

Joyce's ARABY

The consensus interpretation of James Joyce's "Araby" is that it is an initiation story recounting a young romantic's first bitter taste of reality. John Brugaletta and Mary Hayden express the typical view of the boy:

He has been attracted by the "magical name" of the bazaar and has travelled there for the greater glory of that other magical name, the name which springs to his lips in prayers and praises. The vision had been his alternative to the real world, had indeed become at one point so realistic as to apparently fuse with reality for him. But that vision . . . proved too fragile for a world of real older girls, money, drunken and indifferent uncles, and the necessary crassness of day-to-day existence. . . . Anguish, however intense, is a perfectly appropriate reaction. (17)

As have most commentators on the story, Brugaletta and Hayden omit religion from their list of disenchanting influences and regard "anguish" as the most important word in the narrator's climactic memory of his disillusioning boyhood experience: "Gazing up into the darkness I saw myself as a creature driven and derided by vanity; and my eyes burned with anguish and anger." But the anomalous word "vanity," induced by a religious mindset, is the key to the story's theme. Anguish and anger are merely emotional reactions, but the admission of vanity, which reflects the oppressive Catholicism in the story, is a severe moral judgment. The boy, standing alone in darkened Araby with his shattered hopes, may well have felt anguish and anger over his romantic illusions and the circumstances that thwarted them, but it is the now-moralistic adult who looks back on his former self as having been vain in his adolescent desire for romance and happiness, a perception that would have been alien to his youthful *zeitgeist*. This mature narrator, and not the naive boy, is the story's protagonist. I do not think Joyce expected reasonable readers to share his narrator's harsh judgment of himself, a verdict handed down by the stern priest that the once dreamy boy has in effect become. The antagonist of the story is not the hackneyed reality of a tough world but a repressive Dublin culture, which renders hopes and dreams not only foolish but sinful. "Araby" is not a stock initiation story but the dramatization of a soul-shrivelling Irish asceticism.

The still-sensitive narrator has become embittered rather than wiser, which was his destiny from the first for desiring joy in an environment that forbade it. He describes the Dublin that he grew up in as a religion-haunted vale of tears. Joyce, no doubt reflecting his own youthful confinement in Jesuit boarding schools, has his narrator begin the story by referring to "the hour when the Christian Brothers' School set the boys free." But they were "freed" into an equally grim world where not even play brought pleasure: "The cold air stung us and we played till our bodies glowed. Our shouts echoed in the silent streets." The boys gamely tried to frolic among somber houses, whose "brown

imperturbable faces" seemed "conscious of decent lives within them," an image that expresses, with a note of irony, a bond between decency and a constricted life in the mind of Dubliners.

When the narrator was not learning asceticism at school or in the streets, he was learning it at home. He vividly recalls that the former tenant of the house he grew up in, "a priest, had died in the back drawing-room." Another image of repression is afforded by "Air, musty from having been long enclosed," this one more closely linked with religious devotion. In "the *waste* room," which has its own pointed meaning, the boy found three books. Two of them suggest that the priest attempted to lighten the load of the Catholic discipline signified by the third, *The Devout Communicant*, a pamphlet by a Franciscan friar. Sir Walter Scott's *The Abbot* would have added a bit of historical romance to the priest's drab profession, and *The Memoirs of Vidocq*, the autobiography of a French policeman and soldier of fortune, would have provided vicarious escape from it. As the boy was soon to do, the priest apparently made his own, albeit mild, protest against the austere life. But the narrator quietly underscores the loneliness of the churchman by mentioning that he had no one to leave his worldly possessions to except institutions and his sister.

The lesson that romance and morality are antithetical, whether learned from haunting celibates or breathed in with the chastising Dublin air, has not been lost on the narrator. When he was a boy, his sexuality played a part in his obsession with Mangan's sister, and it is now a factor in his harsh assessment of his youthful behavior. As the narrator at least subconsciously realizes, his devotion to the older girl was not nearly as innocent as his sentimental, "O love! O love!" might seem. Opposing his idealization of Mangan's sister ("I imagined that I bore my chalice safely through a throng of foes") are many fleshly memories of her. Most critics have regarded the girl, whom the narrator even now will not call by name, as his adolescent dream-object, but such visions as "Her dress swung as she moved her body and the soft rope of her hair tossed from side to side" are neither ethereal nor platonic. He can still see "her figure defined by the light from the half-opened door," and from their one brief encounter he has retained a vision of "the white curve of her neck" and "the white border of a petticoat just visible." He also recalls that as he made his love-pledge of a gift from Araby, the girl stood clutching one of the spikes of a railing, which would be an odd memory were it not so plainly phallic. That the narrator's "confused adoration" of his first love was tainted by latent lust is now a strong influence on his abashed sense of vanity. With his final, disgusted pronouncement, the reformed sensualist dismisses all such secular attempts to live life with pleasure as base self-indulgence and therefore worthy of the derision of decent people, among whom he now numbers himself.

The boy's quest for the girl was, of course, doomed from the start. The real story of "Araby," however, is not what happened to the boy but what has hap-

pened to the man. The repression of spirit that he attempted to escape as a youth has imprisoned him as an adult. He now knows that dark is right and no longer believes in beacons of hope, feminine or otherwise. He has not been defeated by a shabby bazaar, or even by reality in the absolute sense, but by the temporal gloom blanketing the Dublin of his youth like the snow of the dead. A religiosity that assumes that life is painful and meant to be that way has seeped into his soul. He has come to accept as just a life in which children play in joyless streets, girls cannot attend bazaars because of convent duties, old ladies collect used stamps for pious purposes, aunts mark time as "this night of Our Lord," and even drunken uncles cannot resist moralizing—"The people are in bed and after their first sleep now"—to pleasure-seekers such as the boy. In Dublin, any deathly silence is "like that which pervades a church after a service," and a virtuous, imperturbable face is the only defense.

Surely the refugee from such paralysis who wrote "Araby" wanted his readers to see the disillusioned adult moralist who narrates the story, and not the dreamy young sensualist he once was, as the story's object of pity.

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WORK CITED

Brugaletta, John J., and Mary H. Hayden. "The Motivation for Anguish in Joyce's 'Araby.'" *Studies in Short Fiction* 15 (winter 1978): 11-17.

Ransom's BELLS FOR JOHN WHITESIDE'S DAUGHTER

Although John Crowe Ransom's "Bells for John Whiteside's Daughter" has been widely admired and anthologized since its publication in 1924, commentators seem to have had difficulty describing, in this instance, the nature of the poet's achievement. For example, Robert Penn Warren (98) speaks somewhat patronizingly of Ransom's "admirable little poem," praises what he calls its "manly understatement," and notes mysteriously that "simple grief is not the content of the primary statement" the poem makes—although it is precisely as a statement of grief that readers have received the poem for seventy years.

Vivienne Koch describes the poem simply as a "delicately turned elegy, suffused with affectionate humor" (382), a statement that is true but superficial. Randall Jarrell speaks in glowing but indistinct terms of its "real, old-