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Politics as Metaphor: "Ivy Day in the Committee Room"

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With "Ivy Day in the Committee Room," James Joyce's trilogy of public life in *Dubliners* begins where personal tragedies in the earlier stories give way to severe criticism of larger realities of Ireland. Joyce shows how politics, culture and religion control the consciousness of the Irish people, and how the authorities, instead of bringing liberation, help strengthen British colonial rule over Ireland at the turn of the century.

"Ivy Day" shocks readers. While the narrative seems to deal with local politics, i. e. a municipal election in the Royal Exchange Ward, there are no heated political issues or ideas or perspectives among the parties concerned. The main characters in the narrative are not candidates but those who canvass for them. The whole narrative is also interwoven with dialogues shared among the canvassers in the committee room. The dialogue revolves around trivialities rather than serious

politics. Ironically, however, looming in their minds are such historical figures as the late Parnell as well as the contemporary King Edward VII. How can we understand such a discrepancy between what is said in the story and what is repressed? If Joyce didn't mean to simply portray the canvassers' routine on a certain day, and if he intended it all to happen on "Ivy Day," then we should pay attention to the many layers of metaphors that connect the narrative's surface and the deep meaning hidden beneath.

At the end of the story, we hear Joe Hynes recite his pathetic poem dedicated to Parnell. In the poem, he wishes Parnell to be resurrected "like the Phoenix from the flames" (*D* 132) because "Erin's hopes and Erin's dreams/ Perish[ed] upon her monarch's pyre" (*D* 131). Not surprisingly, the narrator starts by depicting Jack the caretaker's desperate effort to revive from the cinders a fire which is in danger of being choked by ashes.

> Old Jack raked the cinders together with a piece of cardboard and spread them judiciously over the whitening dome of coals. When the dome was thinly covered his face lapsed again, his crouching shadow ascended the opposite wall and his face slowly re-emerging into light. It was an old man's face, very bony and hairy. (*D* 115)

Hynes's serious wish to make Parnell rekindle in the minds of the Irish people is thus enacted (or dramatized) by Jack and the motif of the Phoenix is superbly captured. Jack, an ardent worshipper and representative of those good old days, is most suitable for the role of presiding over the leader's commemoration via the dying fire. Jack rakes cinders as a metaphoric act of reviving Parnellite spirit. What appears on the wall after all is nothing but his own image, that of a senile skeleton, which suggests the gloomy determinism of the Irish who have long forgotten the dream of an Irish nationalism. A world without the national hero is also expressed in such metonymic signifiers as a "denuded room" and the fire that "lost all its cheerful colour" (*D* 117). The chilling rain outside also matches the ever thinning mood of mourning as the years go by.

The dying fire in the room and Jack's futile efforts to rekindle it is an excellent metaphor for the Irish situation. After the death of Parnell, the heroic figure in the long struggle for independence, the Irish people lost their hopes and dreams for liberation. To show the frustration of the Irish people who simply live on day to day, Joyce brings canvassers in a committee room on 6 October 1902, eleven years to the day after Parnell died, and lets us hear their idle talk during endless rounds of stout beer. The agenda of the day is about the coming municipal election and they work as canvassers for Mr. Richard J. Tierney, a Nationalist candidate. Superficially, the narrative seems concerned with the election campaign, but a closer reading betrays the distorted value-system as well as the mean triviality of Irish people.

That Ireland at that time needs the revival of Parnellite spirit means she has lost the Irish integrity of the past and the Irish are deeply immersed in moral depression as British subjects. The ever-deepening disintegration of moral and political values in Ireland is represented through a "father-son" metaphor. Jack refers to a painful relationship with his son, a drunken wastrel, which is significant in that it parodies the decline of Irish nationalism and the shallowness of the younger generation who do not even wish to revive the spirit of Parnell.

> Ah, yes, he said, continuing, it's hard to know what way to bring up children. Now who'd think he'd turn out like that! I sent him to Christian Brothers and I have done what I could for him, and there he goes boosing about. I tried to make him someway decent. (*D* 116)

The outstanding characteristics of the new generation are ungratefulness and forgetfulness as is shown in the "father-son" metaphor. Nowadays, the younger ones do not respect their elders, still less Irish tradition, which Jack worries about. Like Farrington and Lenehan in earlier stories, these Irish youngsters prefer alcoholism's momentary forgetfulness to facing painful reality.

The "father-son" metaphor continues when we hear those canvassers hired for Tierney, i. e. Crofton, Henchy and Lyons, are hardly concerned about whom they

work for. They, the "political sons," work for Tierney, the "political father," not because they share his politics but because they desperately need money. The canvassers are so poor and marginal, they are much more interested in their pay than the political perspective of the candidate they work for. (They are so hard up that Old Jack begrudges even a small bit of coal and Henchy expects to find bailiffs at a home for unpaid debts.) It is understandable that they all are so hard up that they became petty-minded but their political consciousness is shallow as shown in the following discussion.

> —Has he paid you yet?
> —Not yet, said Mr O'Connor. I hope to God he'll not leave us in the lurch to-night . . .
> —O, he'll pay you. Never fear, he said.
> —I hope he'll look smart about it if he means business, said Mr. O'Connor. (*D* 117-8)

At the prospect of no payment that evening, the agents start to slander and condemn Tierney for his tricky meanness: i. e. "Mean little tinker!" (*D* 120). Mocking Tierney's diminitive small body, they also refer to his "little pigs' eyes" (*D* 120), a powerful metonymy for avarice and pettiness. They even disclose his shady background by referring to his father's bootlegging: "Tricky Dicky's little old father had a tricky little black bottle up in a corner" (*D* 120), which means he made money selling drinks illegally — like father like son.

In a corrupt world, the "political father" cannot be trusted, either. Tierney postpones paying his canvassers, saying he has "spent a lot of money" (*D* 120), which subtlely connects him, I argue, to monetary transaction in the election. Henchy saw him, we hear, "having a deep goster with Alderman Cowley in a pub" (*D* 124). He adds "[y]ou must owe City Fathers money nowadays if you want to be made Lord Mayor" (*D* 124). Most dubious about Tierney is that we never hear him say his political views, commitments or plans for Dublin. Worse still, no one in the committee room asks that. What we hear is Hynes's satirical reference to

Tierney: "This fellow you're working for only wants to get some job or other" (*D* 118). Henchy's reference to Tierney's wealth, personality, and no affiliation with any party proves to be exactly the opposite. That he is a "big rate-payer" (*D* 128) is a slogan more suited for a plutocratic than a municipal election. That he is a "prominent and respected citizen" (*D* 128) is contradicted rather than supported by the evidence. Finally, his nonpartisan candidacy does not ring true, either. Since the Conservatives withdrew their candidate, Tierney the Nationalist is supposed to compete with Colgan the Labor. Crofton from the Conservative camp supports Tierney, not because he is a good candidate but because the Conservatives are "choosing the lesser of two evils" (*D* 128). At this point, we see the displacement of the Irish leader by a mean, diminutive man with "little honesty and less dignity" (Cixious 13).

The first issue the canvassers talk about is King Edward VII's visit to Ireland next year. Each shows different responses to the King's official visit. Henchy, a practical man who sees politics as nothing more than business, welcomes the monarch's visit. For it will definitely, he argues, "mean the influx of money into this country," by which "citizens of Dublin will benefit" (*D* 128). Referring bankrupt closed-down factories, Henchy opines that the king's visit should be hailed because "[w]hat [they] want is capital" (*D* 128). For him, "it is only good sense to be in the right 'camp' . . . wherever the power is (Ingersoll 133-34)" because Edward is head of state as well as head of business. Such an inverted opportunism of Henchy's is betrayed by his praise of King Edward VII's personality: "He's a jolly fine decent fellow" (*D* 129). He even translates His official coming as a "friendly visit"" (*D* 129). He simply confuses colonial politics with cheap sentimentality. Henchy's argument is graphically visualized earlier in "After the Race" in which we see lots of race cars with continental wealth and industry coming in "homeward" through the "channel of poverty and inaction" (*D* 35). Henchy should be categorized as one of those "gratefully oppressed" (*D* 35), who cheered up the Continental car racers.

O'Connor and Lyons, however, object to Henchy by reminding him of

Parnell and his anniversary that falls on the same day. Henchy does not even wince but replies "Parnell . . . is dead" (*D* 129). By saying "[l]et bygones be bygones" (*D* 129), he tries to repress the inner voice of his conscience and fossilize the glorious past of Ireland as well. He thus neglects the political metaphor of the royal visit in favor of economic interests. To him, King Edward is not an oppressor but simply an ordinary human being who likes drinking and sports. When he asks "can't we Irish play fair?" (*D* 129), we find in him extreme political perversion and hypocrisy.

The second issue of their idle talk is who is on their side and who is not. A heated debate picks up regarding the genuine identity of Hynes and Father Keon. Such an argument is another dramatization of the tragic history of treachery and betrayal among the Irish independence camp. Their idle talk thus turns out to be a sad metaphor for the Irish history. When Hynes departs suddenly, the remaining canvassers suspect he is a spy from Colgan's camp. Concerning Joe Hynes's trustworthiness, Henchy says Joe is not a person of "nineteen carat," raising serious doubt about his chance for "sponging" (*D* 121). O'Connor, on the contrary, considers him a straight man. It is not clear whether Hynes is a spy because it is impossible to tell who is who in Dublin. What matters is that the topic is subtly connected to the recurrent theme of betrayal in *Dubliners* stories in which rumours of spying and counter-spying circulate continuously. The message of this tired metaphor is that where there is no true political discourse, a spurious one appears, whcih distracts national energy and concern to such petty trickery, treachery and spying. Henchy's reference to "Castle hacks" (*D* 122) who as informers are paid by the British government underscores my argument. He even suspects a "little nobleman with a cock-eye," whom everyone knows to be a "patriot" (*D* 122). When we hear them talk about cases of fellows who would thank God for having "a country to sell" (*D* 122) at all, we witness the endless chain of betrayal handed down from past to present.

Father Keon is another dubious character whose identity is contentious. Frequently, in *Dubliners* Joyce shows the inner depravity of a character through the

description of his or her appearance. Keon's dubious identity as a priest is expressed through his untidy demeanour as well as disfigured features. It is hard to tell if he wears "a clergymen's collar or a layman's," and he looks like a "damp yellow cheese" (*D* 122). Together with a "discreet, indulgent, velvety voice" (*D* 123), such an image of stinking rottenness is an unmistakable metaphor for whom Father Keon could actually be. (Brown suggests, however, that he might simply be an alcoholic [Brown 289].) Religious corruption in Ireland is one of the major underlying themes in Dubliners and it takes the form of an ignominious connection with politics in Keon's case. Rumors say Father Keon has a "very thick" relationship with Fanning the mayor maker. Father Keon's involvement in local politics is again betrayed by the reference to Kavanagh's, a gathering place for politicians in Dublin. The canvassing men in the room finally ask: "What is he exactly?" or "Is he a priest at all" (*D* 123)? Deprived of clerical duties and privileges, he has become a "black sheep" (*D* 123), as they call him. If the "religious father" is labelled as a "stray sheep" (*D* 123), and laymen ("canvassing sons") should worry about him, Keon proves to be another negative example of the "father-son" metaphor. The supposedly normal relationship between father and son is, again, inverted here. This kind of role-inversion is not infrequent in a world where every value system is devastatingly turned over. Ironically, the canvassing laymen appreciate God for not providing many of those "simoniac" clergymen for whom they feel pathetic: "He's an unfortunate man of some kind" . . . (*D* 123).

The conspiracy between religion and politics through the transaction of money is again confirmed when O'Connor suspects Tierney has made some sort of shameful bargain: "There's some deal on that quarter . . . I saw the three of them hard at it yesterday at Suffolk Street corner" (*D* 124). Those transactions behind the scene are instantly parodied by Henchy's innocuous visualization, assigning himself as Lord Mayor, John as his secretary and Father Keon as his private chaplain. Henchy's wish to stay in the Mansion House, the official residence of the Lord Mayor, in all his "vermin" (a satiric reference to the "ermine" of the official robe of the Lord Mayor) is deconstructed when he adds that "[w]e'll have a family party"

(*D* 124). The irony and black humor here is stunning because Henchy, who so far criticized Father Keon, unconsciously identifies himself with the Father by saying "we." Also, he blindly admits that all of them, including Father Keon, are vermin-like beings who survive as parasites on the society's periphery. It is Leonard who, in his Lacanian perspective, regards the narrative as the "complex politics of subjectivity" rather than the "vagaries of a local election" (230). Henchy's verbal dramatization, accordingly, reveals the canvassers' lack of subjectivity rather than their ineffectiveness as politicians. No one in the room seriously worries about the disintegration of political morality or loss of a balanced perspective. Rather, they wonder who they really work for and why.

Exhausted by pointless arguments, the canvassers feel ready to drink when a basketful of stout is delivered from the Black Eagle. At the sight of the bottles, they regain their cheerfulness. Interestingly, they forget their complaints about not being paid and instantly change their attitude toward Tierney: "He's as good as his word, anyhow" (*D* 126). We realize they hold no consistent view of a character, much less a balanced perspective on such political issues as British colonialism and Irish subjugation. They simply to survive day in, day out, gratifying only their base desires as parasites. Thus they unconsciously enact, I argue, the political metaphors contained in the issues they speak of.

The third and final topic of the day happens to be the Parnell issue. The thesis that "Ivy Day" can be read as a political metaphor for the Irish situation under British colonialism is supported again when we see that the canvassers' chatter returns repeatedly to the theme of Parnell. Actually, all the issues talked about are secretly interwoven with, as well as driven to, this theme of Parnell, a "gnomonic" character in the narrative because he is absent figure yet continues to control those in the room. Try as they may, they cannot simply repress and forget their genuine voice of conscience because the presence of Parnell, especially on his anniversary day, is felt everywhere. Earlier, Old Jack missed the good old days when they all had national pride and ideals: "There was some life in it then" (*D* 119). Stark as the utterance may be, its balancing power against those trivialities is poignant.

Hynes also laments, pointing to the ivy leaf on his coat: "If this man was alive . . . we'd have no talk of an address of welcome" (*D* 119). (Here we recall Mr. Simon Dedalus's passionate defence of Parnell at the Christmas dinner scene in A *Portait of the Aritst as a Young Man* and Stephen's shock at seeing his father's eyes welling with tears [*P* 28-39].) All those in the room secretly long for the great father figure in the character of Parnell, especially at a time when all "fathers" — either familial, political or religious—, seem disoriented as well as mislead. That's why whenever a reference to Parnell is suggested, silence suddenly sweeps the room.

The silence which falls a couple times is telling because it reveals the depth of awkwardness and inconvenience they feel at the mention of the national leader. Therefore, when Henchy shows his compromising attitude toward King Eddie's visit by saying that "Parnell . . . is dead" (*D* 129), Lyons refers to the Irish idealism Parnell tried to materialize and O'Connor advises not to "stir up any bad blood" on his anniversary (*D* 130). It is Cixous who deftly reads the hypocrisy lurking behind their seemingly nationalistic utterances. She says that their references to Parnell as an antithesis to King Edward also embarrass and inconvenience them (Cixous 13). Read in this context, both Lyons's and O'Connor's suggestions are not different from Henchy's in their subtle meaning because all try to quiet their own consciences by these conciliatory gestures. Moreover, when we hear O'Connor adding that "[w]e all respect him now that he's dead and gone" (*D* 130), we see exactly the same version of Henchy's principle of voluntary forgetfulness about the painful past. All of them in the room admit that Parnell is the only man that could "keep that bag of cats in order": "*Down, ye dogs! Lie down, ye curs*!" (*D* 130). But when they feel the imaginary presence of the Irish leader in the room, it somehow discomforts them. They long for the revival of Parnellism but they also realize the poignant breach between the dead past and the living present that the politics of the day cannot fill. They are not unaware of the moral decline and political corruption of Ireland expressed in the form of widespread calculation, betrayal, and treachery. But they fail to realize that they themselves are the very agents who

unconsciously reproduce the false consciousness of colonial politics. That is the hilarious message of political metaphor they enact.

When Hynes returns at the end, the topic of Parnellism is recaptured in the form of a poem he recites before the canvassing audience. Joyce adroitly keeps him from the previous redundant discussions in order to assign him the role of amateur poet bringing fresh air to the stale arguments in the room. The poem as such is a text within a text that summarizes the whole narrative as well as criticizes the dubious character of Irish politics at the time. Ingersoll describes the function of the poem: "it connects with the story's themes of hypocrisy and betrayal to provide a clear answer to why these petty politicians are so hypocritical and why they betray each other" (135). During Hynes's absence, the canvassers in the room have been trying to fix Parnell's leadership simply as a historical fact. Hynes's poem, however, tries to resist the historicizing process, poignantly awakening momories of Parnell. In this sense, "The Death of Parnell" can be read as a poetic metaphor for Irish politics that comprises not only the glorious past but the Ireland's deplorable present. In the poem, different layers of irony lie hidden under the well-controlled thematic tension and tonal variations. Hélène Cixous points out three kinds of ironies in the poem: the first two are literal in relation to the audience and the third is historical. Her analysis is worth quoting here:

> To begin with, there is the literal irony of reciting a poem of grief and indignation to an audience that remains completely cold and unmoved. Then by its relationship with this audience, the poem acquires an aggressive tone, because Parnell died betrayed by people whose description ("modern hypocrites," "coward hounds") identifies them with the audience, who are complacently listening to the poem; they behave as though they were not the people being criticised in the poem, as though they had nothing to do with it, and praise their own condemnation. Next, the irony becomes historical too; the contrast is established between the message of hope which the poet cries prayerfully towards the future and the reality of this future, made concrete as the moment in which the poem is being read — and the hope is seen to be both vain and ridiculous. (15-16)

In order to support my argument that the poem is a metaphorical representation of the past, present and future of Ireland, let's briefly look at its synopsis. In the first three stanzas, the poem invites the audience to mourn because "Our Uncrowned King" is dead, slain by the "fell gang of modern hypocrites" and "coward hounds" (*D* 131). In the next two stanzas, the poet refers to the possible fame, liberty and glory of Erin Parnell might have brought as well as to his failure through other's treachery. The poet laments the wasted opportunity; "alas, 'twas but a dream" (*D* 131)! In the following two stanzas, the poet-narrator refers to the theme of betrayal and rebukes the shameful cowardice and meanness which "smote their Lord" (*D* 132). At this point, Hynes sharpens his attack specifically on the wrongdoings of the clergymen. We easily recall here those corrupt fathers, Keon, Burke and Purdon, who enjoyed political connection at the cost of religious commitment. The poet-narrator condemns those betrayers while giving benediction to the deceased Leader: "No sound of strife disturb his sleep" (*D* 132)! He also aligns Parnell with "Erin's hero of the past" (*D* 132). Finally, the tone of lamentation gives way to a hopeful prayer of resurrection.

> They had their way: they had laid him low.
> But Erin, list, his spirit may
> Rise, like the Phoenix from the flames,
> When breaks the dawning of the day,
>
> The day that brings us Freedom's reign.
> And on that day may Erin well
> Pledge in the cup she lifts to Joy
> One grief — the memory of Parnell. (*D* 132)

The first line makes a Biblical reference, likening the Irish to the wayward sheep, which brought anxiety to the shepherd. Parnell in turn takes the image of Jesus Christ whom the chosen people had ungratefully slain. Hence the resurrection metaphor. The poet earnestly implores for the reincarnation of Parnell through the myth of the Phoenix. Ironically, however, the fire bird is destined to emerge from the pyres Erin

raised to burn her "hopes and dreams" (*D* 132). (It is worth noticing here that the fire in the committee room almost dies at the end of the same day.) The poet-narrator's naïve optimism in the advent of the new period is subverted as impossible from the beginning, widening ever more the deplorable gap between desired potentiality and frustrating actuality. Because "Parnell's memory has no place" for Nationalist canvassers who are dominated by material interest and feel happy to accept Conservative support to secure the defeat of Labour (Parrinder 63).

When Hynes finishes his recitation, there strikes a sudden silence in which everyone tries to accommodate their emotional turbulence and guilty consciences. An onomatopoetic of a bottle being uncorked breaks the inconvenient silence. Joyce's craftsmanship is superb here when he gives an ironic twist to the room's political discourse through the sound of an inanimate object. (When Henchy's spit nearly extinguished the smouldering fire, we recall, the coal fire "uttered a hissing protest" [*D* 121].) The cork's sound deconstructs the shallow and venal conversations fixed upon the past they no longer believe in as well as the historicization of Parnell through literature and its recitation. The cork sounds "apologetic" (*D* 128) because the audience in the committee room is afflicted with self-reproach for being disloyal, dishonest and treacherous. In this sense, such awkwardness as their sudden burst of clapping and drinking in silence, O'Connor's taking out of cigarette papers and Hynes's flushing, are desperate gestures to hide their embarrassment. In the telling silence, Parnell, whom they had secretly wanted to repress, is felt all the more poignantly for his absence. And he painfully reminds each of their own dubiousness, pettiness, meanness and cowardice. But they betray Parnell again, as Ingersoll points out, because they "are unwilling or unable to connect themselves with Parnell's earlier betrayers" (136). If they cannot see who they really are, for whom they are working and why, their futile nostalgia as well as desperate hope for rejuvenation of their kingdom can hardly be achieved. All they can do for now is simply expect that "it'll be all right when King Eddie comes" (*D* 121), as the poet-narrator satirically predicts. "Ivy Day" starts with Old Jack making a fire by raking cinders together and ends with the expectation of the same re-vitalizing flames evoked in Hynes's

poem. The whole narrative, however, is a testimony to "the absence of any principles, Phoenix flames or passion for anything beyond money or drink" (Cairns and Richards 83). That is why I read "Ivy Day" not as a political discourse but as a "metaphor for Irish politics."

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Abstract

Politics as Metaphor: "Ivy Day in the Committee Room"

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Among stories in *Dubliners*, "Ivy Day in the Committee Room" is unique in that it exclusively deals with political issues of the day. It portrays a series of debates among a group of canvassers who work for Tierney, a Nationalist candidate for a municipal bi-election. Can we label this, then, as a full-pledged "political" short story? The answer is unclear because both the issues the canvassers talk about and the perspectives through which they carry their arguments turn out to be marginal and highly disorienting. They seem to talk about different kinds of political issues of the time such as Parnell the national hero, the projected visit of King Edward VII to Ireland, and the bi-election in the Royal Exchange Ward. Their arguments, however, betray their shallowness because they cannot comprehend the essence of British colonialism that makes concrete the subjection of the Irish people. Going further, they have no balanced perspective on Parnellism, either. Displacing the political significance of Parnellism with cheap praise and sentimental mourning, they simply feel embarrassed for no longer believing in the national glory Parnell might have brought Ireland. Poor and marginal beings in society, what they do best is merely talk about the possibility of betrayal or spying among the canvassers. Unconsciously they reenact Ireland's sad history. They cannot even recognize that they are deconstructing themselves. The irony is all the more pungent because it all happens in the historical Parliamentary committee room where Parnell was betrayed by the Liberal Party, and on the same day he was killed. That is why I read this short story not strictly as political but as a political metaphor for the Irish situation.