an Irish Jesuit education. The kind of ambitious Catholic schoolboy that Yeats saw in Joyce would have brought up Wilde’s conversion to disconcert the Anglo-Irish theosophist, framing it as the Catholic Church having scored off the Church of Ireland. It was ‘in the next moment’, by Yeats’s account, that Joyce defied his expectations by coolly concluding that he hoped Wilde had kept his integrity. Through this ingenious rhetorical strategy, Joyce casually signaled his principled apostasy without activating Yeats’s Anglo-Irish prejudices. By making Wilde’s resistance to religious orthodoxy the litmus test of Wilde’s artistic worth, Joyce made himself legible to Yeats in relation to Wilde. Like Wilde, Joyce had artistic aspirations that were both high and iconoclastic. But Joyce, *unlike Wilde*, meant to maintain his creative and intellectual freedom at all costs. Through this intricate

setting up of himself as both like and unlike Wilde, Joyce established himself as a new kind of artist, thereby licensing his polished parting shot, 'you are too old', as the punchline for a good story.

The stance of ambivalent identification / disidentification that Joyce took toward Wilde in the above encounter was to influence Joyce's direct and indirect allusions to Wilde across his career. However, the tone of these allusions grew more empathetic between 1906 and 1909, during which Joyce reconceived of Wilde as more than a convenient whetstone against which to sharpen his own artistic identity. This period is bracketed on one end by a letter Joyce wrote to his brother Stanislaus, postmarked August 19, 1906, and on the other, by the publication in April 1909 of his short essay, 'Oscar Wilde: The Poet of *Salome*' in the Trieste newspaper, *Il Piccolo della Sera*. By the time Joyce wrote 'Poet of *Salome*', Wilde was becoming the intimate, fraught doppelgänger that Franklin Walton finds haunting *Finnegans Wake* as 'someone other bearing my burdens' (FW 536.27; Walton, 1977: 311). Wilde not only emerged 'as one of the central characters' in *Finnegans Wake* (Rabaté, 1994: 164), but the *Wake* as a whole can be read as Joyce's herculean effort to proleptically rewrite Wilde's fate, and his own, as his 'own *De Profundis*' (Walton, 1977: 311).

In 1906, Joyce wrote a revealing letter to his brother Stanislaus, describing his reactions on first reading the Italian translation of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (SL 96).¹ From this letter, we can glean much of what Joyce initially thought of the novel, and even more, of what he felt as he imagined with horror 'the capital which Wilde's prosecuting counsel made out of certain parts of it' (SL 96). Evidence of emotional turmoil comes to light in the letter when Joyce asks Stanislaus if he knows of a 'cure for dreaming', immediately following his critique of the novel. The letter thus formally connects Wilde's novel to a spate of recent nightmares involving 'death, corpses, assassinations in which I take an unpleasantly prominent part', though Joyce gives no sign that he is conscious of any connection between them.

As in his first encounter with Yeats, in this letter to Stanislaus, Joyce treats Wilde as a whetstone whose failures serve to sharpen Joyce's own aspirations. By 1906 however, Wilde's *failure* has split into two mutually contradictory faults. Joyce is certainly afraid

¹ In the Spring 1994 *James Joyce Quarterly* special issue on James Joyce and Homosexuality, both Joseph Valente and Jean-Michel Rabaté describe this letter to Stanislaus as revealing that Joyce, at this time, held relatively unsophisticated ideas about Wilde and homosexuality. Valente notes that Joyce expressed 'disappointment that Wilde had dissembled in presenting the homosexual charge binding Dorian, Basil, and Henry' even though Joyce himself would adopt similarly evasive strategies in *Portrait* (Valente, 1994: 170). Rabaté emphasizes Joyce's lack of self-awareness, noting that Joyce is asserting the 'romantic notion of an author faulted for "not daring" to speak the name of the perversion he describes' (Rabaté, 1994: 162). See also Backus, 2013: 119–21.

of having his own writing submitted as evidence against him in court, and thereby suffering a fate similar to Wilde's. Yet he denounces Wilde, not for having exposed himself, but for being too diffident, complaining that Wilde's writing is 'crowded' with too many 'lies and epigrams' (SL 96). By disparaging Wilde's evasiveness, Joyce disavowed his resemblance to Wilde as a sexually and politically dissenting artist whose work might attract and legitimate similar societal retribution. In this way, Joyce could pass over a more visceral, emotionally-charged basis for identification with Wilde by emphasizing, as he had with Yeats, Wilde's supposed moral and artistic alterity.

In both cases, Joyce identified a false step on Wilde's part that discredited Wilde's art, thus implicitly elevating his own artistic aspirations. Yet from the beginning, Joyce's disidentification with Wilde was softened with hope that perhaps Wilde had, after all, overcome social forces that had only appeared to defeat him. To Yeats, Joyce expressed the rhetorically-motivated wish that rumors of Wilde's conversion were untrue. To Stanislaus, in terms more ambivalent, yet more sincere, Joyce '*suspect[s]*' that Wilde might have better fulfilled his 'good intentions' in some other book (SL 96, emphasis added). In the years that followed, a trail of evidence indicates that Joyce actively *looked for* the book in which Wilde had succeeded more fully in spinning the stuff of his life into art, in defiance of his persecutors.

One indication that Joyce continued to think about Wilde has to do with Joyce's literary work during this period. It was during the 1906–1909 period that Joyce was radically revising *Stephen Hero* into *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, its title 'an echo' of Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (Riquelme, 2004: 103). Further, based on the evidence of Joyce's Trieste library, it was in this timeframe that Joyce obtained and read several more of Wilde's books, including an edition of *Dorian Gray* in the original English, which he annotated with atypical intensity (Gillespie, 1986: 259–60). If, in 1906, Joyce *suspected* that Wilde had fulfilled his best aspirations in some 'other books', in the period that followed, Joyce not only *looked for* those books, but found what he was looking for, in the extensively expurgated 1905 edition of Wilde's vast prison letter: *De Profundis*.

Scholars have proposed numerous explanations for Joyce's acutely ambivalent references to Wilde—often focusing on 'Oscar Wilde: The Poet of *Salome*'. In his biography of Joyce, Richard Ellmann first sums up the Joyce/Wilde relationship by observing that in the 1909 essay, Joyce 'took the occasion' of 'the first performance in Trieste of Strauss's *Salome*, based on Wilde's play' to explore through his ambivalent treatment of Wilde 'something of what he was coming to regard as his own personality, the miserable man who sings of joy' (Ellmann, 1982: 274). David Pierce elegantly captures another aspect of Wilde's double-edged significance for Joyce when he

characterizes Wilde as a ‘cautionary model, whose destruction by the English courts was a reminder to the disenfranchised sons of Ireland that wit was not enough to save them’ (Pierce, 1992: 139). Éibhear Walshe focuses on the proleptic energies animating ‘The Poet of *Salome*,’ in which, Walshe argues, Joyce begot in Wilde an Irish literary precursor ‘who challenged the political and moral hegemony of the British Empire’ (Walshe, 2012: 25). And, in the introduction to his groundbreaking collection, *Quare Joyce*, Joseph Valente cogently connects Joyce’s psychoanalytic ambivalence toward Wilde, and toward same-sex desire, to Wilde’s verdict and punishment:

Joyce came to adolescence in the very year that Oscar Wilde thrice came to trial, an event which, by Alan Sinfield’s account, fixed ‘the image of the queer’ in the British popular mind, the better to subject him to suspicion, stigma, and surveillance. The widespread interest that the Wilde affair attracted, its sheer magnitude as a public scandal, was doubtless sufficient in itself to fuel Joyce’s growing mindfulness of same-sex desire as a potent source of curiosity and contempt, fear and fascination. (Valente, 2000: 8)

Indeed, the Spring 1994 issue of *JJQ: Joyce and Homosexuality* that formed the basis for *Quare Joyce* includes several readings of Joyce’s ambivalent references to Wilde, as seen through a queer theoretical lens interpreting Wilde’s conviction and Joyce’s response at the intersection of sociality and psychoanalysis that Valente terms ‘the British popular mind’.

Less accounted for in this work to date is the British mind’s subliminal, irrational counterpart: British social affect. This strata of painful, subverbal affective identification/disidentification subtends and informs collective subjectivity in the modern nation-state, and the burgeoning late-nineteenth century press’s sensational coverage of Wilde’s trials and punishment unleashed waves of intense affect that profoundly reshaped not only the British mind, but British affect. Together, the national mind, made up of shared narratives, symbols, phrases, images, concepts, heroes and villains, historical events, slogans, ideals, etc., and the inchoate realm of a society’s shared social affect produce what Valente and Backus term a society’s ‘moral episteme’, or the broad ‘evaluative assumptions’ that are held in common in a particular society (Valente and Backus, 2020: 207).

Civil Death: ‘His Sons Were Taken Away from Him’

In the first paragraph of ‘Oscar Wilde: Poet of *Salome*’, Joyce implicitly praises the combativeness that led Wilde to ‘break the lance of his paradoxical eloquence against

the ranks of useful conventions' (OCPW 148). 'His name,' Joyce asserts, 'symbolizes him.' Like 'Oscar, nephew of King Fingal and only-born of Ossian in the amorphous Celtic odyssey', Wilde was, symbolically, 'tragically killed by the hand of his host while sitting at table'; he met 'his *civil death* while sitting crowned with vine leaves at table and discussing Plato' (emphasis added; OCPW 148). In 'Poet of *Salome*', Wilde is thus paradoxically victorious through defeat, immortalized by his tragic death. Joyce's depiction of Wilde in this mythic register shows Wilde becoming, for Joyce, 'another aspect of [the] tragedy' of the crucifixion (S. Joyce, 2003: 168).

Many queer studies scholars (myself included) have struggled to explain away the ways in which, in this essay, an unquestionably sympathetic Joyce makes so little of the sexual orientation for which Wilde's name was a byword. Indeed, Joyce's opening meditation on the symbolism of Wilde's names *other* than his last name sends a clear signal that Joyce is prioritizing something about Wilde *other* than gross indecency—something involving social resistance, civil death, and cultural memory. Yet few scholars have considered the possibility that Joyce is responding to Wilde in terms unrelated to sexuality, at least in the first instance. Rather, I would argue, Joyce's treatment of Wilde responds most directly to passages in *De Profundis* that convey visceral, affective pain relating to broken familial rather than erotic bonds through representations of the crucifixion. In *De Profundis*, Wilde rewrites the crucifixion as a case of simultaneously state and civilly imposed punitive child-loss, thereby emphasizing the specialized, exquisite pain inflicted by punitively-broken parent / child bonds. In the passage partly quoted in the epigraph—one of several in which Wilde figures the loss of his children in terms of crucifixion—Wilde represents the crucifixion as a horrific instance of punitive child-loss when he recalls that Jesus was crucified 'before the eyes of his mother' (Wilde, 1905: 76).

In 'The Poet of *Salome*'s' fifth paragraph, the essay's fulcrum, a condensed series of traumatic images mimetically conveys the rapid, brutal, and complete dismantling of Wilde's social identity. In three sentences, organized structurally along the same lines as the Goddess Inanna's descent into the underworld in Sumerian myth, Joyce moves from Wilde's most public to his most personal and intimate injuries. The careful ordering of these losses, from public to intimate, is especially evident because they are presented out of the order in which they occurred. The first sentence recalls Wilde's loss of his own artistic productions. The terse second sentence balances the loss of Wilde's mother and the loss of his wife with a semicolon: 'His mother died under the shadow of shame; his wife died' (OCPW 150). The final sentence denotes the nadir of Wilde's reduction to a state of abjection, his 'civil death': 'He was declared bankrupt, his belongings were auctioned off, and his sons were taken away from him' (OCPW 150).

This culminating sentence incorporates key elements from *De Profundis*. Its cadences combine the figures of the civilly-martyred Wilde and the crucified Jesus while echoing the lines from Psalms: 22.18, with which Joyce concludes the essay, offering them as his preferred inscription for Wilde's gravestone. The prophetic lines from the psalms that Joyce proposes as Wilde's epitaph, which are fulfilled in the course of the crucifixion, mark a climactic moment of abjection in Wilde's account of Jesus' martyrdom, when 'the soldiers gambled and threw dice for his clothes' (Holy Bible, Matthew: 27.35). Joyce ends his essay with these lines, which he cites in Latin, but which the reader is likely to recognize as containing a famous phrase, commonly expressed in vernacular English as 'and they gambled for his clothes'. Joyce's account of the final stripping from Wilde of that which rendered him recognizably human ('his sons'), thus equates Wilde's forced surrender of any relationship to his children to the moment when Roman soldiers, acting outside of, yet protected by, their state-appointed roles, appropriate and profane Jesus' clothes.²

Above all, Joyce's treatment of child loss as the culmination of a process of epistemic destruction comports with Wilde's account in *De Profundis*. The following passage from *De Profundis* exemplifies Wilde's treatment of child loss as a final blow, once again drawing on the crucifixion to convey the ontological force of a rupture that compels Wilde's absolute transformation:

I had lost my name, my position, my happiness, my freedom, my wealth. I was a prisoner and a pauper. But I still had my children. Suddenly, they were taken away from me by the law. It was a blow so appalling, I didn't know what to do, so I flung myself on my knees, and bowed my head, and wept, and said, 'the body of a child is as the body of the Lord: I am not worthy of either.' That moment seemed to save me. (Wilde, 1905: 81)

² Although the circumstances under which Wilde 'surrender[ed] his guardianship of [his] children' are not made clear in *De Profundis*, they are relevant to my argument that punitive child removal represented a signature expansion of the harshest punishments for moral criminals beyond the auspices of the state during this period. As Matthew Sturgis explains, Constance Wilde was persuaded by her lawyers to divorce her husband once she became (wrongly) convinced that Oscar wanted to 'purchase the life interest in their marriage settlement' at their children's expense (Sturgis, 2018: 572). A divorce, Constance's lawyers insisted, would protect the children from Oscar's profligacy by rendering the marriage settlement and the life interest obsolete. However, because a woman seeking to divorce her husband had to clear a higher bar than a man divorcing his wife, Constance could only proceed by proving Oscar guilty of 'incest, bigamy, bestiality, rape, cruelty, desertion ...or sodomy' (573). This complex entanglement of legal, financial, and moral considerations boiled down to an effective choice for Wilde, in his second year of imprisonment, between his children, or his life. Wilde could consent to the legal abolition of his relationship to his children, or he could withhold his consent, stand trial for sodomy (Constance's lawyers had a witness), lose his children under protest, and return for a far longer sentence in the prison system that had almost killed him (573).

In Wilde's terms, the eradication of his parental status shattered his capacity to make sense of himself in the world. Altogether undone, entrapped in a 'centre of pain', Wilde was crushed by the weight of his worthlessness. Only by embracing his abjection and affirming his unfitness to be in relationship to any child could Wilde resurrect a symbolic order capable of accommodating his new condition, thereby 'saving' himself.

In *De Profundis*, Wilde repeatedly describes the experience of suffering as taking place outside of linear time. He describes 'suffering' as 'one very long moment' (Wilde, 1905: 1). 'It revolves,' Wilde observes, 'round one centre of pain'. Central to the kind of pain Wilde is describing is the paradoxical state he experienced of sensational visibility as one *being punished*, and his simultaneous invisibility as one *suffering* punishment. In this sense, Wilde is meditating on the capacity of certain kinds of punishment to produce and disseminate collective epistemic trauma.

The annihilating affective suffering Wilde describes is analogous to the obliterating epistemic pain, amounting to the 'umaking of the world', that Elaine Scarry ascribes to torture. As Scarry describes it, torture's epistemic annihilation of the subject is brought about through the unbearable contradiction between the extreme physical intimacy between the torturer and the tortured, and the absolute denial of the torture victim's experience, which the torturer's actions repeatedly negate (Scarry, 1987: passim). In *De Profundis*, Wilde is phenomenologically representing a new register of spectacular punishment, coupled with strenuously disavowed suffering, brought about through a new spate of morally-based laws that emerged through the combined efforts of the Social Purity movement, and the morally-crusading spirit of the New Journalism.

Through a powerful combination of ethos and pathos, Wilde renders palpable the subjective experience of a new affective analog to physical torture, punishing a new kind of moral crime that is capable of activating a whole machinery of happenstantial, extra-judicial repercussions relating to social bonds in civil society. Having been found guilty of the definitionally ambiguous but morally absolute crime of *gross indecency*, Wilde found himself vulnerable, in a changing moral episteme, to socially-licensed and unrestricted forms of civil retribution serving principally to produce and disseminate affective pain. Owing to its extra-judicial status and its propensity to operate in and through affect, the penumbra of civil punishment that initially gathered around the designated moral criminal was invisible from the standpoint of the state, and thus deniable in the public sphere.

It is, paradoxically, the zone of enforced silence around forms of civil punishment that the state simultaneously authorizes and disavows that gives these forms of cruelty their most far-reaching and durable effects. The traumatic rupture that tore Oscar Wilde from his family extended outward in space and time, fueled by a collective

sense of horrified fascination with things that are simultaneously sensational and unknowable: Wilde's unspeakable, unimaginable crimes, and his equally unspeakable, unimaginable suffering. Wilde describes this dynamic operating on a smaller scale in 'The Ballad of Reading Gaol' (1897), in which a prisoner's execution unleashes an explosion of disciplinary affect that grips and involuntarily unifies every prisoner in a shared field of horrified awareness at the time of the execution. Both Wilde's son, Vyvyan Holland, and his grandson, Merlin Holland, devoted their careers to mapping the contours of the zone of silence that emerged around Wilde's punishment. In *Son of Oscar Wilde*, for instance, Vyvyan Holland documents the efforts of his mother's family, in response to ongoing social persecution directed at the family, to 'obliterate' all memory of [his] father from the minds of both Cyril and [him]self; and at the same time towards destroying all evidence that might conceivably connect [them] with the family of Wilde' (Holland, 1954: 62–63). If, after serving his sentence, Wilde found he was 'leaving one prison to enter another' (Sturgis, 2018: 576), Holland describes, in its most acute form, the fearful sense of internal and social estrangement constraining a generation of boys and men pressured to 'obliterate' any connection to Wilde. Holland describes the fear of 'what I might one day discover' about himself, which grew worse as he 'approached adolescence,' and concludes that 'having it constantly dinned into me that I was different from other boys' left him 'a pariah who could not take his place within the framework of the world' (Holland, 1954: 372).

Publicly circulated through the medium of sensational newspaper scandal, Oscar Wilde's paired hyper-visible punishment and disavowed suffering disseminated a new and visceral terror of eroticism itself. A deeply internalized fear of one's own prospective deviance, or signs of deviance in those to whom one was most closely bonded, was unwittingly absorbed as entertainment by the vast Anglo-American newspaper-reading public. James Joyce, I argue, had the unusual capacity to recognize the enormous significance and the social implications of the specialized suffering *De Profundis* makes manifest. This capacity was rooted not in Joyce's far-from-unusual personal gendered and sexual heterodoxies, but rather in Joyce's childhood experiences in a parallel system of moral criminalization and extrajudicial punishment involving a different but equally ambiguous moral crime, in this case, directly relating to child welfare.

Child Removal, Child Loss, and the Dublin NSPCC

Social changes in late 19th century Dublin exerted new pressures on families, a dynamic that significantly shaped the Joyce family's well-known travails. From 1891, changes in state and quasi-state oversight of families produced new social affects that would

rapidly transform Ireland's moral episteme. The basis for James Joyce's intensely empathetic/paranoid identification with Oscar Wilde lies in this subterranean realm of social affect, which absorbed mounting effusions of fear, grief, and shame in response to the energetic new presence in Ireland of the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC). Arriving in Dublin in 1891 armed with a raft of new laws criminalizing a range of custodial failings, the NSPCC's modes of enforcement transformed bonds between children and caregivers into a new site for the production of deniable affective duress.

As scholars and theorists from Jacques Donzelot to Virginia Crossman and Sarah-Ann Buckley have observed, during 'periods of rapid transformation,' authorities tend to hone in on the family because it is 'a unit that [can] be influenced and moulded' (Buckley, 2018: 242). Practically speaking, however, until relatively recently, in the developing imperial nation-state the form and affective content of families has typically changed as an indirect response to transforming economic and social conditions, rather than owing to direct state intervention. Indeed, it was by incarcerating, policing, or treating those who were, as Kathryn Conrad might say, locked *outside* the family cell (Conrad, 2004: 3–4), that the emergent nation-state first 'proclaimed itself to be in the service of families' (Donzelot, 1979: 25).

In the late 19th century, however, parallel waves of moral reform produced two new, similarly nebulous laws, the enforcement of which both authorized and necessitated state intrusion into the private sphere. The laws prohibiting gross indecency and child neglect reflected and relied on the unified public outrage produced by marketably-packaged media accounts of moral transgressions such as sexual deviance and the endangerment of children. At their most successful, such campaigns produced a widespread *personal* investment in the detection and eradication of immorality, inciting and rationalizing the social isolation of moral perpetrators, and, by extension, the breaking of family bonds to punish moral criminals and protect the innocent. Through these parallel processes, Oscar Wilde's and James Joyce's family bonds were rendered vulnerable in a manner that produced cognate modes of inchoate pain.

Whereas Ireland's longstanding approach to child welfare had focused on placing abandoned children in sectarian institutions, starting in the late 1880s, the first Irish chapter of the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) extended the influence of Catholic and Protestant activists, as well as the British state, directly into Irish families. By this time, the NSPCC had already defined its distinctive approach: to 'advanc[e] legislative reforms [designed to] involv[e] the State in the private lives of families' (Buckley, 2017: 47). And, from 1889, the Dublin NSPCC's vigorous enforcement of 'The Prevention of Cruelty to Children Act'—directed toward

identifying and punishing ‘cruel’ and ‘neglectful’ parents—represented an especially massive shift in that direction, away from the philanthropic rescue of destitute children and toward state and civic oversight of parents and families.

In practice, the NSPCC’s ‘focus... on the abused and neglected child ... [as] the means to stigmatize and reform abusive and neglectful parents’ transformed children’s well-being into an infallible index of custodial worth, conjoining a new form of social shame with a new, pervasive fear of child loss (Luddy, 2014: 106). Authorized by the ‘Prevention of Cruelty to Children Act,’ the Dublin NSPCC mobilized affect to transform social standards through the exposure and punishment of ‘*worthless* parents’ (emphasis added, Buckley, 2017: 48). The Dublin chapter’s first report proudly asserts the social value of punishing the worthless, since ‘one example made of those who commit a gross offence against a child reforms a neighborhood’ (Buckley, 2017: 48). This legal and bureaucratic refocusing on parents as the primary threat to a child’s welfare served to stigmatize a range of family misfortunes, in particular, those relating to poverty.

As both Luddy and Buckley acknowledge, the NSPCC’s original aim was to push back against institutionalization by rehabilitating terrible parents *before* children wound up on the street, thereby keeping families together. In post-Famine Ireland, in which the collective attitude toward child-mortality has often been described as fatalistic, this new focus on children *in* families might have had a beneficial effect, had the NSPCC’s highest priority been identifying and addressing the root causes of harm to Irish children. However, the NSPCC’s fixation on punishing ‘bad’ parents worked at cross purposes with its stated mission of improving families, tending to destabilize or even destroy families where children otherwise had homes. When the Dublin NSPCC found little evidence of the ‘most vicious forms of cruelty’, which had originally inspired their work, its inspectors—determined to root out parental malfeasance of some kind—refocused on the more nebulous charge of ‘negligence’, which they found ‘on all sides’ (Luddy, 2014: 105–06). An NSPCC report, dated May 1889, notes the paucity of cruelty while exclaiming over the ubiquity of ‘general negligence’. In an apparent effort to legitimate the organization’s work in the absence of galvanizing horror stories, the report invests the new crime of child *neglect* with moral urgency by linking it to homicide. Custodial neglect was declared to be the *sole cause* of the high ‘death rate of children under five years of age ... among the poorer classes’ (Luddy, 2014: 105–6).³

³ Historically, as Caelainn Hogan makes clear in *Republic of Shame*, the high rates of infant and child mortality characteristic in Ireland from colonial onset onward, owing to colonial processes of military and economic dispossession, were consistently augmented by the astronomical death rates of infants and children in institutions (Hogan, 2020: 29–31).

The NSPCC's attribution of all harm to children, and especially all child mortality, to parental 'want of care', turned the family itself into the problem, a moralized framework that naturally suggested the breaking apart of familial bonds as the solution. This shift in focus rendered families struggling with all kinds of difficulties, or even families that were doing well, but whose values or make-up offended an inspector's personal sense of propriety, vulnerable to an array of publicly discrediting, frightening, and potentially devastating consequences. Furthermore, as a growing emphasis on child neglect extended the NSPCC's social reach, it also involved established church-based organizations in a wider range of family issues. To avoid accusations of sectarianism, the NSPCC scrupulously reported all charges of custodial malfeasance to religious authorities or institutions corresponding to a family's religious affiliation. For all participants in the collaborations that ensued, child removal emerged as a remedial option for which a clear precedent already existed, since religious organizations had been 'separat[ing children] from their parents' (Luddy, 2014: 106) throughout the 19th century, usually when caregivers failed in their duty to give children what authorities considered the correct religious upbringing (McDiarmid, 2005: 127).

John and May Joyce, as they say, 'started their family' in late 1880, several years before the NSPCC became active in Dublin. Yet bad luck, combined with John Joyce's commitment to a particular strain of Victorian male gentility, would render the Joyce family peculiarly vulnerable to the NSPCC's coming affective onslaught. Seven months into the couple's marriage, John and May's firstborn, whose name, largely forgotten, was John Augustine, died eight days after birth (Jackson and Costello, 1997: 99). In response to this loss, John Joyce spurned the 'curious mix of apathy and stoicism' with which 'the high infant mortality rate in [post-Famine] Ireland was accepted' (Earner-Byrne, 2007: 15), instead insisting that the baby's death was tantamount to his own. His assertion that 'my life was buried with him' was carefully preserved in the family and duly transmitted to Richard Ellmann for inclusion in James Joyce's biography, though the infant's name was not (Ellmann, 1982: 21). John's hyperbolic response surely reflected more than just grief at the death of his infant son. It would have been a matter of public note that May had given birth to their first child less than seven months into their marriage, a situation with theological as well as social implications hinted at by the absence of baptism records (Jackson and Costello, 1997: 99–100). John Augustine's untimely birth in a vigilant and judgmental community surely complicated an already painful loss, turning the birth into haunting evidence of an unspoken transgression that the death both corroborated and punished. In any case, John Joyce's emotional reaction was not only extreme, but, for his time and place, unusual. For parents in a society in which continuous pregnancy and childbirth were synonymous with religious

piety, caring for large, malnourished families while navigating an unpredictably fluctuating semicolonial social order in which miscarriages, stillbirths, and the deaths of infants and toddlers were commonplace, and communicable diseases rife, stoicism in the face of child loss was adaptive, enabling caregivers to direct their scarce energy and resources to those who remained alive.

In so extravagantly grieving his first infant's death, John Joyce effectively nailed his colors to the mast, permanently rejecting 'apathy and stoicism' as a resource when coping with what would become a sequence of worsening losses. Instead, he committed his family to the emergent bourgeois ethos that idealized intensely emotional bonds to every child, a version of respectability and decency dangerously aligned with the NSPCC's absolute prioritization of every child's welfare without consideration of what resources were available to the family as a whole. Having committed himself and his family to this middle-class prioritization of idealized, sentimentalized parent-child bonds, John Joyce paradoxically rendered those bonds both friable and inflexible, thereby putting his family under unbearable yet inescapable pressure.

From 1880 to 1894, May Joyce gave birth to ten children and suffered three miscarriages. During these years, the family's situation was further undermined by other kinds of losses that figure in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*—humiliating forced relocations, lost jobs, and the slow, inexorable liquidation of John Joyce's inherited properties. In early 1902, Georgie, one of the eight Joyce children who survived infancy, died at 14 of typhoid fever. This long series of family catastrophes climaxed in 1903 with the death of May Joyce, aged 44, a catastrophe to which John Joyce responded in the same terms he used when grieving his first-born, by declaring himself as good as dead (Ellmann, 1982: 136).

However, in 1881, as John Joyce was identifying his first child-loss with his own death, he was also unconsciously preparing for a new beginning that would resurrect his shattered prospects. He would start his family again with a new and better first-born son. James Joyce was thus destined to enter the world burdened with expectations exceeding the ordinary ego gratifications expected of the first-born son in the patriarchal bourgeois family. As the next child born to John and May Joyce, James Augustine Joyce entered the world inescapably bound to his ghostly older sibling. Upon James's birth, John Joyce announced his ambition to give him 'the best education in Ireland', an aspiration that, like John's announcement of his own death, gives the impression of having been preserved in the family as a sort of oral heirloom (Ellmann, 1982: 27). James's status as, in Mary Adams' terms, a 'replacement child' (2023, *passim*), was signaled in various ways, starting with the two infants' shared middle name, and by his father's visions of future academic greatness. From his earliest years,

James Joyce's impressive abilities continually flattered his father's hopes; James would heroically secure the family's social standing, even as John Joyce was presiding over its incremental ruin (Ellmann, 1982: 21). From his birth in 1882, as the family's new firstborn son, James Joyce was, as Stephen Dedalus muses in *A Portrait*, charged with 'rais[ing] up his father's fallen state by his labours' (P 84).

By 1891, the year John Joyce withdrew James from Clongowes, the relationship between the British state, church authorities and local agencies relative to the families of Dublin's lower classes was changing. This would have exerted especially poisonous effects on those economically / socially vulnerable families that clung most tenaciously to class respectability. In 1892, the Joyce family moved from Blackrock into Dublin, where the children, who initially were not sent to school at all, grew more conspicuously idle, and presumably more ragged. Unable to educate any of his children in a manner befitting his sense of the family's station, John Joyce reluctantly 'sent them to the Christian Brothers school on North Richmond Street' (Ellmann, 1982: 35). It is possible to sense in this sequence the pressures that were building in Dublin in response to the NSPCC, which 'saw its success in the increase in the numbers of children it discovered as abused and neglected' (Luddy, 2014: 106). It can only have been in response to a growing sense of vulnerability that John Joyce should have overcome his intense, class-based aversion to the Christian Brothers and their lower-caste pupils, dismissed by Simon Dedalus in *A Portrait* as 'Paddy Stink and Micky Mud' (P 71). The Christian Brothers enrollment, though it would have given the family a superficially better-regulated appearance, would have posed a profound, even existential threat to the family's core identity.

In 1893, John Joyce ran into Father John Conmee, formerly of Clongowes, now at Belvedere College; remembering James's abilities, Conmee offered James and his brothers tuition-free admission into Belvedere (Ellmann, 1982: 35). In the at once fictionalized and hyper-realist scene in *A Portrait* that recalls this windfall, Joyce fulfills his social and familial directive, to 'raise up his father's fallen state by his labours' (P 84), by ingeniously undoing a shameful family episode in a way that both exposes and endorses his father's pretensions. In this scene, Joyce expressly overwrites the period during which he and his siblings attended the Christian Brothers' school, while corroborating John Joyce's belief that his connections to people with power and influence had enabled James to 'stick to the jesuits' and receive the best education in Ireland (P 71). As John Joyce would have seen it, and as this scene (not without irony) depicts it, it is owing to John's / Simon's social standing, still good enough to make him *worth* Conmee's notice and even his patronage, that his family, in the fictionalized version, remains securely insulated from the contaminating proximity of the Christian Brothers.

Yet, even as this scene revises the Joyce family's history by erasing the children's period with the Christian Brothers, it simultaneously exposes the bad faith concerning children's welfare on which the Church hierarchy's growing power was predicated. Exuberant over the fantastic deal he has brokered on Stephen's behalf, Simon shares Conmee's account of events at Clongowes originally represented as they were experienced by young Stephen. Simon proudly recounts the 'hearty laugh' he shared with Fathers Conmee and Dolan over *their* story of how Stephen reported to Conmee the wrongful, cruel, and humiliating punishment Dolan had inflicted on him for allegedly breaking his own glasses to avoid doing his schoolwork (P 72). Simon takes evident pleasure in exhibiting the shared laughter and 'behind the scenes' account of how child discipline really works among the Jesuits as evidence of the privileged insider status he is passing on to Stephen. In *A Portrait's* first chapter, we experienced this episode from Stephen's point of view; when Father Dolan pandies him for a patently invented transgression, the reader experiences from within the subjective unmaking of Stephen's world, and Stephen's child-sized hero's quest to put himself and his world back together again (P 48–59). Stephen seeks redress by explaining what has happened to Father Conmee, who assures him that there has been a misunderstanding on Dolan's part. Simon's anecdote reframes Stephen's punishment and his subsequent attempt to clear his name with Father Conmee as a marvelous joke, the butt of which is Stephen's belief that the priests actually care about the guilt or innocence of the boys they punish. Simon's anecdote both reveals and enacts the manner in which arbitrarily-administered punitive pain is socially elaborated not merely into compliance, but enthusiastic adherence.

Stephen, here, is an epistemically-wounded subject who still carries an unbearable / unspeakable experience, but one he has filed away as an experience he had successfully confronted, restoring his world's cohesion by seeking and receiving redress from Father Conmee. His father's account proleptically demolishes his belief that he had rectified an innocent mistake, thereby restoring a rational and trustworthy social order. Stephen has internalized the reassuring conviction that spectacular, publicly-administered pain and humiliation are scrupulously reserved for the guilty, and that any punishment inflicted on an innocent pupil represented a mistake that could be rectified. Simon's account contemptuously dismisses the courtly ideals that defined Stephen's application for justice with the ribald hilarity of men bonded in bad faith, laughing at the absurd naivete of those unable to understand the joke. The story is funny only when exchanged in a space of civil impunity, among those institutionally authorized to arbitrarily designate and punish moral criminals. Thus, in joyously directing Stephen to 'stick to the jesuits' (P 71), Simon is modeling the exuberant bonding through stories celebrating the arbitrary exercise of power by means of which the more adroit of Joyce's Dubliners

continually align themselves with the very institutions and authorities of which they are most justifiably afraid.

In this scene Joyce credits his father, in a back-handed way, for the ways his Jesuit education had indeed stuck with him, and been 'of service to him in after years' (P 71). Through Simon's boasts, Joyce creatively 'corrects' the father / son relationship, imaginatively rescuing his father from an intricate labyrinth of his own creation. John Joyce (through his literary avatar, Simon), and Father Conmee, does restore to James / Stephen a measure of class respectability along with the educational opportunities the Jesuits afforded. Ultimately, however, Joyce does more than repair his family's imperiled social standing in this scene; through the Clongowes anecdote, Joyce indirectly evokes the terror that underlies his father's snobbery, which is clear when we observe the profound change in Simon's social attitudes that a few years have wrought. In this scene, John / Simon is overjoyed because he, and Stephen, are back in favor with the same Catholic power brokers who had only years earlier broken Parnell, the Home Rule movement, and the heart of Simon himself (P 39). Simon has clearly abandoned one component of the Irish nobility to which he otherwise clings: that is, Parnellism's original commitment to the cause of Ireland's disenfranchised. In this moment, when the family's standing is symbolically restored, Simon contemptuously reviles the children who study with the Christian Brothers, while fawning on men he had only years earlier condemned for their shameless prioritization of power over justice, because he is afraid. 'Paddy Stink' and 'Micky Mud' are associated with the abject because their families are liable to moral criminalization and stigmatizing child-loss. Conversely, James / Stephen's reinstatement under the auspices of the Jesuits serves to differentiate the Joyce / Dedalus family from the ranks of Dublin's impecunious inhabitants, insulating them against the specter of child-loss, which, for a time, receded into the past.

'Someone Other Bearing my Burdens'

Only in 1894, the year after the Belvedere College windfall, did John Joyce's strategy for subsidizing his family's affective economy through fantasized adjustments to the family's story breakdown completely, in the face of a second unpreventable child loss. In that year, as John Joyce exhausted the last remnants of his inherited property, the last of his children, Freddie, was born, and, shortly thereafter, died (Ellmann, 1982: 21). While May Joyce had suffered three miscarriages over the course of her many pregnancies, the Joyce family had not, since the death of their *first* firstborn son, suffered the loss of a living child. By 1894, child loss had been fully re-symbolized in the Dublin moral episteme as both evidence of an unforgivable crime, and as stigmatizing punishment.

Freddie's death seems to have reanimated every disavowed loss and failure, extending back to the infant John Augustine's illicit conception, precipitating in John Joyce a terrifying psychotic episode. He violently assaulted and throttled May, who was saved by twelve-year-old James. James pulled his father away from his mother, freeing her to take the younger children and flee the house. Following this episode, the Joyces were visited at home by a police sergeant who apparently held them equally suspect, since he had an extended private interview with both of them. While the children were never removed from the family home, the death of Freddie Joyce delivered a fatal blow to the Joyce family, precipitating a punitive shattering that unfolded in slow but inexorable increments whose subjective impact we witness through the eyes of Stephen Dedalus on June 16, 1904, where he appears as a son whose bonds to both parents have been painfully broken. Internally rent with the gnawing 'agenbite of inwit' (U 1.481), Stephen is the shipwrecked survivor of one of the homes Bloom thinks of as 'always [destined to] break ... up when the mother goes' (U 8.30–31).

In 1895, the year following Freddie's death, Oscar Wilde was found guilty of gross indecency and sentenced to the maximum penalty of two years with hard labor, a punishment that, owing to the nature and the high degree of publicity surrounding his sentence, accounted for only a fraction of his overall suffering. Joyce, who was thirteen when Wilde's verdict was handed down, would have been aware of Wilde's fate from a limited perspective. He could not have known about the enormous physical and mental anguish the conditions of Wilde's imprisonment imposed, nor that Wilde was forced to sever all ties to his children. He could only have *learned* of these things from *De Profundis*, which first appeared in 1905, the year in which Nora Barnacle and James Joyce had their first child, Giorgio.

Even the early, bowdlerized form of *De Profundis* retained Wilde's potent rhetorical strategies for simultaneously denotatively depicting and connotatively conveying his subjective experience of his punishment in its totality. Wilde, in his writing, reversed the affective operations that characterized New Journalist media coverage of the Social Purity movement, which amplified public outrage concerning specific moral crimes, and the apprehension and legal punishment of designated moral criminals, while disregarding the disproportionate subjective harm inflicted by the cumulative judicial and extra-judicial punishments converging around new categories of moral criminal. Instead, Wilde created an inescapably vivid account of the pain produced by the civic destruction of his familial bonds, and hence his social worth. Joyce would have read Wilde's account of the punitive destruction of his family sometime in the period immediately following Giorgio's birth, the anticipation of which had prompted a bout of panicky fight or flight reactions in letters proposing elaborate plans to relocate,

interspersed with arguments defending ‘the struggle against conventions in which I am presently involved’ (Ellmann, 1983: 200). As Joyce suffered (and channeled into his art) the recurrence of painful childhood memories that the early years of parenting can occasion, he would have been attuned to the exact register of epistemic pain and dehumanization that *De Profundis* explicates. Reading Wilde’s account of an uncanny, inescapable pain that seems to emanate from within, but that in fact originated at the moment when the imposition of punitive child loss unexpectedly materialized as the inevitable final consequence of Wilde’s moral criminality, Joyce found in Wilde’s suffering an echo of his own.

By the time Joyce wrote *Finnegans Wake*, he would describe Wilde as ‘someone other bearing my burdens’, to whom he was tied by ‘Kaine’s nought’ (FW 536.27). Oscar Wilde would become, for Joyce, a worldly manifestation of the lost older brother whose position he had usurped, whose death he was plighted to redeem, to whom he was untenably bound by broken bonds. Yet even as Joyce’s literary allusions to Wilde bespeak an ever more intimate identification, a residue of his earlier instrumentalizing, aversive attitude to Wilde remained. Wilde might have been his symbolic brother, yet even in *Finnegans Wake*, immediately after warmly embracing Wilde as ‘someone other’ who shares, and perhaps lightens his ‘burdens’, Joyce recoils instantly, objecting ‘I cannot let it’ (FW 536.27; Walton, 1977: 311). Joyce is bound to Wilde, yes, but by ‘Cain’s knot.’ These residual notes of agonistic repudiation reveal the extent to which Joyce remained faithful to his father’s impossible mandate to proleptically protect the family from a loss it had suffered prior to Joyce’s birth.

As Vicki Mahaffey observes, the prime directive of John Joyce’s fictional stand-in, Simon Dedalus, tendered to Stephen upon entering Clongowes—‘never to peach on a fellow’ (P 21)—is ‘a double message’, enjoining Joyce / Stephen to keep other men’s secrets, and ‘not to pant on a fellow; not to express his friendship sexually’ (Mahaffey, 2012–13: 50). Most fundamentally, Simon’s injunction prohibits any lapses that might injure his family’s or his community’s honor; he must suppress any compromising perceptions concerning his family, his schoolmasters and his fellows, and he must scrupulously avoid all associations and activities that might open his family to charges of moral criminality.

The tension between the two incompatible priorities that Joyce marshalled all his circuitous ingenuity to honor—to place his own experiences and inner propensities before the world, while upholding his father’s mandate to hide all compromising knowledge and suppress all illicit desires, would bedevil Joyce’s relationship with Wilde to the last. Joyce’s simultaneous experience with, and life-long effort to retroactively avert the catastrophe of punitive child loss rendered Wilde, for Joyce, a fellow traveller,

a fellow sufferer, and as defiling Other. Like Joyce's elder brother's death, Wilde's civil death formed the basis for both empathetic identification, and fearful aversion. At the microcosmic and macrocosmic levels, each was the first "knot/nought" that bound Joyce to his family of origin, and his family of origin to a treacherous and unanswerable social order. Thus, for Joyce, Wilde would remain associated with dangerous moral impurity, not as a sex 'pervert', but as a prototypical moral criminal, as another kind of Micky Mud with whom the good son in Joyce remained, above all, grimly determined not to be classed.

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