BRIEF NOTE

Tarsicius: A Hagiographical Allusion in Joyce's "Araby"

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In his story "Araby" Joyce alludes to a Roman martyr both to designate a comic touch by the narrator and to deepen the themes of disillusionment and deflated romanticism. This purposefully melodramatic allusion also provides another example of how closely religion is woven into Joyce's life and fiction.

When the narrator recalls that his youthful love for Mangan's sister dominated his consciousness, he remembers specifically that

> Her image accompanied me even in places the most hostile to romance. On Saturday evenings when my aunt went marketing I had to go to carry some of the parcels. We walked through the flaring streets, jostled by drunken men and bargaining women, amid the curses of labourers, the shrill litanies of shop-boys . . . the nasal chanting of street-singers who sang . . . a ballad about the troubles in our native land. These noises converged in a single sensation of life for me: I imagined that I bore my chalice safely through a throng of foes. Her name sprang to my lips in strange prayers and praises which I myself did not understand (Joyce 28–29).

The religious language in this passage—image, litanies, chalice, prayers—and in the rest of the story has commonly been read as Joyce's vehicle for relating the disenchantment of puppy love to the disillusionment with religion;[1] in this passage the boy's "chal-

[1] See especially Stone, who offers the most detailed study of the story's themes (self-deluding blindness, self-inflating romanticism, decayed religion, mammonism, the coming into man's inheritance, the gulf between appearance and reality) and techniques (partic-

ice" carried "through a throng of foes" is his secret love for the girl, herself depicted as a Madonna-Magdalene figure. Yet none of the many commentators on Joyce's symbolism and allusions has recognized the subtle but encompassing motif of the passage, that of Tarsicius, a minor saint known as the "Boy Martyr of the Holy Eucharist." The standard Roman Catholic hagiography since the eighteenth century, Butler's *Lives of the Saints*, describes him as a third-century acolyte who, while carrying the Blessed Sacrament in his clothes to Christian prisoners, was discovered and killed by heathens with sticks and stones (4: 335).

That the attentive, widely read and youthfully devout Joyce knew of the Tarsicius story is virtually certain, for an immensely popular novel had made it highly visible. The Irish Cardinal Wiseman's *Fabiola*; *or*, *the Church of the Catacombs* (1854) is an embellished revision of Butler on Tarsicius. In it Wiseman emphasizes the youth and sense of religious mission of the orphan-saint who, when bearing the sacrament under his tunic to catechumens, moves through a hostile crowd, is discovered as a Christian and stoned to death (263–67). Published as a title in the Popular Catholic Library series, *Fabiola* was "an instant and even spectacular success" (Fothergill 220). Not only did the novel have an avid Irish readership, but it was also translated into Italian, French, Spanish, Portuguese, Hungarian, German, Danish, Polish, Slovonian, and Dutch (Fothergill 200), thus becoming, and with it the Tarsicius story, a widely shared piece of British and European Catholic folklore.

That the Tarsicius story—via Wiseman's novel in print or oral retelling—would have entered Irish schools and homes is beyond question. An Irish cardinal's tale of persecution and martyrdom in ancient Rome had definite metaphorical value for Catholics living under the rule of Protestant England, the time of "the troubles in our native land." Indeed, "Irish faithful" and "English heathens" were common phrases among Catholic Dubliners.

Moreover, hagiography was a staple subject in Catholic schools. Butler's *Lives* was a requisite on their library shelves and was used as a source from which teachers could draw edifying examples and students the outlines for the writing of their own saints' sto-

ularly the literary, political, religious, and biographical allusions). See also Ghiselin 199, who traces the Christian imagery to show how "hope, faith, and love itself are destroyed" for the boy.

ries. As a boy Joyce's narrator was a student at the Christian Brothers' School. Indeed, Joyce himself had studied at the Christian Brothers' School in Dublin in 1893, but his earlier training at Clongowes Wood College, a Jesuit school, offers stronger probability of his formal knowledge of hagiography as a way to inculcate saintlike behavior. Ellmann notes that that school "roused its pupils to thoughts of grand action and great suffering" (29) and that there Joyce was impressed by the portraits of the saints that hung along the corridor (30). Still more compelling is the fact that at Clongowes Wood Joyce was taught by the traditional guidelines of the *Ratio Studiorum* (Sullivan 9), a book that since 1599 had been the official pedagogical manual in Jesuit schools. Among its other prescriptions, the *Ratio* directs the Jesuit teacher to assign the writing of narratives on the lives of the saints (222), to pray to the saints for intercession with God (243), and to celebrate saints' days "with great pomp of orations, poetry, verses affixed to the walls, mottoes, and insignia."[2] Furthermore, in St. Ignatius Loyola's *Spiritual Exercises*, practiced in Jesuit schools to train the character and will, students were exhorted to venerate the relics of the saints (Fitzpatrick 269). In sum, hagiography was a strong part of Joyce's schooling, a schooling itself rendered stronger by fact of his youthful impressionability.

The allusion to Tarsicius is further plausible when set next to a kindred but more familiar allusion to a martyr in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. There, Stephen Dedalus (who also had been a student at Clongowes Wood College) identifies himself with the first Christian martyr, St. Stephen, when "crossing Stephen's, that is, my green" (249). The allusion to St. Stephen who, because of false charges of blasphemy, was stoned to death, serves much the same purpose as does the subtler allusion to Tarsicius—that of a Catholic boy identifying himself with a hero on a religious-like mission who was stoned to death by a hostile crowd.[3] Butler's *Lives* makes the connection between Stephen and Tarsicius. In citing his source for Tarsicius as a fourth-century poem of Pope St. Damascus, Butler notes that "one Tarsicius, like another St. Stephen stoned by the Jews, suffered a violent death

[2] Fitzpatrick 252. N.B. also the custom, begun by the Tractarians, of using saints' days to date letters, essays, etc.

[3] The story of St. Stephen is first recorded in The Acts of the Apostles 6:8–8:3.

rather than give up the divine body to raging dogs" (4:335). The recurrence of the martyr imagery in Joyce's story and novel is the more striking because, though he published them two years apart in 1914 and 1916, Joyce had been working on both concurrently as early as 1905.

Like the orphan Tarsicius, the boy of Joyce's story is orphanlike, living not with his parents but with an aunt and uncle. Like Tarsicius, he bears his "chalice," a sacred trust on a special mission. Like Tarsicius, he must pass "through a throng of foes." Like Tarsicius, his ultimate destination is a sacred place—for Wiseman's saint, the catacombs, for Joyce's boy, the bazaar of Araby that he likens to "a church after a service."[4] And like the Tarsicius story, Joyce's story ends in a sacrifice, not of a life but of an illusion.

Given the Irish Catholic schooling of both the character and his author, the allusion to Tarsicius is appropriate. To the Catholic boy, the boy-martyr's life was a perfect metaphor of his own situation, a secret harboring of a religiously intense love in a world "most hostile to romance." To the narrator (as well as to Joyce and many Catholic readers), his own incongruously heroic and melodramatic allusion, recalled after years, could only elicit a smile at the remembrance of boyhood innocence.

The Tarsicius allusion is thus another figure, in what Stone calls the palimpsest of Joyce's writings, one "rich with shimmering depths, strange blendings, and tantalizing hints" (409). And recognition of the allusion evokes a deeper appreciation of the layered texture of "Araby" with its origins deep in Joyce's boyhood.

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[4] *Dubliners* 32. The Araby-Church association is furthered in this passage by Joyce's allusion to the moneychangers in the temple, a biblical allusion to profanation derived from Matthew 21:12 ff., Mark 11:15 ff., and John 2:13 ff.

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