

The Dead Priest in Ireland

A priest stands between man and God, as Christ did once. It is his vocation to pass on the word of God, the language of God's word, and the meaning of it; and to do so ritually, not in plain speech. He is to deliver those elements that constitute the rites of baptism, communion, confession and matrimony, and to ensure truth and fairness in their delivery; it is he who must ask for objection in the moment of promise, to know a human bond can be made rightly in the eyes of God; he must make of wine the blood of Christ, and of water the holy substance which makes one fit to drink him. Irish Catholicism is peopled with the recurrent image of the priest as guide, neighbor, friend, confidant, teacher, warrior, and man of God; and the relations between this image, the culture, and the man himself are the images and subjects of Irish literature. In James Joyce's *Dubliners* (1914), a collection of short stories set in early twentieth-century Ireland, these images and subjects are largely of the priest in death; the dead priests of these stories are propagated in the Irish cultural mind in the eternal way of a saint or of Christ, for they become image-priests, phantoms and stories, and so are finally relieved of their human sin, which has kept them from bringing man's hand to God.

The meaning of Christ is inextricable from the ministrations of priests who come after him, for the faithful may partake of salvation only through union with the body of Christ, and this dead substance may only be animated by the priest's touch, to be shared. This druidic, animistic function of the priest sets him apart from man, for then he has the power to transform material into life. Such transformation, be it creation or resurrection, is the office of divinity; and so the priest partakes of divinity.

It is from the demands of this office that Father Flynn suffers in "The Sisters", the first story in *Dubliners*, which is narrated by a young boy who has been Flynn's friend and companion, yet who is queerly relieved by his parting. The boy's "[discovery] in [himself of] a sensation of freedom as if [he] had been freed from something by his death"¹ is followed immediately by the fact that Flynn had "taught me a great deal... to pronounce Latin properly... had explained to me the meaning of the different ceremonies

¹ Joyce, James. *Dubliners*. New York: The Viking Press, 1967. pg. 12

of Mass... [put] difficult questions to me.”² Flynn has in appearance fulfilled his priestly duties of the Word, those being the education of laymen to receive that Word by language, by ceremony and by reflection on the nature of sin and on “certain institutions of the Church which I had always regarded as the simplest acts.”³ Yet this fulfillment has troubled and constricted both boy and priest: Flynn’s sister Eliza tells us that “the duties of the priesthood were too much for him, and then his life was, you might say, crossed.”⁴ The cross his life bears is the sin of deception; unable to adequately fulfill “the duties of the priest towards the Eucharist and towards the secrecy of the confessional,” which he impresses upon the narrator as being “so grave... that I wondered how anybody had ever found in himself the courage to undertake them,”⁵ he becomes an impostor in the church, a fraudulent priest.

Since his priesthood is untrue by some grave and unknown standard, Flynn’s provision of the sacrament of confession stands as an unrightful trade of the blessed or precious materials of church, as the sacraments are, and therefore as simony. It is as a simoniac as, in the close aftermath of his death, Flynn appears to the narrator in need of confession; and upon his appearance, the boy’s soul “[recedes] into some pleasant and vicious region.”⁶ By casting the boy as his confessor, Flynn thrusts him into vice, for the boy is unprepared as he is to take confession from Flynn and is now in danger of the same cross pressed upon him. Thus is explained the narrator’s sensation of relief at Flynn’s death, which he describes immediately following the vision-dream of Flynn’s confession; he needs no longer undertake for the sake of Father Flynn those duties that are too grave for boyhood.

They are also too grave for men. The secret duty that is failed is death: that in standing as peer of Christ, the priest must achieve a purity that, in practice, demands of him that he put aside his human desires, which is inachievable for he who feels the stochastic directions and redirections of life. The true priest is an original Christian, part of the “royal priesthood... [who] may proclaim the excellencies of [God],”⁷ and just as his function is to interpret God to man, so it is to offer man to God in the fashion of Christ, which is

² *ibid.*, pg. 13

³ *ibid.*

⁴ *ibid.*, pg. 17

⁵ *ibid.*, pg. 13

⁶ *ibid.*, pg. 11

⁷ 1 Peter 2:9

the fashion of sacrifice. In keeping his vows, the priest strives to preserve a special audience with God, that when laymen offer themselves to him in confession, he may in turn offer himself up to God in the manner of “that great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, [for whom we] hold fast our confession.”⁸ Christ’s offering to God and man was his death; and it is this which is simulated by the vows of a priest, which forbid him participation in the acts of human life, forbid exactly those emotions and movements of the breast that might “let a young lad run about and play with young lads of his own age and not be....”⁹ dead.

Which is the suggestion of their neighbor, Mr. Cotter: that friendship with Father Flynn is “bad for children, because their minds are so impressionable. When children see things like that, you know, it has an effect...”¹⁰ The thing that is seen is left unclear, but this statement is quickly followed by the sight of Flynn’s face in the boy’s dream, suggesting that Cotter refers not only to Flynn’s physical death, but also that dead element which pervades his priesthood and touches his mind. He is taken by a nervousness that sets him to laughing in the innermost room of the church, laughing without object, having disappeared in the night; he sits in the confession-box without light, “wide-awake and laughing-like to himself... So then, of course, when they saw that, that made them think that there was something gone wrong with him.”¹¹ What is wrong is the splintering of Father Flynn between the human life that is his and the need to resign himself to death, to put his human life to death, accommodate death within his human body such that, in theology, he might be akin to Christ, and dispense to his flock Christ’s deadly sacrifice.

This need resolves in his final resignation. “He had a beautiful death,” Eliza says; “Father O’Rourke was in with him a Tuesday and anointed him and prepared him and all... He was quite resigned.”¹² This is the submission he could not show in life, the reception of that stillness that, like a spell, puts all human desire and ability to sleep; and in this relief from that intrusive desire, which made the keeping of his vows so grave and so obscene, he is relieved also from the humor of his situation, which kept his face in states of

⁸ Hebrews 4:14

⁹ Joyce, pg. 10

¹⁰ *ibid.*, pg. 11

¹¹ *ibid.*, pg. 18

¹² *ibid.*, pg. 15

smiling and made the narrator uneasy. “[Flynn’s face] began to confess to me... and I wondered why it smiled continually,” the boy says of his vision; “but then I remembered it had died of paralysis and I felt too that I was smiling feebly as if to absolve the simoniac of his sin.”¹³ In death, Flynn is free to confess in his true form, as a layman in priest’s vestments; in the role of confessor, in the confession-box, he can only laugh in mockery of himself and of his situation, of his inability to dispense the holy sacrament as a holy man. And cast as confessor, the boy touches Flynn’s wound with kindness; his smile is not that of “a disappointed man,” as Flynn is described, and does not mock the strangeness of his position as the child-confessor of a priest; instead, it is meant to forgive the same sin which Flynn’s smile has so often betrayed.

Blessed, anointed and having confessed, Flynn’s body is relieved of its bitter laughter. At the wake, “he just looked as if he was asleep, he looked that peaceful and resigned. No one would think he’d make such a beautiful corpse.”¹⁴ This is because in life, no one would have seen him with that killing resignation in his heart; now, no longer possessed by the impulses of living, he may join the many haunting, nameless priests which line the walls and minds of Ireland, which appear in *Dubliners* story after story. “Araby” is populated with references to the priest who died in the back room, forgotten except for the fact of his death, and yet in this fact is an eternal and companionable presence in the descriptive mind of the narrator. In “Eveline”, the main character “had never found out the name of the priest whose yellowing photograph hung on the wall,”¹⁵ unliving yet filling the room as might a portrait of Mary or of Christ, of whom it is written that “the former priests were many in number, because they were prevented by death from continuing in office, but he holds his priesthood permanently, because he continues forever.”¹⁶ The dead priest no longer holds his office, yet by the culture of Catholic Ireland he stays up on the wall, haunts the dead-room, becomes part of the landscape and furniture. By the force of culture is achieved theological satisfaction: in the way that image, his memory, and the invocation of his name is enough to plant him in the mind, the priest in death becomes a true religious object. If he cannot achieve Christly death in life, then at least he can die; the spirit and the ghost of him will survive, and then his vocation will be complete.

¹³ *ibid.*, pg. 11

¹⁴ *ibid.*, pg. 15

¹⁵ *ibid.*, pg. 37

¹⁶ Hebrews 7:23-25

Bibliography

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