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Spleen, Paralysis and the implications of Modernity: a comparative study on Baudelaire and Joyce

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Introduction

If Modernity, as Max Weber pointed out, represented the fulfilment of a process of “rationalization and disenchantment of the world”¹ which started during the Enlightenment, the unprecedented combination of transformations which marked the modern age was originated by a faith in reason which promised “an unending era of material progress and prosperity”² to all individuals. However, the rise of industrialisation, capitalism and urbanization, altered the basis of human experience and gave way to feelings of uncertainty and alienation which not only started to question the nature and value of progress itself, but also to overshadow the myth of optimistic advancement associated with it.

During the nineteenth century the work of art becomes the privileged viewpoint on the effects that the collision of a cluster of social, economic and political changes has on the individual, showing that art has the fundamental role of unveiling the implications of a reality which increasingly seems to create a fracture between individual aspirations and actual existence. Moreover, modern artists interpret a reality whose characteristics are radically different from those of the past and perceive a new era where individual expectations are paradoxically fuelled and frustrated.

¹ Nicholas Gane, *Max Weber and Postmodern Theory: Rationalization versus Re-enchantment*, New York, Palgrave, 2002, p.45.

² Stuart Hall et al., *Modernity: An Introduction to Modern Societies*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1996, p.4.

The strong connection between the works of Charles Baudelaire and James Joyce lies in their ability to capture and portray the responses of human consciousness when faced with a world which imposes a new body of experience and a new engagement to analyse the consequences which arise from the exposure to a radical redefinition of life. What both authors aim at portraying are the ways in which the models of modernity act so powerfully on the individual as to shatter all possibilities of fulfilling personal desires in reality, and in doing so, prompt the individual to restrict his or her ideal fulfilment outside reality. There is indeed not only a strong similarity between the ways in which Baudelaire and Joyce represent the disappointment connected with modern reality, but also a correspondence between their description of the process which originates from it, the need which triggers the individual to escape his situation, sometimes attempting to provide himself with a personal utopia. At times, the meaning of one work is enhanced by the complementary presence and meaning of the other. For instance, Baudelaire's illuminating description of the modern era as a "suffering age"³ acquires a stronger and more vivid significance when put in relation with Joyce's acute observation of the "minute vermin-like life"⁴ of modern individuals, so that while Baudelaire traces the obscure contours of the experience of modernity, in *Dubliners* Joyce engages in portraying its result, a parasitic attitude towards life.

But why the new experience of modernity seems to be so hostile to human happiness? The manifold experience of modernity is

³ Charles Baudelaire, *Selected writings on art and artists*, trans. P.E.Charvet, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1972, p.105.

⁴ James Joyce, *Dubliners*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2008, p.54.

marked by the accumulation of different factors; indeed, if on the one hand the hegemony of rationality represented the basis for social advancement and economic betterment, on the other hand modern times were also defined by an “increasing difference between the 'space of experience' and the 'horizon of expectation'”⁵. For Koselleck, this gap represents a direct consequence of the myth of progress, since “the kind of experience of progress [...] lends to our horizon of expectation [...] a historically new quality, constantly subject to being overlaid with utopian conceptions”⁶. Progress is thus recognised as an ambiguous double-edged phenomenon, both in its direct and indirect consequences. On a first level indeed, the faith in progress informs mechanisms such as capitalism, industrialisation and urbanisation, which restrict and shape the experience of reality by imposing a whole new body of knowledge; at the same time, it also becomes potentially dangerous in its indirect arousal of expectations which individuals would naturally feel limited in their materialization. The risk, as Max Weber remarks, is that individuals may become “'tired of life' but not 'satiated with life'”⁷, continuously triggered by the desire of new experience, but in the end only able to “catch the most minute part of what the life of the spirit brings forth”⁸.

⁵ Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: on the semantics of historical time*, trans. Keith Tribe, New York, Columbia University Press, 1979, p.276.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 279.

⁷ Nicholas Gane, *Max Weber, op. cit.*, p.48, n.1.

⁸ *Ibid.*

Chapter One

The City

“Horrible Life! Horrible city!”¹
(C. Baudelaire)

“The city of failure, of rancour
and of unhappiness”²
(J. Joyce)

The urban experience has always represented “one of the magnetic poles of human existence”³. The centrality which Charles Baudelaire and James Joyce attribute to the city is both designed to highlight the erosion of the myth of progress and to define the urban space as the locus of the creation and permanence of the frailties which become characteristic of the modern self. For these authors the city represents the catalyst of modern discontents.

Above all, in the age of modernity, the city represents the place in which spatial discovery becomes a way of knowledge and disappointment the source of artistic production. It is indeed by employing the dark contours of a tragedy that both writers picture the contradictions which lie hidden below the surface of big metropolises, the traumas of modern living and the disillusion which accompany them. As in a modern tragedy, the emotions weighting on characters

¹ Charles Baudelaire, *Paris Spleen*, trans. Martin Sorrell, London, One World Classics, 2001, p.18.

² James Joyce, cited in Edward Brandabour, *A Scrupulous Meanness: A Study of Joyce's Early Work*, Champaign, University of Illinois Press, 1971, p.24.

³ Edward Timms et al., *Unreal city: Urban experience in modern European Literature and art*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1985, p.1.

always seem to lead to a crisis, to a moment where they are defeated because of their inability to fit the society which surrounds them. For both authors the city represents the privileged viewpoint of their times, the place where the anxieties brought by the models of modernity are condensed and reworked as the source of literary creation; it is in two cities, or better, in the crowded streets of two capitals that Baudelaire and Joyce engage in portraying the outcomes of progress and the failures of civilization on the modern self.

Notwithstanding the undeniable differences which can be delineated between Baudelaire's nineteenth-century Paris and Joyce's early twentieth-century Dublin, their focus is strikingly similar under many respects, and this because they both share the idea of the city as a space saturated by a vision of limitation where personal frustrations and desires are shaped into imaginative dimensions. The ambiguous presence of the city is perceivable everywhere in Baudelaire's *Flowers of Evil*, but it is in the "Parisian Scenes" section that the poet inaugurates a new attitude which positions the city not only as an object of scrutiny and investigation, but also as the fundamental subject of a work of art which is specifically modern. In Baudelaire, the phenomenon of urbanization acquires a new and distinctive quality, becoming the symbol of contemporary living and offering the spectrum of imagines through which reality has to be interpreted and recreated. From the moment in which the poet recognises and elects the city as symbolic of modern times, a focus is placed on the elements which tend to question the idea of urbanization as the apogee of civilization, but rather insist on its discomforts and on its

crepuscular nature.

Baudelaire's vision of Paris is a vision at twilight. In the metropolis the poet witnesses “the human wreckage”⁴, the decline of civilization beneath which “we read in transparency the return to the wild”.⁵ For Gérard Picon indeed, the intrinsic quality of Baudelaire's urban poetry lies in the revelation of “the vicious circle of an illusionary progress that is only the mask of regression”⁶, a negation of the promise connecting economic advancement and personal betterment. In the city, the threads of civil society are lost and diluted in mechanisms which maximize the importance of economic gain, minimizing the importance of personal relationships; so deprived of their function, relations are recognised only as empty, meaningless structures which are no longer able to offer comfort but, on the contrary, give way to alienation and despair, social maladies which both *The Flowers of Evil* and *Dubliners* explore. The space of the city thus becomes the privileged viewpoint of the failures of modernity, condensing, in Flaubert's words “all the difficulties of existence”.⁷

Baudelaire's interest in the space of the city is indeed essentially marked by the possibilities which urbanization offers in order to unveil the dark side of progress and explore the consequences of capitalism's myths on society. The poet's awareness of the deterioration of society is marked by the realization that the breakdown of civilization in the city of modernity is responsible for a

⁴ A.S., Kline, *Yoyage to Modernity: The Poetry of Charles Baudelaire* (2005) in <http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/French/VoyageToModernitypage.htm>

⁵ Gérard Conio, *Baudelaire: Etude de Les Fleurs du Mal*, Allier, Marabout, 1992, p.398. [Translation mine]

⁶ *Ibid.* [Translation mine]

⁷ Gustave Flaubert, cited in Guy Sagnes, *L'Ennui dans la littérature Française; de Flaubert a Laforgue (1848-1884)*, Paris, Librairie Armand Colin, 1969, p.194.

loss of hope and sense of immobility which emerge from individuals' inability to escape the sterile prerogatives of their age. It is precisely in this feeling that the tragic side of modern living is discovered. The city, for Baudelaire, is always the element saturating the scene and encapsulating a nuanced melancholy of helplessness and despair, the locus which encloses a spirit that "is cracked"⁸. Paris is the place where "Hope [...] conquered, moans, and the tyrant Anguish gloats"⁹, where the prostration of the soul finds a parallel only in "a black day sadder than [...] nights"¹⁰.

The poet's observations in 'The Swan' for example, portray different aspects characteristic of the dejection given by the transformations of modern living, and in particular by the alterations which have affected the city of Paris. In this poem indeed, the appearance of the fast-changing capital represents the starting point for Baudelaire's analysis of his condition and of all the inhabitants of the metropolis. Paris' past is processed in the poet's mind as a memory, or better, as a set of memories which underline his frustration at the inevitable diversity of the present city:

The old Paris is gone (the form a city takes
More quicky shifts, alas, than does the mortal heart);

I picture in my head the busy camp of huts,
And heaps of rough-hewn columns, capitals and shafts,
The grass, the giant blocks made green by puddle-stain,
Reflected in the gaze, the jumbled bric-à-brac.¹¹

⁸ Charles Baudelaire, *The Flowers of Evil*, trans. James McGowan, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2008, p.145.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 151.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 149.

¹¹ Charles Baudelaire, *The Flowers of Evil*, *op. cit.*, p.175, n.8.

However, it is only in Baudelaire's mind, that the old city's vestiges are saved from the tides of history, as a collective repository which aims at preserving what progress, in its endless pursuit of new goals, tends to leave behind:

Paris may change, but in my melancholy mood
Nothing has budged! New palaces, blocks, scaffoldings,
Old neighbourhoods, are allegorical for me,
And my dear memories are heavier than stone.¹²

If on the one hand Paris' changes reflect the changes brought by the passing of time, on the other hand Baudelaire's melancholy is recognised as the immutable element by means of which he is able to fill the void left by past images and the tool to create the allegoric framework to portray his idea of urban modernity. However, the poet's efforts to keep and transform memories weighting heavily on his consciousness, are further complicated by the isolation which his task implies. Indeed, the two characters which feature in Baudelaire's poem are a swan wandering helplessly through the streets of Paris and Andromache, a symbolic figure of entrapment and captivity. Both are meant to represent who, as the poet himself, lives urban modernity as an exile, displaced and trapped by memories of a past which cannot be recovered: "I think [...] of all those who have lost something they may not find / Ever, ever again! [...] I think of sailors left forgotten on an isle, / Of captives, the defeated"¹³.

In *Dubliners*, the "twilit, half-lit"¹⁴ atmosphere of the city,

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*, p.177.

¹⁴ Seamus Deane, "Dead ends: Joyce finest moments" in *Semicolonial Joyce*, ed. Derek Attridge

seems similarly characterised by the presence of individuals whose struggle is based on the possibility to break free from spectres of the past. Joyce's Dublin is a space where death corrodes the lives of the living and the modern metropolis becomes a necropolis, a city governed by ghosts whose effective agency on characters' lives influences their actions and existence. This is the case of Eveline's mother in the fourth of *Dubliners'* stories and of Michael Furey, Gretta's past lover, in "The Dead". One of the reasons behind Eveline's final inability to escape with Frank is connected with her inability to escape a memory, the last promise she made to her dying mother when she accepted to replace her becoming the angel of the hearth for her father and her brother. However, Eveline's domestic routine shares more affinities with a nightmare rather than with an idyllic representation of familiar love. Despite her frustration, the protagonist recognises that her dilemma only allows her to choose between staying or leaving, betraying her promise. Her connection with the responsibilities deriving from that promise results in her utter impossibility to leave (and live) her present, a moment which will forever mark her existence. Paralysis is thus the element which transforms the city into a prison of unhappiness where everyday life exists only in relation to the past and bears the permanent mark of remembrance. In "Eveline", the protagonist's life is literally on the verge of being submerged by the "dust"¹⁵ of memories, by the debris of an urban landscape which is changing but remains alien to the world of the living. The city stands in front of Eveline as a world of

and Marjorie Howes, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000, p.21.

¹⁵ James Joyce, *Dubliners*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2008, p.25.

shadows, which she looks with the melancholic view of an exile who is bound to look back to a past in which everyone “seemed to have been rather happy”.¹⁶ As an exile, she experiences the ambiguous feeling of living in a liminal space where memories deconstructs the present and activate constant references to the past, the only means to fill the emotional void of Dublin's present; in the portrayal of Irish society “home [...] signifies not a haven in a heartless world but the lifeless monotony of domestic routines”¹⁷ an internal space reflecting the paralysis of the exterior world and reproducing the same stagnation.

For Eveline, domestic immobility corresponds to a condemnation. Dublin is indeed not only a city which shows the failure of relationships and the disturbing disfunctions of modern society, but also the collapse of the concept of home, a notion which is echoed in Joyce's rhetorical question about its nature: “How could I like the idea of home?”.¹⁸ Joyce's doubts about the idea of 'home' is portrayed in the domestic frustration and social abuse which his characters experience, all fundamental signs of the permanence of a deep-seated dissatisfaction which expresses itself in the close urban interior of characters' houses. In “Eveline” domesticity hides human exploitation and humiliation, an entire world of violence which corrupts families and transforms home in a prison; in a story where poverty and drunkenness signal “the inadequacy of a social

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Luke Gibbons, “Have you no homes to go?: James Joyce and the politics of paralysis” in *Semicolonial Joyce*, ed. Derek Attridge and Marjorie Howes, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000, p.164.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 168.

environment which do not nourishes its participants”¹⁹, the protagonist's view of the “familiar objects which she had dusted once a week for so many years”²⁰ suggests the monotonous and almost mechanical repetitiveness of gestures which characterise modern living in Ireland.

For Gretta, Gabriel's wife in “The Dead”, it is the memory of a dead lover which bounds her to the past, frustrating also her husband's attempts to establish a connection with her. After the dinner held by Gabriel's relatives in occasion of the conclusion of Christmas festivities, the protagonist and his wife Gretta head to their hotel, where the emotions of the couple are revealed in all their striking difference: if on the one hand Gretta seems abstracted and detached from reality, “her face [...] serious and weary”²¹, on the other hand, his husband Gabriel is thinking about the possibilities offered by conjugal love which fill him with a desire “to crush her body against his, to overmaster her”²². Gabriel discovers that Gretta's detachment and apparent uninterest for marital bliss is caused by a song, “The Lass of Aughrim”, and specifically by the memory of a “very delicate”²³ young boy, Michael Furey, whom she was in love with when a young girl in Galway. Indeed, Micheal used to sing that song to her and now, many years later, she cannot but confess the vividness of his image in her mind: “I can see him so plainly [...] Such eyes as he had: big dark eyes! As such an expression in them-an expression!”

¹⁹ Patricia Meyer Spacks, *Boredom: the literary history of a state of mind*, Chicago & London, University of Chicago Press, 1995, p.221.

²⁰ James Joyce, *Dubliners*, *op. cit.*, p. 25, n.15.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 170.

²² *Ibid.*, 171.

²³ *Ibid.*, 172.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 173.

Gabriel's jealousy for this discovery is ambiguously enhanced by the fact that Gretta's lover died at seventeen, probably from the consequences of a cold he caught while visiting Gretta during her last night in Galway before leaving for Dublin. In Gretta's mind, the circumstances of Michael's death are processed in a way that she feels not only responsible for the tragic end of the young boy, but also strangely elevated by the fact that the boy died "for her sake"²⁵. Nonetheless, Gabriel's reaction is to feel "humiliated [...] by the evocation of this figure from the dead"²⁶ because "at that hour when he had hoped to triumph, some impalpable and vindictive being was coming against him, gathering forces against him in its vague world"²⁷. If for the protagonist the world of the dead embodied in Gretta's remembrance of Michael seems to conspire against the world of the living, the possibilities he imagined of a full communion with his wife are inevitably shattered as something which would never achieve the same pathos and romanticism of a moment in the past which for Gretta represented the highest accomplishment of love and devotion. Gabriel's desires of love in the present thus cannot be equated to the feelings which his wife's description of Michael's puts forward. The recognition that his wife Gretta "had been comparing him in her mind with another"²⁸, is a shock which undermines Gabriel's self-confidence and highlights his frustrations at the false assumptions on which he has built his marriage, while his delusion is mirrored in his wife's inability to fill her present emotional life.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 175.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 173.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 174.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 173.

For both authors thus, death and remembrance are distinctive traits of the modern city. In Baudelaire's view, modern capitals are indeed the place where “mortality”²⁹ is to be found “in gloomy district streets”³⁰ and the poet, among the paved streets of the city, engages in the mourning of his age, deconstructing the layers of boredom which shape and characterise his vision of reality. In fact, *The Flowers of Evil* represents the perfect example of a work of art which locates the poet's discontent: for Baudelaire the metropolis is the place where the Spleen triumphs. The Spleen as “a particularly modern [...] form of melancholy”³¹, is rooted in the poet's perception of his times, in the acute sensation of being crushed by the burden of the present and by the suffocation of the Ennui. The Ennui is the vice which represents the true defeat of existence, the sign of modern man's spiritual malady, the source of Spleen and self-disgust, of torments that in their repetitiveness are perceived as endless.

The “petrifying melancholy”³² which dominates Baudelaire's vision of Paris is the focal point of the picture which the poet draws of the disappointment that emerges with the modernization of the urban space; he is indeed the first poet to recognize and portray the city as a “metaphor for human suffering”³³. It is only by exploring the city, by the “passage through negativity”³⁴ which the city implies, that

²⁹ Charles Baudelaire, *The Flowers of Evil*, *op. cit.*, p.145, n.8.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ Jonathan Arac, *Impure Worlds: the institution of literature in the Age of the Novel*, Fordham, Fordham University Press, 2000, p.142.

³² Carlo Salzani, *Essays on boredom and modernity*, ed. Barbara Dalle Pezze and Carlo Salzani, Amsterdam and New York, Barnes & Noble, 2009, p.138.

³³ William Pratt, *Singing the Chaos: madness and wisdom in modern poetry*, Columbia, University of Missouri Press, 1996, p.14.

³⁴ James McGowan, “Introduction”, Charles Baudelaire, *The Flowers of Evil*, *op. cit.*, xxxi, p.8. n.6.

Baudelaire is able to concentrate his poetic activity.

For Picon, the poet's journey in the depths of the city corresponds to a descent to the first of Dante's afterlife's reigns, a revelation of the urban space as “the modern form of hell”³⁵, an underworld where time reigns intimating: “Live and be damned!”³⁶. It is in the splenetic city that Baudelaire gives form to the ways in which “time becomes palpable”³⁷, and all the “horrors”³⁸ of modern living are brought to light. Paris, so intensely connected with the ‘unbearable, implacable Life’³⁹ gives voice to the poet “as someone condemned to live in the capital day after day”.⁴⁰

If in Baudelaire's poetry the city is the locus which summarizes a view characterized by the loss of hope, James Joyce's *Dubliners* is constructed to show the same disillusion with reality, the same sense of limitation. It is interesting to note that with *Dubliners*, the gates of hell are to be found on the very first page of the collection since “The Sisters” opens with a reference to Dante's *Inferno* as the thought which strikes the protagonist while wondering about father Flynn's death. The reference is clear: if in Dante's *Inferno*, the afterlife of damned souls begins with a warning and a condemnation - “Abandon all hope ye that enter here”⁴¹— in twentieth-century Dublin hopelessness is perceived as a matter of fact: “there was no hope for

³⁵ Gérard Conio, *Baudelaire, op. cit.*, p.396, n.5.

³⁶ Charles Baudelaire, *Paris Spleen, op. cit.*, p.11, n.1.

³⁷ Susan Blood, *Baudelaire and the aesthetics of bad faith*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1997, p.97.

³⁸ Gérard Conio, *Baudelaire, op. cit.*, p.396, n.5.

³⁹ Charles Baudelaire, *Paris Spleen, op. cit.*, p.10, n.1

⁴⁰ Jules Laforgue, cited in *Walter Benjamin, Selected writings 1938-1940*, vol.4., ed. Michael William Jennings, Harvard, Harvard University Press, 2003, p.31.

⁴¹ Dante Alighieri, “Inferno” in *Divine Comedy*, trans. Stanley Lombardo, Indianapolis, Hackett Publishing Company Inc., 2009, p.12.

him this time”⁴². The meaning of Dante's sentence in the “Divine Comedy” is indeed to underline the uselessness of hoping to escape the eternal quality of damnation.

The beginning of “The Sisters” comprises the same concept, reproducing Joyce's view about the stagnation of nineteenth-century Dublin and the paralysis from which it suffered. On a first level, the line applies to the boy's thoughts about Father Flynn's health conditions, to the paralysis which has literally consumed all hopes for the priest's recovery. The same line can also be read as a moral judgement of the boy with respect to the priest's conduct, based on facts which the boy, as well as readers, are only allowed to guess by putting together the fragments of adults' discourse in the story. Since “The Sisters” was developed by Joyce as a sort of introduction the whole work, Joyce's opening line of *Dubliners* was his hallmark to put in the foreground the leitmotif of his collection, his judgement on the “hemiplegia of the will”⁴³ affecting the city and all its inhabitants.

What Baudelaire and Joyce share then, is a focus on the condition produced by the manifold experience of living in the age of modernity, the outcomes of the accumulation of its different processes. On a political level, indeed, modern times saw the emergence of mass participation in public life, while industrialisation and mass production shaped society. If on the one hand capitalism offered new standards to satisfy a growing economic prosperity, on the other hand, the cultural progress of single individuals was neglected to favour the division of labour and the mechanization of

⁴² James Joyce, *Dubliners*, *op. cit.*, p.3, n.15.

⁴³ James Joyce, cited in Florence L. Walzl, 'Dubliners' in *A Companion to Joyce Studies*, ed. Zack Bowen and James F. Carens (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1984), p.159.

production.

For Walter Benjamin, capitalism had a profound influence on art. The desire of contemporary masses to possess the work of art resulted in the mechanical reproduction of art which, by detaching the object of art from the unique characteristics which contributed to its creation, specifically, its presence in a definite time and space, aimed at depriving the work of art of its uniqueness. In his opinion, Baudelaire's poetry is the representation of a reaction, an artistic creation comprising the intoxication of modern living and he places modernity at the core of Baudelaire's production, underlining the relation between his poetry and the growing influence of the commodity culture which flourished during the 19th century.

Baudelaire is the first poet whose city becomes a “brothel”⁴⁴, a place where commodification is accepted in the name of progress and art is measured on the market place. In his poetry, the commodity culture is reflected in his enjoyment of crowds; the indistinctive crowd of passers-by, in fact, represents a *mise en scène* in which as Benjamin underlines, “no one is either quite transparent or quite opaque to all others”⁴⁵ and the poet “finds himself in the position of both the architect and the consumer”⁴⁶. It is also to find forgetfulness that Baudelaire joins the crowd. In the modern city, “the last narcotic for people who have been abandoned”⁴⁷ is to be achieved by participating to the “fiction of [...] communion”⁴⁸ of the multitude, in

⁴⁴ Charles Baudelaire, cited in *Cities perceived: urban society in European & American thought, 1820-1940*, ed. Andrew Lees, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1985, p.81.

⁴⁵ Walter Benjamin, *Selected writings*, op. cit., vol.4, p.28, n.40.

⁴⁶ Marc Eli Blanchard, *In search of the city: Engels, Baudelaire, Rimbaud*, Stanford, Anma Libri, 1985, p.82.

⁴⁷ Walter Benjamin, *Selected writings*, op. cit., vol.4, p.31, n.40.

⁴⁸ M. E. Blanchard, *In search of the city*, op. cit., p.105, n.46.

which even sympathy is identified with stealing; as a matter of fact, in the crowd the *flâneur* “*purloins* every profession, makes his own every delight, every misfortune he encounters”⁴⁹[Emphasis mine]. Relating with the other is a process which for Baudelaire takes place only “at the expense of mankind”⁵⁰, in the ambiguous exploitation of fellow human beings, in the “ineffable orgy”⁵¹ which only the contact which the crowd is able to offer. To achieve a mental state similar to “drunkenness”⁵² the poet establishes an economy in which he becomes the buyer of commodized individuals.

The other reason behind Baudelaire's enjoyment of crowds is the experience of being always in the middle of the passing moment, as a *flâneur* who makes “his passion and profession to become one flesh with the crowd [...] to be at the centre of the world and yet remain hidden from the world”⁵³, a spectator of life in its changeability. At the same time the poet is always able to isolate himself, to gaze at the multitude only from a distance and retain the capacity to rejoice his 'incognito'.⁵⁴ It is also in his ambiguous relation with the crowd that Baudelaire's modern poetry aims at drawing from the fugitive reality of the present “whatever element it may contain of poetry within history [...] to distil the eternal from the transitory”⁵⁵. The artist thus recognizes the present as a *réservoir* of unchangeable and eternal beauty which he is called to extract. However, throughout

⁴⁹ Charles Baudelaire, *Paris Spleen, op. cit.*, p.22, n.1.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ Charles Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, New York, Phaidon Press, 1965, p.9.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 12.

history, every age coupled this beauty with a “relative, circumstantial element, which will be [...] its fashions, its morals, its emotions”⁵⁶ - all aspects which characterised the modernity of all ages in the course of history; since the poet's interest for the beauty of works of art of the past is given “not only by reason of the beauty which could be distilled from it by those artists for whom it was the present, but also precisely because it is the past, for its historical value”⁵⁷, the present becomes interesting and fascinating in “its essential quality of being present”⁵⁸.

For Joyce, the beauty of early-twentieth-century Ireland was deeply undermined by the commodification of the Irish capital and indeed it is the mortal sin of simony that the author places next to paralysis on the very first page of *Dubliners*. In the collection, the meaning of simony is expanded beyond the crime of exchanging money for sacraments and comes to signify “any attempt to project a specific material equivalence for things of the spirit”⁵⁹, any attempt to commodify what is sacred in individuals' lives.

“Araby” is the example of how in the age of modernity the marketplace can be assimilated to a sanctuary in which commerce is idolized. If in the bazaar the boy recognises “a silence like that which pervades a church after a service”⁶⁰ the reduced importance of his feeling is signalled by the insistence with which Joyce underlines the economics of the scene: the bazaar is a place where money crushes

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ Suheil Badi Bushrui and Bernard Benstock. eds. *James Joyce, an international perspective: centenary essays in honour of the late Sir Desmond Cochrane*, New York, Barnes & Noble Books, 1982, p.178.

⁶⁰ J. Joyce, *Dubliners*, *op. cit.*, p.23, n.15.

emotions, because it is the boy's love which becomes a means of exchange. Money in all its forms is the true antagonist pervading the scene; the protagonist hears “the fall of coins”⁶¹, the noise of “sixpenny [...] and shillings”⁶² which fill a “hall [...] in darkness”⁶³ where no other sound is perceived. What “Araby” portrays is the ambiguous parallel established by capitalism, a disturbing correspondence which dangerously equates the love cherished by the protagonist to a form of currency proper to capitalism. Simony is the vice which depends upon a “hungry materialism that sees everything as something that can be bought or traded”⁶⁴, it represents the vice that more than any other reigns in this modern hell; it is a debasement of spirituality, a mechanism representing a fundamental source of disappointment in the age of modernity and the productive feature of that distortion of feelings which complicate human relations.

It is only in the city that new forms of relations are discovered from the contact with the other, where “multitude and solitude”⁶⁵ enter in communication only if the individual dares to become an “accomplice”⁶⁶ of the other, in an ambiguous communion where interpersonal relations are compared to the connivance to a crime. The city itself is a riddle which the artist has to solve as the privileged interpreter of reality, the one whose “capacity of seeing”⁶⁷ is accompanied by the exceptional “power of expression”⁶⁸.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ Vicky Mahaffey, 'Dubliners: Surprised by Chance' in *A Companion to James Joyce*, ed. Richard Brown, Oxford, Blackwell, 2008, p.22.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ Charles Baudelaire, *The Flowers of Evil*, op. cit., p.193, n.8.

⁶⁷ Charles Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life*, op. cit., p.12, n.53.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

Baudelaire is the artist who sympathises with the victims of existence who, like himself, live at the margins of society as outcasts from the dominant bourgeois order. It is only in the prostitute that the artist finds a parallel to his condition, an idea which informs also Baudelaire's concern about the changes which have invested the realm of art in the age of modernity. In the prostitute the poet sees the incarnation of the commodity, the mirror of his lost self in the market economy of the capital, “a type of bohème wandering on the borders of approved society”⁶⁹. Both of them “walk the streets of the city, both are connoisseurs of its recesses [...] both embody the melancholia of its unfulfilled promises and intimate desires”⁷⁰; she is a product and waste of bourgeois capitalism, embodying the way in which the ferocity of the age has the power to transform a human being in a “beast of prey”⁷¹.

Since in the modern capital love and fraternity, the basis of community and civil society, are equally represented as forms of “prostitution”⁷², the city becomes a “prison”⁷³ of solitude and despair, where the “constant fear of [...] unhappiness”⁷⁴ is combined with a sense of “unbearable isolation”⁷⁵, and by the impossibility to establish a true contact with the other. In fact, as Raymond Williams rightly underlines, the age of modernity sees “the extension of the association between isolation and the city to alienation”⁷⁶, but what readers find in

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 36.

⁷⁰ Carlo Salzani, *Constellations of reading: Walter Benjamin in figures of actuality*, Bern, Peter Lang, 2009, p.144.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 107.

⁷² Charles Baudelaire, *Paris Spleen*, *op. cit.*, p. 22, n.1.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 81.

⁷⁴ Clive Scott, *Translating Baudelaire*, Exeter, University of Exeter Press, p.271.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ Raymond Williams, *Politics of Modernism: against the new conformists*, University of

Baudelaire's poetry is a form of “self-alienation”⁷⁷, a bitter choice of independence which stands as a “reaction to the commodity fetishism of a city whose bourgeois modernity left the poet stripped of his humanity”⁷⁸. His alienation is the recognition of the regression of civilization, the recognition, as T. S. Eliot underlines of “an age of progressive degradation”⁷⁹.

As Florence Waltzl remarks, the present in Joyce's *Dubliners* is also marked by the city's “progressive diminution of life”,⁸⁰ by a sense of paralysis that has to be understood as “a living death or a succession of emotional, spiritual, psychological deaths”⁸¹. In the urban space in fact, characters are immersed in a limbo where no actual pain is felt, but despair is produced by the incessant repetition of living and spatial constriction mirrors the ties of living which endlessly weigh down on characters' decisions. If Joyce's portrayal of the modern city is based on the recognition that individuals' scope of existence is confined within a limited horizon, the urban landscape expresses a feeling of dejection which is highlighted by the presence of “shadows”⁸² and “spectral mansions”⁸³, scattered remains of the author's apocalyptic vision of the capital. In its “murky air”⁸⁴ Joyce reveals a world of dullness, a city in which buildings are personified and mirror human gestures, houses witness and gaze “at one another

Michigan, Verso, 2007, p.40.

⁷⁷ Patrice Higonnet, *Paris: Capital of the World*, Harvard, Harvard University Press, 2005, p.208.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ T.S.Eliot, cited in *The Cambridge Companion to T. S. Eliot*, ed. Anthony David Moody, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1994, p.62.

⁸⁰ Florence L.Waltzl, “Pattern of Paralysis in Joyce's *Dubliners*” in *College English*, 22 (1961), p.222.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 223.

⁸² James Joyce, *Dubliners*, p.54, n.15.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p.168.

with brown imperturbable faces”⁸⁵ and an infinite succession of small streets entraps children like “mice”⁸⁶.

Dubliners’ picture of paralysis is based on a sombre palette and a language expressing the repetitiveness of a dull existence: “dark muddy lanes”⁸⁷, “dark [...] gardens”⁸⁸, “little dark rooms”⁸⁹, “little brown houses”⁹⁰, all features which take part in the creation of “the minute vermin-like life”⁹¹ of this modern capital. Moreover, urban landscape and weather always seem to conjure against characters, adding a tragic nuance to the character's view:

It was a dark rainy evening and there was no sound in the house. Through one of the broken panes I heard the rain impinge upon the earth, the fine incessant needles of water playing in the sodden heds. I was thankful I could see so little.⁹²

It is in the disillusioned and disenchanting description of this street-view that the essence of paralysis as a limbo is revealed; in the city, silence and darkness compose the veil through which the character perceives the oppressive atmosphere which hovers on Dublin. If for the protagonist a limited view of the city is perceived as a blessing, what Joyce asks his readers is exactly to look at paralysis’ “deadly work”⁹³, inviting them to tear the veil of romanticism which enveloped contemporary representations of Ireland:

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p.19.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p.54.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 54.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 20.

⁹³ James Joyce, *Dubliners*, *op. cit.*, p.3, n.15.

In realism you are down to fact on which the world is based: that sudden reality which smashes romanticism into a pulp. What makes most people's lives unhappy is some disappointed romanticism, some unrealisable or misconceived ideal. In fact you may say that idealism is the ruin of men.⁹⁴

If in Joyce's view realism represents a tool to portray the implications of the mechanisms which produce Dubliners' paralysis, his city, as in Baudelaire, becomes a "hospital"⁹⁵, a place in which humanity looks for a cure, a solution, a means to escape the tragic entrapment of modern existence.

⁹⁴ James Joyce, cited by Jeri Johnson in "Introduction" to *Dubliners*, *op. cit.*, p. xiii, n.15.

⁹⁵ Charles Baudelaire, *Paris Spleen*, *op. cit.*, p.81, n.1.

Chapter Two

The Spleen in Baudelaire

“I cry! I cry! Life feeds the seasons' maw
And the dark Enemy who gnaws our hearts
Battens on blood that drips into his jaws”¹
(C. Baudelaire)

Baudelaire elaborates the myth of Paris in modernity. In doing so, his metropolis comes to reflect the miseries of the modern urban condition, shaping also the aesthetics of his idea of modernity. But the very existence of Baudelaire's poetry is inextricably linked with the *atroce moralité* it portrays. As Massimo Colesanti observes, his poetical discourse is elaborated within an “aesthetic-moral space”² where the images and symbols distilling the fracture between men and society, mirror a deep insoluble conflict within all men which is rooted in the human condition.

The poet's tragic description of the evils of the modern metropolis opens the way to a profound recognition which sees the models of modernity and its phenomena as exterior signs of an inner troublesome concern. What lies deeper in the drama described in *The*

¹ Charles Baudelaire, *The Flowers of Evil*, trans. James McGowan, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2008, p.29.

² Massimo Colesanti, *Baudelaire: tutte le poesie e i capolavori in prosa*, Roma, Newton & Compton, 1998, p. 20. [Translation mine]

Flowers of Evil is indeed connected with the poet's recognition that the character of human suffering is not temporal, but existential. As Baudelaire writes in *My heart laid bare*:

There are in every man, at all times, two simultaneous tendencies (*postulations*), one towards God, the other towards Satan. The invocation of God, or spirituality, is a desire to climb higher; that of Satan, or animality, is delight in descent.³

The clear knowledge of this duality is fundamental to the poet. He recognises the impossibility to chose or reject one of these two postulations, thus emphasising the entrapment of the human soul between the pleasures of the Evil and the aspiration towards the Good, towards the perfection of the self. The cruel tension of this eternal struggle represents the core of his morality and the key of his poetical activity, where his morality is incarnated in words, forms and imagines. *The Flowers of Evil* is thus to be read as a work of art where this conflict is represented and explored, its modernity residing precisely in the poet's ambitious enterprise to structure it.

The collection aims at portraying a progression based on the poet's life, of the ups and downs of his "contracted sensitivity"⁴, as De Lollis rightly observes. It was indeed very important, for the poet, that

³ Charles Baudelaire, *My Heart Laid Bare and other Prose Writing*, ed. Norman Cameron, London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1950, p.181.

⁴ Cesare De Lollis, *Scrittori di Francia*, a cura di Gianfranco Contini e Vittorio Santoli, Milano e Napoli, Ricciardi, 1971, p.425. [Translation mine]

the general structure of the collection would be clearly in view: “The only praise that I ask for this book is that people recognize it is not a pure album and that it has a beginning and an end. All [...] poems were made to fit into the strange framework I had chosen”.⁵

The title itself represents a straightforward declaration of the poet's intentions, of his poetical decision to connect his idea of moral dualism and his idea of (modern) art. *The Flowers of Evil* is a title which juxtaposes two terms representing two different categories, aesthetics and morality; the poetic tension generated by this oxymoron comes to be identified with the poet's task, the extraction of beauty from evil. The poetic input of the collection is indeed to be found in Baudelaire's will to extract “*la beauté du Mal*”⁶, to distil and treat the Evil as the object of his work of art. His goal is to connect the tragedy of the evils in modern society to the tragic division of the modern self, torn between Good and Evil, God and Satan; his idea is to explore “*a beauté dans le mal*”⁷ and the distinction “*du bien d'avec le beau*”.⁸

The first poem of the book is emblematic of the dualism around which Baudelaire's morality is formed. “To the Reader” is a warning

⁵ Charles Baudelaire, letter to Alfred de Vigny (1861), cited in M. Colesanti, *Baudelaire, op. cit.*, p.21, n.2.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p.320.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*

to the reader which puts forward the poet's need of complicity to unveil the plain truth about human existence. In the first verse, the accumulation of negative ideas, “folly and error, stinginess and sin”⁹ is meant to portray the human subjection to the Evil, or better, to “Satan Thrice-Great”¹⁰, as the repository of all evil in Christian tradition. If Satan is the *deus ex machina* of individuals' lives, mankind limits itself at nourishing “our tame remorse”¹¹, refusing to accept its real double nature. The pleasures of Evil are hypocritically cherished and rejected with false confessions “thinking mean tears will wash away our strains”¹². Our descent towards the abyss of Hell is marked by the need to steal pleasures (“steal a furtive pleasure as we pass”¹³), secretly regretting the internal drive which prompted our base actions. Our feeling of shame is not directed towards God and not certainly towards Satan, but, as Cacciavillani underlines, towards “the richest metal of our will”¹⁴, our potential for good, our reconstructed self, which is, however, always “vaporized”¹⁵ by the Evil inside us. It is exactly this hypocrite repression that generates the Ennui, “the

⁹ Charles Baudelaire, *The Flowers of Evil*, *op. cit.*, p.5, n.1.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

creature [...] most foul and false!”¹⁶, a feeling which characterises a soul which is unable to give voice to its instincts and desires.

At the same time, poetry becomes the fundamental means to uncover the inner division and motives of the human soul, and the privileged tool to unveil the laws governing culture at large. Indeed, the 5th stanza suggests a broader cultural interpretation. Our existence is compared with a ”poor libertine”¹⁷ who “will suck and kiss / the sad, tormented tit of some old whore”¹⁸, where “old whore” comes to personify the myth of Western civilization as a whole, of its values and ideas, of its system of power. But the system is old and hypocrite, as we have seen in the first chapter. The debris of its spirituality, of its language and values are falling together with its ruinous ideal of progress. It is in this context that the poet recognises his and our perverted enjoyment of “a furtive pleasure”¹⁹, whose power on us is evidently so strong as to enslave us, making us not only accept, but also embrace the burden of an endless personal and cultural decline. In this first poem, Baudelaire outlines the picture of a world where boredom is the result of a duality which the reader is stirred to

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

recognize: “Reader, you know this dainty monster too; / -Hypocrite reader, -Fellowman,-my twin!”²⁰.

The first section, “Spleen and the Ideal”, opens with a neat juxtaposition of two terms announcing the key contrast of moral duality. As we have already seen in the first chapter, the city of Paris is filled not only by this opposition, but also and especially, by the Spleen itself, so that the metropolis comes to be identified with its privileged locus, the exterior sign of an inner condition. This condition is specifically explored in four poems, which, both in the first and second edition, bear the same title: Spleen. The insistence with which this term is repeated is significant, as it is also Baudelaire's decision to use the English term in place of the French “*Ennui*” which he used up to this part of the collection. At the time when *The Flowers of Evil* was published, the term Spleen, as Cacciavillani underlines, was assimilated to *Ennui*, nonetheless, its meaning was felt to be more indefinite than its French 'synonym' and also strictly connected with British society. It is fundamental to note that this aspect is not of secondary importance since during the second empire, Britain was perceived as being a quintessentially modern society, whose industrial

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p.7.

character seemed likely to produce feelings of depression. It follows that the Spleen was thought of as a distinct modern malaise, an illness inherent to modernity, a condition, as seen in chapter one, arising from the contradictions of modern everyday living. At the same time Spleen is also *Ennui*, the product of moral dualism, the paralysing boredom which is to be found at the core of Baudelaire's morality. The 'internal' and 'external' qualities of Spleen are crucial to the whole collection and especially in the first section, where the poet's (and our) inner division is always portrayed and represented as mirroring an external paralysed world.

In the first of the Spleen poems (LXXV) indeed, the role of the city is once again loaded with ideas of death and stagnation. The allegoric personification of Pluvius (one of the name of the Republican calendar introduced during the Revolution and abandoned in 1805) as a God inundating the city is the opening image describing a reality where mortality fills “gloomy district streets”²¹; the cemetery, on the contrary, hosts “pallid inmates”²², as if suburbs, in a modern conception, could be perceived as being more deadly than cemeteries. It is in this context that the poet establishes a very interesting

²¹ *Ibid.*, p.145.

²² *Ibid.*

connection between his cat and “some poet's phantom [...] / Moaning and whimpering like a freezing soul”²³. It is the old poet's phantom voice and not the cat's, whose voice is heard in the gutter, a place usually associated with the latter rather than the former; it is Baudelaire's voice, his poetical voice which becomes a ghost, which is silenced by a dull existence which is best described as the “teeking deck of cards- / some dropsied crone's foreboding legacy-”²⁴ in the last stanza. This last character is, as the God-like presence of Pluviose, symbolic of a past haunting the present. Both characters stand for a past which takes two different forms in the poet's present: one the one hand Pluvius, a symbol of the Revolution and of the changes it was meant to produce and which, for Baudelaire, never attained, and on the other hand, the “dropsied crone”, personifying the system of rules and values of the Western tradition as a whole and its 'fatal' game always presupposing the defeat of the individual.

However, it is still the present which empowers both these figures. The poet recognizes all this and his Spleen is exactly the apathy and disinterest for this type of reality. Under the splenetic influence, nothing emerges or is different from the rest, the images of

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*

the cat and the poet are merged, as do the image of the dead and the alive...everything is part of the immense wreckage of modernity. It is exactly at this point, when everything is stripped from its significance, that everything acquires new and vital poetical significance for Baudelaire.

The allegorical scheme of the poem is thus designed to penetrate the significance of Spleen as the continuation and result of an inherited cultural disease, whose stagnation and effects are further investigated in the following poem, the second of the Spleen-cycle (LXXVI). Here, the poetical voice is put in the foreground exactly at the beginning of the opening verse “More memories than if I'd lived thousand years!”²⁵and is immediately recognised in all its weariness. The image portrayed by the poet is based on the relation between a symbolic representation of time, '*mille ans*', and the great number of 'souvenirs', impressed in his consciousness which are meant to express its saturation by memory and experience, by his knowledge of life and of the irrevocable passing of time. The exhaustion of the poet, or better, of his “sullen skull”²⁶, is projected in different metaphors, all contributing to underline the endless character of existential boredom,

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p.147.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

understood also in the repetitiveness characterising the process of accumulation of memories.

The poet's brain is indeed pictured as a depository and compared to a meuble where “balance, sheets, love letters, lawsuits, verse”²⁷ are stored, as if the tokens of the affective, poetic and economic life of the poet compose a body of memories communicating a sense of repetition which is inextricably linked with the quotidian, with everyday life. Baudelaire makes clear that this body of memories is a burden, that it weights on his brain in the same way as the drawer is “stuffed”²⁸ by the items it contains. The following comparisons of the poem are meant to describe the deadly traits of this burden. The poet's brain is identified with a “pyramid, a giant vault / Holding more corpses than a common grave”²⁹ with a 'graveyard hated by the moon’³⁰, with “a dusty boudoir where are heaped / Yesterday's fashions”³¹.

The poet's brain is at the same time seen as an ancient (pyramid), collective (a giant vault) and modern (graveyard) repository, where imagines as 'remains' are stored, but cannot give the

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p.190.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p.192.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*

true sense of a life lived fully. The present is thus opaque and fundamentally unauthentic, trapped within its inconsistencies and marked by the Ennui, the “fruit of dulling lassitude”³². If the essence of the present is lost among repetitive actions and fading imagines, nothing is really meant to last but the oppressive power of Spleen which “takes the size of immortality”³³. In the last part of the poem the register changes so that the poetical voice is distanced from its representation. The address Baudelaire makes to his objectified self is clear as to the dejection of his self:

-Henceforth, o living flesh, you are no more!
You are of granite, wrapped in a vague dread,
Slumbering in some Sahara's hazy sands,

An ancient sphinx lost to a careless world,
Forgotten on the map, whose haughty mood
Sings only in the glow of setting sun.³⁴

It is the most desolating image of the poem. Baudelaire's soul is petrified, paralysed in a surreal desert which reminds the city's 'brumeaux faubourg' of the previous poem. In these verses, the poet becomes the unrecognised, unknown sphinx of its age, his actions and feelings annihilated by the Spleen transforming his brain in a *matière 'assoupi'* and hardened. The very sense of existence is lost in the

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*

splenetic insensitivity of living and a granitic presence looking for personal and social oblivion is the poet's only remain.

Baudelaire's poetical voice, however, is not silenced. As the sphinx, his is the chant of decline. It is exactly from the Spleen, from the recognition of boredom, that reality is transformed into art, into the “haughty mood”³⁵ of his poetry. It is a vision in which creativity springs from negativity, where the Spleen, produced by the existing modern culture, represents the mandatory condition to poetry.

The following Spleen (LXXVII), is based on the same concept. First of all, it is worth noticing how its first verse is linked to the former poem, as if the poem had been designed as a continuation of it. The opening verse “I might as well be king of rainy lands”³⁶, not only echoes the formula used in the previous poem (“I am a graveyard [...] I am a dusty boudoir”³⁷) but also reminds us of the god-like presence Pluvius of the first Spleen by featuring the same adjective. Here the poet is a king “wealthy and young, but impotent and old”³⁸, who despite his status, his privileges and possibilities as a king, '*s'ennuie*'³⁹. Boredom haunts his existence and he cannot find relief from his

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p.194.

disease, because the malaise afflicting him lies in the contradictory nature of his very existence. This “twisted invalid”⁴⁰ is simultaneously young and old, rich and and powerless, he is fundamentally marked by a profound duality which prevents any relief. None of the diversions offered by the world is able to save the poet-king; again, he is described as being simultaneously dead and alive, as in the former poems, a “*cadavre hebeté*”⁴¹ living in an empty and meaningless world. Neither the alchemist nor the ancient Roman custom of invigorating blood baths are able to alleviate his congenital illness:

The alchemist who made him gold cannot
Attend his soul and extirpate the flaw;
Nor in those baths of blood the Romans claimed
Would bring an old man's body youthful force,
Can scholar's knowledge bring to life a corpse
With Lethe's putrid water in its veins.⁴²

After the rejection of hopeless remedies, in this final part the poet's status is clarified and paralleled to the condition of dead's souls in the Hades. The presence of the river Lethe in the final verse is indeed fundamental because it reasserts the 'positive' value of the Spleen in the frame of Baudelaire's poetical activity. In Virgil's Aeneid, as

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² *Ibid.*

Colesanti rightly observes, the dead drunk the waters of the river Lethe not only to forget their earthly life, but also because this was a condition to reincarnation. The poet decides to compare Lethe's water to the blood running in his veins, underlining the extent of which forgetfulness is part of his very existence. This is another example of how the poet, pressed down by the splenetic world, in the abyss of Spleen, longs for forgetfulness, as he had longed for oblivion in the second Spleen poem, but only as a condition to reach regeneration. So we could say that what he really longs for is regeneration and sees the spleen as a condition to it; his insensitivity towards the world is the impulse of his poetry which is meant to express a new, unconditioned vision freed from hypocrisy.

The following poem, the fourth poem of the cycle, is probably Baudelaire's most dramatic rendition of the annihilating powers of Spleen. In Spleen (LXXVIII) indeed, all elements concur in the creation of a hopeless landscape which is condensed in the central image of the prison:

When the low and heavy sky weights like a lid
Upon the spirit moaning in ennui,
[...]
When earth is changed into a sweaty cell,
In which Hope, captured, like a frantic bat,
Batters the walls with her enfeebled wing,

Striking her head against the rotting beams;

When steady rain trailing its giant train
Descend on us like heavy prison bars;⁴³

The entire world is assimilated to a dark, “vast prison”⁴⁴, where the unlimited, endless duration of Spleen is reinforced by the idea of immobility. But the Spleen is fundamentally recognised as a universal condition; from the first stanza onwards, the sky, the earth and the rain weight not only upon the poet's spirit, but indistinctly upon “us”⁴⁵, upon all mankind.

The exterior world is thus reflected in the prison of our interior world, where our brains are overwhelmed by the Evil and besieged by a “silent multitude of spiders”⁴⁶ while Hope, our aspiration towards the Good, figuratively beats his wings ineffectively. A desperate cry arises from within and is merged with the image of “bells [...] jump out with all their force”⁴⁷. In the last stanza of the poem, however, this inner struggle equating the poet's condition with everyone else's is again elaborated within the poet's soul alone:

-And long cortèges minus drum or tone,

⁴³ *Ibid.*, pp.194-195

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p.196

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

Deploy morosely through my being: Hope
The conquered, moans, and tyrant Anguish gloats-
In my bowed skull he fixed his black flag.⁴⁸

The tragic parade described here indeed, takes place only in the poet's soul. We assist to the passage from the collective'nous' of the first three stanzas to a description focusing on Baudelaire's inner self. In his soul the poet accepts the silent death march of existing reality together with the allegoric struggle between Good and Evil, which this time takes the form of a struggle between Hope and Anguish. Hope is defeated, nonetheless, it has not succumbed under the weight of Ennui, it 'cries', becoming Desperation. In the poet's lucid vision, the defeat of Hope is the necessary condition to start anew, the prerequisite to set his personal revolt, which takes the form of poetry. By cutting off the ties which connected his Hope to a concrete possibility of change in reality and by arriving to the depths of Spleen and desperation that the poet is able to elect this same desperation as the vital creative source of his poetry. It is only after having known and rejected all values and myths of modern existence that the poet can start his journey to the unknown, towards a complete liberation and renovation from the Spleen.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

Chapter Three

Paralysis in Joyce

“I said softly to myself
the word *paralysis*”¹
(J. Joyce)

On a first level, James Joyce's *Dubliners* can be read as a collection of straightforward realistic tales about life in Dublin at the turn of the 20th century. The author's fidelity in the representation of things and events as they are is also strictly connected with his will to portray an unadulterated vision of humanity, where reality is not censured but preserved:

I have written *Dubliners* for the most part in a style of scrupulous meanness and with the conviction that he is a very bold man who dares to alter in the presentment, still more to deform, whatever he has seen and heard.²

A faithful representation of reality imposes not only an objective gaze but also no reluctance to look at the most sordid features of the *Dubliners*' lives, concentrating on the reasons behind the dysfunctions of Dublin's society to reveal the source of paralysis. The author's aversion for any attempt to 'correct' representations of modern reality, stands also as a personal and artistic reaction against the Irish literary

¹ James Joyce, *Dubliners*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2008, p.3.

² James Joyce, *Letters of James Joyce*, edited by S. Gilbert, Richard Ellmann, New York, Viking, 1966, 3 vols, vol. II, p.134.

conventions of his day, characterized by a tendency to offer an adulcorated version of modern reality: “I am nauseated by their lying drivel about pure men and pure women and spiritual love and love for ever: blatant lying in the face of the truth”.³ This affirmation is rooted in Joyce's firm belief that the object of the work of art was not beauty, but truth. Truth is in Joyce's mind, the supreme tool for the artist who wants to see behind the veil of stagnation and repetitiveness which characterises the social and moral situation of Ireland's inhabitants.

First of all, as Jeri Johnson underlines, the author's focus on truth “required real names of real places [...] honesty not censorship”⁴. Indeed, even if the author's focus on truth characterises the whole collection, *Dubliners* was not meant to be a compilation of detailed descriptions of Dublin citizens' lives, nor a work of art solely based on documenting a specific historical moment in the history of Ireland: the essence of Joyce's work is to be found in its connection with morality. Joyce's aesthetic programme in *Dubliners* is in fact intertwined not only with a concern on Good and Evil, but also with the idea of the 'civilizing' role of art and the belief in its agency. This position is to be found at the core of the author's ethical and literary

³ *Ibid.*, vol.i, pp.191-192.

⁴ Jeri Johnson, “Introduction”, James Joyce, *Dubliners*, *op. cit.*, p.viii, n.1.

'mission': "I seriously believe that you will retard the course of civilisation in Ireland by preventing the Irish people from having one good look at themselves in my nicely polished looking-glass".⁵

For the author, the course of the Irish civilization was thus fundamentally linked with a process of self-recognition that would trigger a change in the Irish people. The fidelity and realism of his 'nicely polished looking-glass' would be a means to achieve a double purpose, a way "to betray the soul of [...] hemiplegia or paralysis which many consider a city"⁶ and consequently prompt a "first step towards the spiritual liberation"⁷ of Ireland.

Since in Joyce's mind the Irish people had to be liberated from their entrapment, the basis of his literary activity resides in the 'betrayal' of the roots of this condition, a mission which would generate a reaction in real-life Irish people by throwing light on the display of paralysis. In Joyce's words, the plan of the collection is aimed at portraying Dublin under "four of its aspects: childhood, adolescence, maturity and public life".⁸ Each of the fifteen stories thus fits into a pattern which is meant to underline the equal pervasiveness

⁵ James Joyce, *Letters of James Joyce*, op. cit., vol.1, p.64, n.2.

⁶ James Joyce, cited in Florence L. Walzl, 'Dubliners' in *A Companion to Joyce Studies*, ed. by Zack Bowen and James F. Carens, Westport, Greenwood Press, 1984, p.159.

⁷ James Joyce, *Letters of James Joyce*, op. cit., vol.1, pp.62-63, n.2.

⁸ Jeri Johnson, "Introduction", *op. cit.*, p.xiv, n.1.

of paralysis in all stages of life and give the readers “multiple distinctive individuals who collectively stand as representative of the paralysed Dublin itself”⁹.

The word 'paralysis' is found right at the beginning of the collection, in the story which opens the 'childhood' section, 'The Sisters'. This story is interesting under many resp. pects, first of all because Joyce thought of it as an introduction to the whole work, putting forward the themes and atmospheres of the entire collection. Secondly, it is in this story that the reader is initiated to the task of extrapolating meaning from characters' personal language and narratives because, despite the enormous amount of details and facts which Joyce accurately selects and accumulates to draw his picture of Dublin as faithfully as possible, the representation is characterised by intentional omissions which depend upon readers' interpretation. Indeed, readers' interpretation can only rely on the characters' limited understanding of the ways in which paralysis acts on their lives, and generally, throughout the collection, what characters express or leave unsaid, is always based on their personal and restricted point of view. Since all stories are focalised through the specific perception of

⁹ *Ibid.*

characters, readers are asked to identify the common thread of the collection, the essence which connects all different sides of paralysis in the capital.

In “The Sisters” the first part of the story revolves around the protagonist, a boy, who tries to find out whether Father Flynn, a priest he used to know has died. The discovery of his death is accompanied by a further concern, since even if no one speaks directly about the causes of his death, old Cotter nonetheless hints that “something gone wrong with him”¹⁰ in the last part of his life. After the news, the boy and his aunt pay visit to Father Flynn's sisters, who tell them about an incident from which the priest never recovered: “It was that chalice he broke...That was the beginning of it. Of course, they say it was all right, that it contained nothing, I mean. But still...”.¹¹ The only additional clue which is given to the boy is that after this incident, Father Flynn was found “sitting up by himself in the dark in his confession-box, wide-awake and laughing-like softly to himself”.¹²

The adults' few indications about the priest, the frequent gaps and omissions punctuating their speech, all participate in the creation of a vague and ambiguous atmosphere of uncertainty, where no one is

¹⁰ James Joyce, *Dubliners*, *op. cit.*, p.10, n.1.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p.9.

¹² *Ibid.*, p.10.

willing to speak openly in front of the boy: “there was something queer...there was something uncanny about him [...] it was one of those...peculiar cases...But it's hard to say”¹³. The boy is thus excluded from knowing the circumstances of Father Flynn's behaviour, as if all adults wanted to preserve him from facts, while readers are left to the same task of extracting meaning from what is left unspoken.

Which are the 'facts' behind Father Flynn's end? The boy struggles to comprehend the meaning of the few words which he managed to catch, puzzling on their possible relation to the priest's case. Many critics have underlined that the three words in italics which Joyce places in the first paragraph of the story, are there to draw readers' attention:

'He had often said to me: I am not long for this world, and I had thought his words idle. Now I knew they were true. Every night as I gazed up at the window I said softly to myself the word *paralysis*. It had always sounded strangely in my ears, like the word *gnomon* in the Euclid and the word *simony* in the Catechism [...] It filled me with fear, and yet I longed to be nearer to it and look upon its deadly work.¹⁴

Paralysis, gnomon, simony; these are the three aspects of Dublin's life that readers are asked to recognize in Joyce's picture of twentieth-century Dublin. It is now up to them to decipher their meaning in the collection.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p.3.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

Paralysis is, of course, connected with “the total inability to move, act, function”¹⁵ and is here presented together with Gnomon, a riddle or a parallelogram with a corner missing, and simony, the sin of selling something of spiritual value for temporal things. As a “figure of incompleteness”¹⁶ many critics have underlined that Gnomon corresponds to the ellipses and gaps in the knowledge of characters and to the unconscious blindness which permeates their existence; *Dubliners* can also be read as a gnomon itself, a riddle which must be interpreted in all its complexity, also by means of the aspects that are missing from the picture.

What is certainly not missing from Joyce's picture, are the two main reasons behind Dublin's paralysis, its double enslavement under the British Empire and the Roman Catholic Church; Ireland's political position as a colony of the British Empire and its spiritual subjection to the over power of the Roman Catholic Church. Joyce indeed thought that these two structures, these two aspects of Dublin's public life, were deeply implicated in shaping Ireland's present and equally powerful to determine its paralysis. Indeed, he stated: “I confess that I do not see what good it does to fulminate against the English tyranny

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Margot Norris, *Suspicious Readings of Joyce's Dubliners*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003, p.16.

while the Roman tyranny occupies the palace of the soul.”¹⁷. The critique to both powers had thus to enter his analysis.

From a religious point of view, for example, the behaviour adopted by adults in 'The Sisters', is Joyce's way to point out the cultural and moral atmosphere of the Irish capital in all its uneasiness about speaking the truth, in its moral subjugation to Catholic concerns. The hints adults make about Father Flynn, make the boy, as we readers, assume that the priest committed acts of sexual nature, but adults' reticence to explain exists only in a social system where Catholic 'decency' prevails over knowing or as in this case, acknowledging, facts of an ambiguous nature. The story indeed, presents exactly the kind of “social, familiar and religious culture that would demand Joyce censor such stories”.¹⁸ The first member of the Church that Joyce's decides to picture in *Dubliners*, is a priest who nonetheless stands both as a symbol of the paralysed dogmas of the Irish Church and its degeneration, its loss of spiritual values. These aspects are connected also with the third word in the opening page of *Dubliners*: simony, the sin of selling things of spiritual value for economic gain, that is, the entrance of spirituality in an economic

¹⁷ James Joyce, *Occasional, Critical and Political Writing*, ed. Kevin Barry, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2002, p.125.

¹⁸ Jeri Johnson, *op. cit.*, p.XXX, n.1.

discourse. For the author, indeed, simony applied to both the Irish religion and its politics.

On a political level, at the beginning of the twentieth-century, Ireland was still under the British rule. In the same years, the movement of the Irish Revival, established by the Gaelic League in 1893, promoted a return to the Irish roots by means of a re-discovery of the Irish culture. Despite nationalists' attempts for independence, however, the long and still ineffective struggle against the British empire highlighted the immobility of Irish politics, an aspect which Joyce places at the centre of "Ivy day in the Committee Room", the story which opens the 'public life' section of the collection. The story is set on October 6th, on the day Ireland remembers the death of his "uncrowned king"¹⁹, the famous Irish political esponent Charles Steward Parnell. During a discussion among supporters of the Nationalist party at the Municipal Elections on whether to pay respects to King Edward VII during his visit to Ireland, the party reveals his two 'souls'; while some like Mr Heynes think that if Parnell was alive "we'd have no talk of address of welcome"²⁰, some, like Mr Hency, think that "the citizens of Dublin will benefit by it".²¹

¹⁹ James Joyce, *Dubliners*, *op. cit.*, p.103, n.1.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p.94.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p.102.

It is essentially because of economic reasons that Mr Hency believes in the benefits of the king's visit; in fact, he underlines that the occasion “will mean an influx of money into the country”²². Secondly, on a political level, he does not feel menaced by the king at all, but rather thinks that “King Eddie”²³ “is a man of the world [...] a jolly fine decent fellow”²⁴, and that it was thus not right to “insult the man when he comes right over here on a friendly visit”²⁵.

On the contrary, Mr Heynes, O'Conner and Mr Lyons agree on refusing to pay visit to the “king of England”²⁶, following Parnell's example on the issue. Mr Lyons decides to follow his “ideals”²⁷, but Parnell's legacy seems nonetheless to be fading out against the corruption ruling present-day Irish political practices. “Tricky Dicky Tierney”²⁸, the Nationalist candidate, is here presented as the new hope for Irish emancipation, but his political activity seems more focused on money rather than on ideals; in fact, what his collaborators enhance during their propaganda is that “he is a respectable man [...] he has an extensive house property in the city and three places of

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*, p.95.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p.102.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p.94.

business”²⁹, above all, he is described as a Nationalist favouring “whatever will benefit this country”³⁰, alluding to Mr Tierney's evident economic interests in keeping “down the rates”.³¹ The focus on “spondulics”³² is however, also apparent in the attitudes of the Parnellists' side of the group. They wait impatiently for the reward the leader promised them, but at the same time fear Mr Tierney's decision to “drag the honour of Dublin in the mud to please [...] Edward Rex”

³³.

It was certainly not to please the king that Parnell's political activity ended so abruptly: the scandal which invested him after he was convicted of being responsible for the divorce of Captain O'Shea from his wife Katherine, was fuelled by Irish religious hierarchies in the belief that being a Catholic imposed the condemnation of Parnell's immoral conduct. Because of this dogma, the Nationalist party split and a new generation of politicians was called to take over from him and finally achieve Ireland's 'Home Rule'. Joyce's description of the 'new' course of Irish politics seems, however, as sterile and empty as the “denuded room”³⁴ in which this story takes place. Indeed, even if

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p.101.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*, p.94.

³³ *Ibid.*, pp.93-94.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p.93.

the symbolic ivy leaf is worn by nationalists to remember Parnell's death, the difference between the old times which had “some life in then”³⁵ and Dublin's present, is to be found in the absence of concrete political plans to end Ireland's submission to the British Empire and in a renewed political passion for what could offer a chance to enhance the country's future.

If religious beliefs participated in Parnell's fall and economic gain replaced the pursuit of Irish independence, in 'Counterparts' Joyce shows readers that power relations between colonial Ireland and Britain are strictly connected with power relations in Irish society. The title itself applies to a copy, a version which duplicates an original document, a task which Farrington, the protagonist, is asked to perform daily at Crosbie & Alleyne. Mr Alleyne, Farrington's boss, is immediately recognised as an Ulsterman, because of his “piercing North of Ireland accent”³⁶, an aspects which Joyce underlines in order to put forward Alleyne's possible Protestant and Pro-British views. The strict and demanding attitude of Mr Alleyne, however, does not suit Farrington's apathetic achievement of his duties at the office; on the contrary, the source of his enjoyment is represented by “a good

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p.94.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p.66.

night's drinking"³⁷, a pleasure which he cultivates by frequent escapes during his long working hours. Back to work, he assumes "an air of absent-mindedness"³⁸ and is thus bound to bear his boss' complaints about his inefficiency. In his "lower office"³⁹ the disappointment at his boss' scolds are reversed in "his secret desire to 'rush out and reveal in violence"⁴⁰ since "the barometer of his emotional nature was set for a spell of riot"⁴¹.

His humiliations at work are soon mirrored by the frustrations of his long awaited night-out, when, after having lost at a trial of strength against Wheathers, a foreign artist performing in Dublin, the ideal representation of himself as a strong man is torn into pieces in front of his friends. For Joyce, Farrington's defeat is not only a matter of personal pride, but a question of "National honour"⁴² and he draws a neat correspondence between the protagonist's failures and Ireland's political status as a colony, a way to intertwine personal and political issues. The parallel is then also to be further expanded in Farrington's relations with his pro-British boss, where his continuous frustrations are connected with those suffered by Ireland by hand of British

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p.67.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p.68.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p.69.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² *Ibid.*, p.73.

authority. In the end, it is Farrington's rage against his child which reproduces the same political mechanisms of domination which connect Britain and Ireland.

It is in the repetition of failures that personal frustrations are connected with public paralysis, and political defeats are reflected in private dramas; it seems as if the entire system of Dublin exists only as a copy, an endless reproduction of discontents. In the last scene of the story, indeed, Farrington's little boy is represented as the last victim of an endless series of frustrations; he is, however, already 'conscious' of the mechanism which rules the society he lives in, and tries to bargain over his father's beating with his prayers, inscribing religion in an economic discourse: “O, pa! [...] Don't beat me, pa! And I'll...I'll Say a Hail Mary for you [...] if you don't beat me”⁴³. The boy's recourse to religion is here represented as essentially opportunistic, deprived of any spiritual value and used as an empty and meaningless formula.

What emerges from “Counterparts”, in the end, is a picture where characters' lives are deeply affected by their political status as colonized individuals. This idea is further developed by Joyce in 'Two

⁴³ Ibid., p.75.

Gallants', a story in which, as numerous critics have pointed out, historical and political themes are reflected in the two protagonists' behaviour. The title itself is ironic, since Corley and Lehehan's deceit at the expenses of a young "slavey"⁴⁴ working for a healthy family, is defenetly not the type of behaviour that readers would expect from two gallants - refined and brave gentlemen giving polite attention to women. The essence of their 'gallantry' rather resides in a plan which they conceive to convince the girl to procure them ready money by stealing from her employer's house, thus taking advantage of her and of her trust in Corley's manners. On his part, Corley feels no qualms about betraying the girl and boastfully tells his friend "She's a bit gone on me"⁴⁵ since he knows "the way to get around her"⁴⁶.

In a broader context, his ways with the girl are surely reminiscent of Ireland's exploitation by British colonial authority, his behaviour exemplifying "the active force in bringing that nation willingly to her knees and getting paid for it to boot"⁴⁷. By abusing of the girl's naivety, Corley is enacting the same type of relation which for Joyce was still keeping Ireland under British domination.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p.37.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p.38.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Donald. D., Torchiana, 'Two Gallants': A Walk trough Ascendancy. Background for Joyce's *Dubliners*, London, Allen & Unwin, 1986, pp. 91-108, p.91.

His self-reliance is the characteristic which Joyce decides to place in the eyes of readers throughout the story: “He knew the inner side of all affairs and was fond of delivering final judgements. He spoke without listening to the speech of his companions. His conversation was mainly about himself”⁴⁸. His confident attitude is completely different from his friend Lenehan's, the other 'gallant' of the story; despite his more reserved personality, Lenehan is nonetheless Corley's accomplice in the treachery against the girl, not only accepting, but also supporting her exploitation for his personal gain, the easy availability of money. In Joyce's analysis of Dublin's paralysis, he exemplifies “a slack and indifferent nineteenth-century Irishry that stands by as the nation is defrauded”⁴⁹. Both Lenehan's and Corley's behaviour is indeed reflected in their indifference at the political situation of their country. As many critics have noted, the working-girl of the story is not the only representation of Ireland in the story.

The harp which the two young man see played in front of the Kildare Street Club, a famous club among Pro-Unionist in the capital, is probably one of the best known representation of Ireland in the whole collection, another clear reference of the author with respect to

⁴⁸ James Joyce, *Dubliners*, *op. cit.*, p.38, n.1.

⁴⁹ Donald D. Torchiana, 'Two Gallants', *op. cit.*, p.91, n.47.

the Irish political situation at the beginning of the twentieth-century:

Not far from the porch of the club a harpist stood in the roadway, playing to a little ring of listeners. He plucked at the wires heedlessly, glancing quickly from time to time at the face of each new-comer and from time to time, wearily so, at the sky. His harp too, heedless that her coverings had fallen about her knees, seemed weary alike of the eyes of strangers and of her master's hands.⁵⁰

The reification of Ireland in this harp tells much about Joyce's vision of the subjugation of his country, especially because of his linguistic insistence on key terms in the colonial discourse: weary of being used by 'strangers' and by its 'master's hands', the harp is fallen to her knees among a few spectators. If on the one hand readers could certainly see in these two terms a hint to the country's subjugation to the Roman Catholic Church and to the British Empire, on the other hand, Corley and Lenehan's behaviour is indicative of the ways in which these two structures shape the moral stagnation of Joyce's representation of Irish society. Joyce's reading of Irish society thus warns readers that a way out of the power of these two structures is the only mean to escape the paralysis of the country.

⁵⁰ James Joyce, *Dubliners*, op. cit., pp.39-40, n.1.

Chapter Four

Escapism

“When do we sail for happiness?”¹
(C. Baudelaire)

“Escape! She must escape! [...] Why should she be unhappy?”²
(J. Joyce)

Even if in modern reality, as Charles Taylor rightly remarks, “the centre of life, of the purpose of life [...] is to be found in [...] ordinary life”³, it is exactly in the discontent of everyday experience that Baudelaire and Joyce uncover the tragic side of living the age of modernity. Reality is no longer perceived as being capable of providing the essential circumstances necessary to individuals' fulfilment, but on the contrary, it is seen as an agent which produces disappointment. In *The Flowers of Evil* and *Dubliners* the authors' awareness of a reality marked by “desperation, negation, emptiness”⁴ represents the starting point used to analyse the implications of the feeling of disenchantment with the world which, by opening the way

¹ Charles Baudelaire, *Intimate Journals*, trans. Christopher Isherwood, New York, Stratford Press, 1947, p.34.

² James Joyce, *Dubliners*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2008, p.28.

³ Octavio Paz, in *Voices: Modernity and its Discontents*, ed. Bill Bourne et al., Nottingham, Spokesman, 1987, p.26

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp.99-100.

to illusions, encapsulates another form of disappointment. Indeed, what these works offer is not only a critical analysis of the ways in which contemporary living frustrates individuals' desires and produces spleen and paralysis, but also an inquiry on the disappointment generated by the collapse of illusions. In Baudelaire and Joyce's works, the discovery of the double disappointment rooted in the age of modernity acquires also the essential significance of unveiling the hidden dangers of escapism.

For Warren Young, escapism represents “the attempt of the individual to escape the drudgery of the situation he finds himself in; an attempt to provide himself with a personal utopia”.⁵ Escapism is thus to be considered first of all as an answer to the frustrations inherent to modern living. What Baudelaire and Joyce portray is indeed a suffering originated by the limitations of existence, by the fracture which the models of modernity produce between happiness and reality. If living is perceived as “a black shipwreck into the present”,⁶ both authors aim at describing the implications of reality as a liminal space where the only possibility of happiness is to be found in an imaginative flight outside one's own life. Young's notion of

⁵ Warren L. Young, 'Escapism in Literature and Life' in *Neohelion*, vol.4, (1976), p.377.

⁶ Guy Sagnes, *L'Ennui dans la Littérature Française: de Flaubert à Laforgue (1848-1884)*, Paris: Librairie Armand Colin, 1969, p.70. [Translation mine]

“personal utopia” is indeed a construction which answers what Walter Benjamin calls “the atrophy of experience”,⁷ the permanence of a dissatisfaction towards reality that prompts individuals to look for fulfilment outside it.

The very first consequence of the disappointment generated by everyday living is that imagination begins to permeate the dullness and frustrations of actual life: life starts to be imagined. In Joyce's 'Counterparts', for example, the protagonist's debasement and rage at all “the indignities of his life”⁸ represents a source of disappointment from which escape is achieved only by the elaboration of his personal humiliations into an ideal representation of his self. As a matter of fact, the servility which Irish Farrington demonstrates when confronted to the furies of his Ulster boss, is transformed by the character into a boastful and gratifying act of self-affirmation in front of his friends at the pub: “So, I just looked at him – coolly, you know [...] *I don't think that's a fair question to put to me, says I*”.⁹ The image which the protagonist gives to his friends is clearly a projection of his imagination, a form of escape which functions as a way out of

⁷ Walter Benjamin, cited in John Joseph McCole, *Walter Benjamin and the antinomies of tradition*, New York, Cornell University Press, 1993, p.268.

⁸ James Joyce, *Dubliners*, *op.cit.*, p.71, n.2.

⁹ *Ibid.*

reality; by creating his alter-ego Farrington performs the ideal image of himself.

In *Dubliners* escapism represents the only cure available to the present, the evasion from a reality which is marked by the crystallization of the effects of the models of modernity, a diversion, a hope or an aspiration by means of which characters can endure a condition which is perceived as being the result of constructions alien to their decisions. This is indeed the problem which connects the literary representation of the feeling of limitation inherent to modern Dublin reality and the idea of modernity itself which for Joyce, as well as Baudelaire, seems characterised by the ambiguous tendency of being overlaid by utopic conceptions. As Matthew Arnold rightly underlines indeed, modern individuals feel that the system they live in “is not of their own creation, that it by no means corresponds exactly with the wants of their actual life [...]” and it is exactly this feeling that for Arnold captures the essence of a distinct “modern spirit”.¹⁰ If the urban space condenses the mechanization and degradation of the present, the city exemplifies also the loss of values and hope which prompt the individual to look for “anything, so long as he manages to

¹⁰ Matthew Arnold, cited in *The Cambridge Companion to James Joyce*, ed. Derek Attridge, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1990, p.69.

escape from himself”.¹¹ The age of modernity creates “a world in which action is not the sister of dreams”,¹² where the malady affecting mankind is also discovered in the imaginary escapes produced by the elaboration of disappointments.

Escapism is thus portrayed by both authors in all its dangerous ambiguity. In Baudelaire's work, escapism takes the form of a tension towards the Ideal, the second fundamental element in the “double postulation”¹³ characterising the moral condition of modern man. The juxtaposition of Good and Evil, the “permanent duality of man”¹⁴ torn between Spleen and Ideal is for Baudelaire not only to be understood as an awareness of the presence of Spleen, but also in the recognition of the presence and function of the Ideal, the solution which seems apt to “satisfy the yearning heart”¹⁵ of the poet oppressed by the Spleen of a “worthless century”.¹⁶

What Spleen and Ideal thus represent, are the two poles of experience which Baudelaire places at the core of his vision of modernity, the combination by means of which the moral significance

¹¹ Blaise Pascal, cited in Warren L. Young, 'Escapism', p.378, n.5.

¹² Charles Baudelaire, *The Flowers of Evil*, trans. by James McGowan, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2008, p.267.

¹³ Charles Baudelaire, cited in Maria C. Scott, *Baudelaire's Le Spleen de Paris: shifting perspectives*, Ashgate, Aldershot, 2005, p.12.

¹⁴ Charles Baudelaire, cited in Virginia E. Swain, *Grotesque figures: Baudelaire, Rousseau and the aesthetics of modernity*, Baltimore and London, John Hopkins University Press, 2004, p.54.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p.39.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

of his oeuvre is produced. The city, by condensing the effects of the models of modernity, entraps the individual in a condition which reflects the prostration to which every individual is subject by the domination of evil. The ascendancy of Evil is questioned only when in the Ideal the poet recognises a potential mean to develop the self, opposing the influence of Evil: “the Ideal is not something vague, [...] an Ideal is the individual recovered by the individual, the individual reconstructed [...] to the vivid truth of his native harmony”.¹⁷

However, the possibility offered by the ideal is double edged. The tension towards it can represent a way to subside the disappointment of reality, but it is exactly in its being outside reality, in its being a form of personal utopia that the Ideal, in the end, highlights the feeling of frustration which has prompted its very creation. As Cacciavillani and Conio rightly observed, indeed:

The dualism between Spleen and Ideal must not be understood as an opposition, but as a reversibility. The Spleen is the condition to the Ideal and viceversa [...] they do not exclude each other, but are rather complementary poles in an endless exchange.¹⁸

What emerges from Baudelaire's poetry is thus an ethical question which also throws light on his views of escapism: is the Ideal

¹⁷ Charles Baudelaire, cited in Gérard Conio, *Baudelaire: Etude de Les Fleurs du Mal*, Allier, Marabout, 1992, p.147. [Translation mine]

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

effectively helpful to endure the discontents of the modern condition? In his poetry, the process of projecting desires outside reality defining everyday living in the age of modernity, is discovered as being highly controversial and painful. The poet is thus perfectly represented in the image of the *Heautontimoroumenos*, the self-tormentor who creates the cause of his own despair:

I am the wound, and rapier!
I am the cheek, I am the slap!
I am the limbs, I am the rack,
The prisoner, the torturer! ¹⁹

In these lines Baudelaire is recognised as Jonathan Culler underlines, as “the victim of his own self-consciousness”.²⁰ For him, the Ideal becomes a prison when its presence is felt so deeply as to make everyday living still more unbearable; the risk is in fact that even if the Ideal offers the possibility to “restore to joy a heart”,²¹ it can also become a “monster”,²² as the poet describes in 'To Each His Chimera'.

In this prose poem indeed, Baudelaire draws an allegoric scene in which the implications of escapism and its hidden dangers are revealed. It is by describing a scene which highlights the void and hopelessness of living that the poet captures the moment in which the

¹⁹ Charles Baudelaire, *The Flowers of Evil*, *op. cit.*, p.157, n.12.

²⁰ Jonathan Culler, “Introduction”, *The Flowers of Evil*, p.xxix, n.12.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p.201.

²² Charles Baudelaire, *Paris Spleen*, trans. by Martin Sorrell, London, Oneworld Classics, 2011, p.12.

chimera, as a fanciful fabrication of the mind, becomes a part intrinsic to existence: “under a huge grey sky, on a vast dusty plain without path [...] I encountered several men trudging, backs bent. Each bore on his shoulders an enormous Chimera”.²³ A desolated landscape is the metaphorical setting which the poet uses to convey the sense of limitation weighting down modern humanity; in the scene, the presence of the chimera is, however, not perceived as a superimposed burden alien to life, but a part of the self which the individual consciously chooses and accepts, indeed, “not one of the travellers appeared irritated by the ferocious beast [...] the impression was that each considered it a part of himself”.²⁴ The tragedy of the picture is nonetheless uncovered by the poet, who understands that the hopes exemplified by the chimera are a necessity for life, but that their presence, their consolation, is more of a condemnation: “under the sky's splenetic dome [...] they walked with the resigned air of those condemned to eternal hope”.²⁵

It is hope which nourishes the escape, or better, it is the sense of hopelessness inherent to reality that makes it flourish; its apex, the utopia, is for Baudelaire a calamity, a true monster produced by the

²³ *Ibid*

²⁴ *Ibid*

²⁵ *Ibid*

Spleen that has the same capacity to delude and oppress. It is also in the seductions of the Ideal that Baudelaire finds the real problem of modernity. His literary activity thus engages both in the description of the dejection of everyday life and in the entrapment produced by desires projected outside the actual:

Dreams, always dreams! And the more the soul is ambitious and discerning, the greater the distance between dream and the possible. [...] Shall we ever be part of the picture my mind has painted? ²⁶

The trauma of modern consciousness lies exactly in the perception of the limits of reality and in the ambiguous tension which entraps the individual, in the distance which is always felt from the ideal representation of the self.

The same process is described in James Joyce's *Dubliners*. The shallow present of Dublin's life is a drama where, as Seamus Deane remarks “the world of the actual is processed into the world of consciousness”²⁷; *Dubliners* are thus forced to take part in the same vicious circle which Baudelaire portrayed. In the collection, personal utopia has to be understood as a construction in which characters conflate their need of “acceptance, approbation and reward”²⁸ which

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p.34.

²⁷ Seamus Deane, 'Dead ends: Joyce finest moments' in *Semicolonial Joyce*, ed. Derek Attridge and Marjorie Howes, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000, p.33.

²⁸ Marilyn French, 'Missing pieces in Joyce's *Dubliners*' in *Twentieth Century Literature*, vol.24, n.4, (1978), p.446.

they all have placed outside Dublin's present. Their projections attest that what is missing in the modern metropolis is the sense of a “fully lived life, the life true to itself, in which individual human energies could function harmoniously with an outer realm”.²⁹

Dublin's reality seems, however, more as a realm in which the projection of fantasies of escape represents a response to its stagnation. This is indeed an aspect which Joyce decides to portray in “A Little Cloud”, where the story is filtered by the personal view of the protagonist, Little Chandler. Since “the narrative consciousness and the language”³⁰ of the the protagonist are aligned, readers are able to catch a glimpse of the character's frustrated literary ambitions, of the contrast he feels between his own life and his friend's Gallaher' journalistic success in London. His admiration is ambiguously accompanied by a scorn of Dublin citizens' “minute vermine-like life”³¹, a rejection which draws him closer to Gallaher's opinion of the “old country”.³²His admiration leads him also, however, to compare his life and that of his friend's, and even if he is sure that “he could do something better than his friend had ever done, or could ever do,

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p.453.

³⁰ Jeri Johnson, “Introduction”, James Joyce, *Dubliners*, *op. cit.*, p.xxv, n.2.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p.54.

³² *Ibid.*, p.56.

something higher than mere tawdry journalism if he only got the chance”³³his real chances to follow Gallaher's steps are in the end only able to arouse in him “a dull resentment against his life”,³⁴ What readers see in Little Chandler's fantasies about his life is that he fantasises about being a poetry:

Could he write something original? He was not sure what idea he wished to express but the thought that a poetic moment had touched him took life within him like an infant hope. [...] A light began to tremble on the horizon of his mind. [...] He tried to weight his soul to see if it was a poet's soul. [...] He would never be popular: he saw that. He could not sway the crowd but he might appeal to a little circle of kindred minds.³⁵

Escapism is thus the answer which opens a new whole new range of possibilities to a victim of victim of “dear dirty Dublin”³⁶ : “Could he not escape from his little house? Was it too late for him to try to live [...]?”³⁷ It is only outside the system of Dublin represents that Little Chandler is able to see a prospect to ameliorate his life and give voice to the soul of his poetical ambitions. On the one hand the utopic escape fuels new prospects and new desires, and thus while reading Byron, Little Chandler is again raptured at the idea of artistic creation: “he felt the rhythm of the verse about him in the room. How

³³ *Ibid.*, p.61.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p.63.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p.55.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p.57.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p.63.

melancholy it was! Could he, too, write like that, express the melancholy of his soul in verse? There were so many things he wanted to describe [...]”.³⁸ However, on the other hand, the protagonist's imaginary constructions are bound to collapse again under the weight of his everyday life as his child awakes and starts to cry, interrupting his reveries: “It was useless [...] He couldn't do anything [...] The wailing of the child pierced the drum of his ear. It was useless, useless! He was a prisoner for life!”.³⁹

Little Chandler's reaction is emblematic of the way in which illusionary escapes result in the arousal of feelings of “shame and [...] remorse”⁴⁰, a criterion to judge everyday life, a way to indulge in the desperation given by the limitation of existence. The protagonist's sense of entrapment is common to many other characters in *Dubliners*. The essence of the author's betrayal of Dublin's paralysis lies in the depiction of their latent desires and unfulfilled dreams merging in the mental fabrication of the escape and their final inability to escape.

The full extent of the hemiplegia of the city is perceived and distilled, and the negation of life becomes apparent, like in “Eveline”,

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p.64.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p.65.

where the protagonist's escape is shaped from a need of happiness which finds no response in reality: "Escape! She must escape! [...] she wanted to live. [...] Why should she be unhappy? She had a right to happiness".⁴¹ Eveline's final resignation is similar to Little Chandler's in 'A Little Cloud', and her recognition of her own paralysis is never strong enough to be enacted: "No! No! No! It was impossible [...] Amid the seas she sent a cry of anguish! [...] She set her white face to him, passive, like a helpless animal".⁴²

The necessity of "doors of escape"⁴³ thus seems always to imply a new disappointment given by the impossible realization of ideals. In Joyce's collection, 'A Painful Case' is a story in which the alienation of the protagonist summarizes the discomforts of modern civilization from which the desire of a true relation with the other is formed. Mr Duffy indeed has "neither companion nor friends [...]" he lived his spiritual life without any communion with others",⁴⁴ but the sense of isolation which characterises his existence is a condition which he accepts. It is by meeting Mrs Sinico that the protagonist seems finally able to establish a contact with another individual, extracting from his

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p.28.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p.29.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p.11.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p.83.

melancholy, “saturnine”⁴⁵ personality, a vision of social communion which “exalted him, wore away the rough edges of his character, emotionalized his mental life”.⁴⁶ This moment of elation is however amplified by the dangerous implications of idealisation:

He thought that in her eyes he would ascend to an angelical stature; and as he attached the fervent nature of his companion more and more closely to him, he heard the strange impersonal voice which he recognised as his own, insisting on the soul's incurable loneliness, we cannot give ourselves: [...] we are our own.⁴⁷

Mrs Sinico becomes both the instrument to surpass personal limitation and a tool for Mr Duffy's self-affirmation. However, it is in this same idealisation that the protagonist's hopes for social communion wreck and the possibility of establishing a true communion with the other is questioned and lost in the realization of the full extent of one's solitude:

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.⁴⁸

In the immense breakdown of modern society, in the endless decline of civilization in which the entrapment of reality shuts every chance to happiness and fulfilment, escape, for Joyce and Baudelaire,

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p.82.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p.85.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p.90.

represents a fugitive moment of hope amid the “feeling of catastrophe in permanence”⁴⁹. The price to pay in the age of modernity is a paradox which is as clear in *Dubliners* as it has been in *The Flowers of Evil*: “the place might dominate, producing paralysis; the consciousness might dominate, producing fantasy”.⁵⁰ *Dubliners* portray a reality where individuals feel a disillusionment so powerful as to make them dangerously “hungry for illusion”.⁵¹ What Joyce's citizens suffer from “is the inability to escape from modernity and from its emblematic place”⁵², shaping from their disappointment illusory doomed flights towards anything that might represent an escape.

⁴⁹ Jonathan Arac, *Impure Worlds: the Institution of Literature in the Age of the Novel*, Fordham, Fordham University Press, 2000, p.138.

⁵⁰ Seamus Deane, 'Dead ends', p.33, n.27.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p.23.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p.33.

Chapter Five

Breaking the circle

“I have only tired arms
from having hugged the clouds above”¹
(C. Baudelaire)

“The time had come for him
to set out on his journey westward”²
(J. Joyce)

It is in the disappointment generated by escapism that Baudelaire and Joyce capture the essence of a trauma which reveals the triumph of Spleen and paralysis in the vicious circle which characterises the age of modernity. Indeed, *The Flowers of Evil* and *Dubliners* share the focus on a reality in which living is saturated by fantasy, filled with an unsatisfied desire of happiness and fulfilment that is bound to collapse under the weight of modern living. What both authors underline is the persistence of this condition, and the feeling of hopelessness and resignation which accompanies the discovery of a reality frustrating personal realizations. Baudelaire and Joyce thus work to show how the harmonious correspondence between individuals and society had

¹ Charles Baudelaire, *The Flowers of Evil*, trans. James McGowan, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2008, p.345.

² James Joyce, *Dubliners*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2008, p.176.

been compromised by the painful perception of a “friction between the soul and the external world”³, a gap which marks the need of an escape, a way out in the direction of a new way of life. Escapism becomes the palliative of living, an integral part of the human condition, a resource which is used to fill the void of an age which has discovered the multiplication of horizons, but also the frustration and nothingness of existence. Since nothing seems able to offer a true sense of fulfilment, Escapism might represent a consolation, but both authors agree in considering its influence a dangerous form of illusion. What *The Flowers of Evil* and *Dubliners* seems thus to imply is a question of paramount importance: is there a solution to the vicious circle of Spleen and paralysis?

Baudelaire's first attempt to limit the rule of Spleen is the recognition of “the epic side of modern life”⁴, an aspect which at the same time is rooted and contrasts the “perpetual mourning”⁵ characteristic of the age of modernity. The discovery of the “heroism of modern life”⁶ informs the poet's perception of his age without

³ Hermann Hesse, cited in Franco Rella, *Miti e figure del Moderno: letteratura, arte e filosofia*, Milano, Feltrinelli, 1993, p.82. [Translation mine]

⁴ Charles Baudelaire, cited in *The Cambridge companion to Baudelaire*, ed. Rosemary Lloyd, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2005, p.139.

⁵ Charles Baudelaire, cited in Gérard Conio, *Baudelaire: Etude de Les Fleurs du Mal*, Allier, Marabout, 1992, p.410. [Translation mine]

⁶ Charles Baudelaire, *Selected Writings on Art and Artists*, translated by P.E.Charvet, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1972, p.104.

excluding the painful awareness of the tragic side of everyday life; on the contrary, it is exactly in the recognition of this particular quality that Baudelaire shapes his disappointment by revealing the beauty intrinsic in the present. The city is thus rediscovered as an object which can be invested by aesthetic possibilities; the conflation of the negative aspects of civilization represents but the starting point of artistic creation, the privileged *reservoir* of images which the author reworks. The artist's superior perception of the potential of the city, allows him to go beyond the limits of the quotidian and find that "Parisian life is rich in poetic and wonderful subjects. We are enveloped and steeped as though in an atmosphere of the marvellous; but we do not notice it"⁷.

The permeation of the urban space in the poet's mind becomes so powerful that the act of writing itself starts to mirror the poet's wanderings in the city; the poet becomes a flâneur, "stumbling on words as over paving stones, sniffing in corners all the risks of rhyme"⁸. His artistic creation is thus a struggle, a process which involves the exploration of the dark side of the present. Indeed, the process of extracting beauty and moulding an unfeeling reality into an object of

⁷ *Ibid.*, p.107.

⁸ Charles Baudelaire, *The Flowers of Evil*, *op. cit.*, p.169, n.1.

art is never a task which leaves the poet unharmed, but art is the only means to achieve a sort of compromise with reality. Art is also the only element which can offer awareness, where the Spleen of everyday life is shaped to communicate with the other, thus transcending the failure of relations of the present.

It is in the bitter recognition of the condition of humanity that the poet establishes a parallel between himself and a reader who stands as the incarnation of all modern humanity; Baudelaire, self-conscious of the failure of the Ideal and the persistence of the Spleen, signals the correspondences which tie his existence to his fellow human beings. The poet addresses the reader, pointing at the deadening effect of Ennui and the moral triumph of Evil: “Ennui! [...] Reader, you know this dainty monster too; - Hypocrite reader, - fellowman, - my twin!”.⁹ In a moral perspective, in his poetry Baudelaire discovers a bond with humanity which is based on a necessity, unveiling the truth about the spiritual malady saturating the age of modernity. Artistically, he elected this condition as the source of his creation, inserting the Spleen at the centre of his aesthetic programme.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p.7.

For James Joyce, writing *Dubliners* is essentially a way to warn readers on the consequences of paralysis. If reality is perceived as a prison of unhappiness and the fragile hope given by escape is always bound to collapse under the weight of paralysis Joyce is not just portraying the diagnosis of the crisis intrinsic in reality, but also its cure, the solution which is able to break the vicious circle of paralysis. For the author, *Dubliners'* worth as a work of art is thus the potential revelation it can offer simply by “having one good look”¹⁰ at it as a “nicely polished looking-glass”.¹¹ *Dubliners* is a mirror which Joyce designs as much for readers as for Irish people; in it, the realistic description of the ways in which paralysis entraps individuals both originating and condemning the flight towards escape, has the essential function of pointing out that the only solution to the vicious circle lies in the focus on the actual, surpassing idealization. Joyce's realism, indeed, was indeed meant to smash “romanticism into a pulp”¹²and he warned *Dubliners'* readers that a faithful portrayal of Dublin's life was the only anecdote to save his citizens. Joyce's characters in the collection, indeed, confirm the author's creed of the dangers of the

¹⁰ James Joyce, *Letters of James Joyce*, 3 vols.: vol.i ed. Stuart Gilbert; vols.ii and iii ed. Richard Ellmann, New York, Viking, 196, vol.i, p.64.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² James Joyce to Arthur Power, in Arthur Power, *Conversations with James Joyce*, ed. Clive Hart, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1982, p.36.

escape; Eveline, Little Chandler and Mr Farrington are only some of the characters whose discontents and frustrations are not solved by means of the Ideal, but worsened after the failure of their imaginary escapes.

In *Dubliners* breaking the circle of paralysis is a process which requires a fundamental modification in the practice of living; if Baudelaire recognises that 'it takes an heroic mind to live modernity'¹³ Joyce realizes that salvation is to be achieved by means of "a course of action and not of hope"¹⁴ which inevitably requires a critique of the forces and mechanisms holding Ireland behind. Joyce sees the real escape as a matter of choice and free will, an act of courage prompted by the awareness that paralysis exists also in the connivance of those who let it flourish: "What's the matter with you is that you're afraid to live. You and people like you. The city is suffering from hemiplegia of the will".¹⁵ It is also in the mental slavery of Dublin's citizens that Joyce recognizes the mark of paralysis; if all *Dubliners* are blind to the mechanisms which rule their lives, the portrayal of their condition represents an illustration to readers of the mistakes to avoid.

¹³ A.S.Kline, *Voyage to Modernity: The Poetry of Charles Baudelaire*, (2005), in <http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/French/VoyageToModernitypage.htm>

¹⁴ Warren L.Young, 'Escapism in Literature and Life' in *Neohelicon*, vol.4, (1976), p.380.

¹⁵ James Joyce, cited in Florence L. Walzl, 'Dubliners' in *A Companion to Joyce Studies*, ed. Zack Bowen and James F.Carens, Westport, Greenwood Press, 1984, p.159.

The collection is thus a means to achieve conscious awareness: “the first step towards the spiritual liberation”¹⁶ of a country. It is for this reason that *Dubliners* are designed to show moments of *anagnorisis*, sparks of self-recognition which underline the possibility of a new beginning, of a new attitude towards life freed from the suffocation of paralysis. As a matter of fact, Joyce's stories represent a series of “epicletic”¹⁷, epiphanic revelations which are meant to betray the 'soul' of paralysis. These pictures of Dublin life reveal a work of art that aims at capturing those moments in character's lives which are charged with the discovery of one's true and actual condition in reality; for the author it is only in the portrayal of the “most delicate and evanescent of moments”¹⁸ in which the self experiences the “sudden spiritual manifestation”¹⁹ of the epiphany that the collection, as a work of art, has the possibility to trigger the process of liberation from paralysis. As Vicki Mahaffey remarks, the exposure of the epiphanies is “designed to prove the power and authority of the self over the external world”²⁰ or at least to prove that individuals, and

¹⁶ James Joyce, *Letters, op. cit.*, vol.i, pp.62-63, n.10.

¹⁷ James Joyce, cited in Patrick Parrinder, *James Joyce*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984, p.41.

¹⁸ James Joyce, *Stephen Hero*, ed. Theodore Spencer, New York, New Directions Press, 1944, p.210.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Vicki Mahaffey, 'Joyce's shorter works' in *The Cambridge Companion to James Joyce*, ed. Derek Attridge, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1990, p.193.

consequently readers, are offered the chance to understand that the way out of paralysis is not to be found in the idyll represented by escape, but only in a new form of self-awareness. In the revelation, the vicious circle of paralysis is uncovered in its deadening influence, in the repetition of a never ending process of negation and despair shaped into illusionary projections of happiness doomed to collapse.

Since *Dubliners'* stories express the necessity to find of a new vision of reality, epiphanies are the sparks of consciousness which are meant to bring to light the unconscious blindness of existence. A blindness that is perfectly embodied in the protagonist of 'Clay' who, by means of the trivial occasion of traditional Hallow Eve games, reveals a life which comes to epitomize the inevitability of the sense of mourning intrinsic in Dublin life. During the game used to foretell the future, it is clay which blindfolded Maria finds, an item which traditionally has no other meaning than death. The story reaffirms Joyce's belief of the hopelessness inherent to Dublin's life; Maria, like all other characters in the collection, is a victim whose blindness has to be understood also in her decision to accept the condition which entraps her.

Breaking the circle of paralysis is thus a question that assumes a

fundamental importance in relation with the individual's possibility to find a valid and concrete alternative to imaginary escapes. Both the last poem of *The Flowers of Evil* and the last of *Dubliners'* stories are focused on the exploration of one of these alternatives, the voyage. Baudelaire' s 'Voyaging' is a poem in which the usefulness of the voyage is revealed in the knowledge which its experience is able to produce; as a fundamental form of revelation, it offers a lesson on the way in which reality should be interpreted:

How bitter, what we learn from voyaging!
the small and tedious world gives us to see
now, always, the real horror of the thing,
ourselves- that sad oasis in a gulf of ennui.²¹

Voyage may represent a first response to the Spleen, an escape which this time comprises not only a flight of the imagination but also the possibility of an actual movement, but since “everywhere is here” and all is the same, the Spleen is re-established as the negative consciousness of the modern condition. If for Baudelaire “life is a hospital where every patient is possessed by the desire to change beds”²² voyaging is thus only an illusionary solution, another form of

²¹ Charles Baudelaire, *The Flowers of Evil*, *op. cit.*, p.291, n.1.

²² Charles Baudelaire, *Paris Spleen*, trans. by Martin Sorrell, London, OneWorld Classics, 2010, p.94.

false hope. Similarly, death, the ultimate, terrible chance which the poet envisions, results only in another instance of impossibility, in another reaffirmation of the vicious circle. What is revealing indeed, is the poet's perception of death as a means to achieve something new:

O Death, old captain, time to make our trip!
this country bores us, Death! Let's go away! [...]
plunge to depths of Heaven or of Hell,
to fathom the Unknown, and find the *new*!²³

It is interesting to see how these lines summarize the splenetic circle in the exact definition of its two phases: a first moment of discontent which is then followed by a second moment in which the self projects his desires outside reality. Like the Ideal, the *new* is revealed as another form of expectation, another form of escape, another illusory possibility to find happiness, to forget the Spleen and the domination of Evil.

On the contrary, in Joyce's "The Dead", the voyage seems to offer more than just the pretext of another unrealisable Ideal. Gabriel Conroy's discovery that "the time had come for him to set out on his journey westward"²⁴ marks a recognition which stands for a true attempt to change his life concretely. It is not a coincidence that 'The Dead' is set on January 6th, the Feast of the Epiphany; it is in an

²³ Charles Baudelaire, *The Flowers of Evil*, *op. cit.*, p.293, n.1.

²⁴ James Joyce, *Dubliners*, *op. cit.*, p.176, n.2.

epiphany that the protagonist understands the full extent of living a liminal space where death saturates life, where the lives of the dead offer a parallel in which *Dubliners* are defeated. Notwithstanding Gabriel's attempt to affirm his presence in the world by creating a boundary between his present and the past, the past is an element which cannot be left behind, since it is part of the logic of paralysis. Indeed, even if he stresses his conviction not to “linger on the past,”²⁵ but the necessity to move forward, the discovery of his wife's still vivid attachment to a dead lover represents the moment in which all his certainties falter and together with shattering the ideal image of his wedding, the shock prompts him to establish a parallel between Gretta's dead lover and his present love for his wife. By placing his feelings next to those of Michael, the protagonist recognises the limitations of his emotional life and the implications of living a reality where the world of the living is dissolved into the world of the dead since his own identity too “was fading out into a grey impalpable world”.²⁶ For Gabriel, the epiphany thus reveals his own subjection to the past, and also the necessity of a movement from the paralysis which as “snow”²⁷ freezes the present of Ireland. His ephiphanic

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p.160.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p.176.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

recognition of paralysis is, in the end, the first step in the direction of his spiritual liberation.

Conclusion

In the works of Charles Baudelaire and James Joyce the age of modernity seems to offer us a struggle doomed to failure. Both authors elect the city as the element which condenses the disappointment of the present; by exploring urban reality the tragic condition of humanity is uncovered in the perception of a fracture between individuals' expectations and actual existence.

For Baudelaire, portraying the city means descending to an underworld populated by “innocent monsters”¹, products and victims of an age in which everyone is bound to become an unconscious accomplice of its mechanisms. *The Flowers of Evil* capture an urban experience which is defined by the experience of the failure of relationships, by the trauma which accompanies the loss of the individual within the crowd, by the frustration produced by the commodification of art and of all aspects of individuals' lives. It is in the sense of hopelessness and limitation which characterizes this environment that Baudelaire recognises the essence of modern

¹ Charles Baudelaire, *Paris Spleen*, trans. Martin Sorrell, London, Oneworld Classics, 2011, p.209.

disappointment, the Spleen, a paralysing boredom which annihilates all prospects of happiness.

The perception of the inadequacy of the city becomes also the leitmotif of James Joyce's focus on the shadows of Irish modern living. In *Dubliners*, indeed, the urban space is the locus where societal stagnation results from characters' passive acceptance of a reality which is revealed in the corruption of its politics and religion. Both structures of power are indeed reflected in the author's desolate picture of a city marked by paralysis, where characters' social immobility and personal inability to establish interpersonal relations are explained as the result of their deadening influence.

The only consolation available from the feeling of Spleen and Paralysis which pervade the present is discovered in the fragile windows of hope offered by the escape, by the flight of the imagination by means of which the self attempts to construct its own "version of paradise"² in the desperate attempt to fill the void of reality. Escaping reality is a necessity which offers a temporary palliative, a process which captures the individual in the tension towards an ideal of happiness and fulfilment; however, the same

² A.S. Kline, *The Voyage to Modernity: Poetry in Charles Baudelaire*, (2005), in <http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/French/VoyageToModernitypage.htm>

mechanism which enables mankind to endure the present, to evade the discomforts of everyday existence, is a double edged possibility which hides another form of disappointment.

Indeed, if reality makes the soul cry out in despair for a place to realize his ideal happiness, the escape is revealed in all its illusions. The escape is a prison which is cherished because it offers a means to forget reality and a way to leave behind a quotidian marked by unhappiness; both authors consider it as the only element which answers the sense of frustration inherent to the age of modernity. If “everything, [...] is an abyss – actions, desires, dreams, words”,³ if everything conveys the same sense of limitation and entrapment, every failure generates new expectations for the ideal, new imaginary constructions ready to provide a fugitive instant of hope. What Baudelaire and Joyce share, then, is the discovery that the Ideal concurs with Spleen and paralysis to the definition of the malady of modern humanity, playing a role as fundamental in its creation. It is indeed in the collapse of the Ideal that individuals experience the return to the initial condition which prompted the escape. The mutual reversibility which characterises the two elements which compose the

³ Charles Baudelaire, *The Flowers of Evil*, trans. James McGowan, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2008, p.343.

vicious circle of modern reality is a mechanism which stands for the true tragedy of modern humanity.

The fundamental importance of these works lies in the realization that awareness is the only key to subside the disappointment of living in the age of modernity, the only true solution available to be freed from the vicious circle of spleen and paralysis. For Joyce this discovery positions the work of art at the very centre of human experience, because in its realism, in its pitiless description of the present, it highlights the necessity to surpass idealization; both authors agree, indeed, that the ideal is not able to offer solutions and that it is only by means of a clear-eyed vision of reality that the fracture between desires and actual existence can be healed.

The Flowers of Evil and *Dubliners* show that in the age of modernity art becomes “the great creator of the possibility of living”⁴. From discovering the beauty of endurance inherent to the present, to perceiving the fundamental importance of epiphanies, Baudelaire and Joyce offer an image of modernity as a struggle that shows us how “some achievements of the soul are not possible without disease”⁵.

⁴ Franco Rella, *Miti e Figure del Moderno: letteratura, arte e filosofia*, Milano, Feltrinelli, 2003, p.78. [Translation mine]

⁵ *Ibid.*, p.43. [Translation mine]

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