THE MOTIVATION FOR ANGUISH
IN JOYCE'S "ARABY"

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In his discussion of James Joyce's "Araby," Epifanio San Juan, Jr. contributes to Joyce studies a predominantly valid discussion of plot. We agree with San Juan in his assumption of the "relevance and qualified validity of all the existing interpretations of 'Araby.'" Our only disagreement with this critic's view of the story—our point of departure from that of other critics who have discussed the story—is in the evidently universal assumption that the one crucial conversation between the narrator and Mangan's sister actually took place. "The boy promised Mangan's sister to bring her a gift," San Juan believes, later referring to the central passage as a "factual transcript of the first verbal exchange."

In our examination of "Araby" and of a pattern which relates it to certain other stories in Dubliners and A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, we find little reason to believe that Joyce meant to represent the physical presence of Mangan's sister in that back room where the priest had died. Indeed, there is much evidence that her absence from that event is a fact which is vital to the experience of the story. Put simply, Mangan's sister was not there; the boy imagined her, her words and her actions.

When Joyceans mention "Araby" at all, they often refer to it with a hint of an apology for the supposedly exaggerated anguish of the narrator. Joyce places this anguish, evidently with some care, at the end of the

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2. San Juan, p. 54, footnote. Our emphasis.
4. pp. 55, 56.
5. Hereafter referred to as Portrait.
6. "Driven and derided, 'anguish and anger'—these reactions seem far too strong. Indeed they seem pretentious when compared to the trivial disillusionment which caused them." Stone, p. 349.
story. (It would have been easy enough for the author to have kept us with his protagonist a little longer, leaving him on the train home, or even arriving there, so as to emphasize the anguish less.) This placement combines with the strong terms used in describing the boy’s emotions at the story’s end (“driven,” “derided,” “my eyes burned,” “anguish and anger”) to give us a clear sense of this event’s great significance, even apart from its epiphanic qualities.

Nevertheless, apparently many readers are struck with the notion that there is inadequate motivation for such intense anguish. It is easy enough to refer to the narrator’s promise to Mangan’s sister and of the frustrations he experiences in the ensuing quest as Joyce’s explanation. Such motivation, however, must appear weak in contrast with the reaction they supposedly cause, the boy’s youth and romanticism notwithstanding. If readers are not to chastise Joyce for offending their sense of psychological consistency, they will find themselves thinking, perhaps secretly, of the narrator’s naïveté and childish idealism in order to explain away the disparity. This reading, of course, comes uncomfortably near to begging the question. Rather than allowing us to reread the story with satisfaction, it merely tells us we do not know enough, or remember enough from our own childhood, about the subject of the story.

When read carefully, however, “Araby” tells us exactly why the boy is so anguish-stricken; there is no need then to feel nearly so inadequate in our preparation for reading the story. We may begin by noting that the narrator and Mangan are peers, and that these boys are appreciably younger than Mangan’s sister. This last is evident in the boys’ hiding from her when she calls her brother in to tea, finally walking up to Mangan’s steps “resignedly”; were they nearer to her in age they would openly challenge her authority, never bothering to hide, finally acquiescing, if at all, most probably with audible protests. It is also significant that they behave toward her under such circumstances much as they do toward the narrator’s uncle, clearly an authority figure; if the girl exercises authority over the boys, she must be significantly older than they.

To pursue the disparity in ages between the narrator and Mangan’s sister, we may also note that he watches covertly from the front parlor for her to leave her house each morning. Snatching up his books, he follows her in silence, walking up alongside the girl—still mute—at the last possible moment. He tells us he had virtually never spoken to her. Obviously he is fascinated by this older girl, awed to the point of speechlessness. The experience is a common one; nearly every post-pubescent boy has borne the image of some older girl through an everyday world which, in its harsh clashing of real things, seems very much like a “throng of foes.” And nearly every older girl, thus idolized, reacts (when she recognizes the situation) not as the boy’s peer but as his elder. Usually she will either humor the boy, enjoying the situation as a game, or she will ignore him for one reason or
another (lack of interest, often, or as part of an attempt to discourage the attention out of concern for the boy’s feelings).

It must strike us, therefore, as odd that Mangan’s sister acts as she does while talking with the narrator. The nervous turning of her bracelet as she speaks betrays a lack of self-confidence in the younger narrator’s presence which a real sixteen-to-eighteen-year-old girl is unlikely to have. And what she says, in effect, is hardly more in keeping with the older-girl/younger-boy relationship: her coy (but nervous) hints that he will be doing something which fascinates her, an implication of her interest in the narrator himself, are the components of a peer male-female relationship, not the relationship which exists in this story.

This “conversation” in the room where the priest died is indeed a curious one. We take the foregoing as what may be called soft evidence of the physical absence of Mangan’s sister on that important occasion, “soft” because based upon what we take to be no more than generally recognized psychological facts about young people in general. But harder evidence for her absence is plentiful.

A review of this harder evidence must begin with Joyce’s clear rhetorical framing of the curious conversation in the form of an anecdote: he begins the passage with “One evening . . .” and ends it (about thirty lines later) with “. . . that evening!” Except for the opening paragraph of the passage (a paragraph with its own crucial function as we shall see), the two participants speak throughout the passage. Clearly we are meant to see anecdotal integrity in this carefully framed section of the story. And yet halfway through the passage the narrator seems to be no longer in the back room but is viewing Mangan’s sister at “the railing,” at her own front door. We submit that this is physically impossible. If the narrator must lie on the floor “in the front parlour” in order to watch her door, then he cannot be watching her at her front door from the “back drawing room.” This portion of the passage, at least, must be seen as occurring psychologically, not physically.  

But what of the remainder of this supposed rendezvous? Did Joyce mean for us to believe that this meeting, with its extremely awkward social implications for the participants, actually took place? Given the fact that the boy says he had spoken only “a few casual words” to her, did Joyce expect the reader to accept as literal fact this curious event with no hint whatsoever of arrangements made beforehand for the meeting, coincidental circumstances placing them together in such an odd room, or even a brief description of the girl’s entering (or leaving) the room? Mangan’s sister might just as well have materialized out of thin air for all Joyce tells us.

7. Of course one may read a chronological break between the paragraph which begins “One evening” and the subsequent paragraph which opens with, “At last she spoke to me.” To do so, however, violates the integrity of the passage.
In point of fact, we believe that to be very close to what Joyce does tell us. Joyceans have not, heretofore, read the story carefully enough. Had they done so, they would have noted the carefully described retreat from the objective world on the narrator’s part. This is the beginning paragraph of the passage, preparing the narrator (and the reader) for the subjectivity of the experience to follow. There was “no sound” in the house. He hears the soft patter of rain falling on the garden beds—a sound and no sound, a white noise, mesmerizing, shutting out other, possibly distracting, noises. There is a faint light of uncertain origin, yet it is “dark.” The narrator comments on this diminution of the sensory functions, “I was thankful that I could see so little. All my senses seemed to desire to veil themselves . . . feeling that I was about to slip from them. . . .” We must not be satisfied to think these the mere exaggerations of a hypersensitive boy. Taken literally, they help immensely in making better sense of the story. He has situated himself sensuously and prepared himself emotionally for an encounter within the imagination.

In the previous paragraph he had said, “Her name sprang to my lips at moments in strange prayers and phrases which I myself did not understand.” This is just such an instance, though something new has been added, doubtless due in part to his being no longer amid the cacophony of the “flaring streets.” He has retreated entirely from the world of “curses,” “shrill litanies of shop-boys” and “nasal chanting.” His senses no longer assailed by stimuli, he can focus his attention wholly upon the image and imagined voice of Mangan’s sister which have been building within him. He presses the palms of his hands together in the attitude of prayer and murmurs “O love! O love!” repeatedly.

To ignore the visionary nature of this experience is to ignore what Joyce tells us on more than one occasion about the psychological tendencies of this boy. On the night of the bazaar, he stares long at the empty front of the girl’s house, “seeing nothing but the brown-clad figure cast by my imagination.” And in the days following the supposed conversation, “her image came between me and the page I strove to read.” These are but after-shocks of that first psychological earthquake, differing only in their lesser degree of intensity and realism. The girl’s physical presence is not required in order for the boy to see her.

The youthful narrator is not alone among Joyce’s characters in his visualizing of absent persons. While his crucial vision, with its high degree of realism, is not reproduced with precision elsewhere in Joyce’s early fiction, it does fall within a clear pattern of events in Dubliners, as well as in Stephen Hero and Portrait.8 In “The Sisters,” the boy-narrator is in the dark of his bedroom, when he reports,

8. The novels date from 1904-5, the same year as the writing of “The Sisters,” “A Painful Case,” and “Araby.”
I imagined that I saw again the heavy grey face of the paralytic. I drew the blankets over my head and tried to think of Christmas. But the grey face still followed me. I murmured; and I understood that it desired to confess something. I felt my soul receding into some pleasant and vicious region; and there again I found it waiting for me. It began to confess to me in a murmuring voice and I wondered why it smiled continually and why the lips were so moist with spittle (Dubliners, p. 11).

In this instance, the envisioned, the priest who was guilty of simony, is dead, a fact which renders his presence impossible. It may well have been this incident which caused Joyce to place the “Araby” conversation in the room where he priest had died. The two events are of a kind, and the brief allusion serves to point up the similarity.

This attempt to avoid the dead by thinking of Christmas brings us inevitably from the first to the last story of Dubliners, to Gabriel Conroy’s vision of another dead man. Here again, in another setting of near-darkness and silence, the absent one becomes—at least temporarily—more unavoidably real than the physical surroundings as Gabriel “imagined he saw the form of a young man standing under a dripping tree. Other forms were near. His soul had approached that region where dwell the vast hosts of the dead. . . . The solid world itself, which these dead had one time reared and lived in, was dissolving and dwindling. A few light taps upon the pane made him turn to the window. It had begun to snow again” (Dubliners, p. 223).

Surely we are not meant to believe it is the snow which is tapping on the pane. Snow, even Irish snow, rarely, if ever, taps. This is Michael Furey, now dead, who had thrown gravel against Gretta’s window to call her down to him. The imagined figure in this case neither speaks nor murmurs, but it does repeat, in a pallid way, one detail of Gretta’s account of its former self, a detail which adds audibility to visibility.

In “A Painful Case,” the imagined presence is perceived tangibly and perhaps audibly: “As the light failed and his memory began to wander he thought her hand touched his” (Dubliners, p. 116). “She seemed to be near him in the darkness. At moments he seemed to feel her voice touch his ear, her hand touch his” (p. 117). But minutes later, “He could not feel her near him in the darkness nor her voice touch his ear. He waited for some minutes listening. He could hear nothing; the night was perfectly silent. He listened again: perfectly silent. He felt that he was alone.” (Ibid.) Emily Sinico is dead. James Duffy, having just read a newspaper account of her death, has imagined her presence under much the same circumstances as other Dubliners protagonists envision absent people: the pattern of relative darkness and silence remains consistent when the vision is successful. Indeed, in the third instance of “A Painful Case,” when the vision leaves
Duffy, the silence was mightily disturbed only seconds earlier by a train with a "laborious drone" and a "pounding." Furthermore, the first instance in "A Painful Case" follows similar visions in "The Sisters," "Araby" and "The Dead" in occurring in a bedroom.  

The four visions of *Dubliners* clearly are of a kind. It may even be seen as evidence of their unity that each of the four contains a factor not present in the other three: while in every other instance the imaginer has known and, in one sense or another, loved the imagined, in "The Dead" we are forced to think of Greta's identity as fused with Gabriel's if we wish the pattern to remain consistent. In "A Painful Case," tangibility has taken the place of visibility in the pattern. In "The Sisters," the imaginer evidently is frightened by his "dream"; this obtains in none of the other visions. And in "Araby" the imagined is not dead, as are the priest, Emily Sinico and Michael Furey. What is more—and this fact possibly has misled readers of "Araby" more than any other—Joyce records dialogue from the narrator's vision. The boy in "The Sisters" had heard a "murmuring voice," James Duffy had "felt" a voice, and Gabriel Conroy had heard taps on the window pane; but only in "Araby" are we given the exact words (or, more correctly, some of the exact words) of an imagined dialogue.

Two possible reasons for this last curiosity are not far to seek. First, the plot demands that the boy be led into promising the envisioned girl a gift from the bazaar. This would be difficult without at least some dialogue. But secondly—and this is more important in that it tells us exactly what we wish to know about the story—it goes a long way toward explaining the narrator's intense anguish later. Linked closely in a causal relationship with the unique dialogue is the narrator's evident acceptance of the vision as reality. He goes to Araby in order to make good the promise he thinks—and almost entirely believes—he has made. Direct quotation so nearly reifies the memory of Mangan's sister in the crucial passage that readers have thought her really there. The technique necessary for the character (the boy) has worked all too well on the reader.

Joyce's interest in the vision as literary device, now further developed, is sustained in *Portrait*. Here the pattern is associated with Stephen's obsession with his painfully ambivalent feelings for E. C. E. C.'s "virgin" image shames him in his lustful fantasies as he composes the "Villanelle of the Temptress" in his bedroom. He lies in his bed in the "dull white light" of a silent dawn, his senses "veiled," and recalls that she approached him once and begged him to sing one of his "curious songs" (*Portrait*, p. 219). Her image dances teasingly before him until he distorts her "fair image," confounding her with the whorish girls who have beckoned to him in his

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9. The situations of "The Sisters" and "A Painful Case" are obvious. In "Araby," the priest had died in bed, making it the priest's bedroom, though not the boy's. "The Dead" similarly uses a variation upon the bedroom pattern: the hotel room is a bedroom for a price; not Gabriel's but anyone's bedroom.
Dublin walks. Anger, and jealousy of the priest, whom he sees as his rival, consume him, yet he knows that “however he might revile and mock her image, his anger was also a form of homage” (p. 220). Like the narrator of “Araby,” Stephen lives on images of the girl, transforming them into events which can function as reality. The younger boy’s character and psychological tendencies are consistent with those of Stephen, and in fact prefigure them, as critics have noted.  

But the “Araby” vision is much more concrete than any of the other four visions. He carries her image (though weakened) with him as far as Araby on his assumed quest. Once there, however, the immediate object of his quest within easy reach, the ultimate object—her image—fades away. Or, to be more precise, the vision of Mangan’s sister fades into the physical presence of the young woman at the bazaar. The idealized image and its setting fade into the harsh reality of the concrete and necessary world: the soothing darkness of the upper room to the cavernous darkness of the upper part of the hall; the soft “silence” of fine rain to the sharp chink of coins on a salver; the gentle, somewhat coy dialogue of the vision to the flat contradictions and open flirting of the salesgirl and her English acquaintances; the shy (bracelet-twisting) admiration of the envisioned girl to the unencouraging, dutiful tones of the girl of flesh. And then the words which haul him back by the scruff of the neck from what little remains of his reveries: “O, I never said such a thing!” She did, perhaps, but her counterpart did not. And that fact no doubt suddenly bursts into clarity (and claritas) for the boy at that point, most occasions having informed against him.  

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, concrete though it was, proved too fragile for a world of real older girls, money, drunken and indifferent uncles, and the necessary crassness of a day-to-day existence. He had conjured up the spirit of love with an incantation (“O love! O love!”) only to have that spirit dispelled by the clumsiness of a physical world. The light is out now, as the voice has called, the light from within, and the upper part of the universe is in darkness. Nothing whatever remains for him to do; this is paralysis indeed. Anguish, however intense, is a perfectly appropriate reaction.

10. As examples, see Brandabur, p. 37, and Stone, p. 345.

11. The girl is the familiar Joycean woman, the virgin/temptress, to Stephen “a figure of the womanhood of his country, a batlike soul waking to the consciousness of itself in darkness and secrecy and loneliness...” (Portrait, p. 221). Joyce’s male protagonists usually idealize the female, but almost invariably display an attraction/repulsion response to her.