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JOYCE STUDIES IN ITALY

22

**JOYSPACE**  
**JAMES JOYCE AND SPACE**

*Edited by*  
*Roberto Baronti Marchiò*

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*Volume pubblicato con il contributo  
di The James Joyce Italian Foundation*

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## JOYCE'S INFERNAL DUBLIN IN CHILDHOOD AND MATURITY

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**Abstract:** As we know, Dante was Joyce's favorite writer and, in fact, he took him as a model in all his works. In particular, *Dubliners* is characterized by a strong presence of Dante's setting and Joyce attributes to each short story a Dantean moral, a sin or a fault, with consequent punishment to be served. However, he decides to do this by transporting Dante's Inferno into a modern and real world, which is located in Dublin, carrying on his interest in detail and truth. Joyce models *Dubliners* following a real Dantean pattern: Father Flynn's tobacco spills in *The Sisters* recall the dance of the damned in the *pianura della sabbia ardente*; the boys in *An Encounter* find themselves locked in the *Malebolge*; the "shower of kindly golden dust" described by Little Chandler in *A little Cloud* recalls the vision of the flames that crowd the eighth *bolgia*. In *A Painful Case* we find ourselves in *selva dei suicidi*, where the atmosphere is dominated by bare trees. The streets of Dublin become the infernal circles of the twentieth century, populated by damned souls in search of redemption.

**Keywords:** James Joyce, Dante Alighieri, Inferno, *Dubliners*, Comparative literature

*Joyce's Dublin might well be found in a corner of Dante's Inferno. [...] the lack of hope, the perversion of love – all these remind forcibly of Dante's journey through Hell. [...] If Dante's "state of souls after death" is a moral image of the state of souls in life, Joyce's description of the state of souls living in Dublin is an image of the state of souls living in a moral hell. (Carrier 1965: 215)*

### 1. Introduction

As it is known, Joyce describes Dublin carefully, inserting realistic details, and catapulting us into a city that we get to know well, page after page. We learn the names of the streets, the locations of the pubs, we know when the

sun rises, and when it sets. However, behind this obsessive realism, there is certainly an allegorical background, which Joyce takes from one of the greatest works ever written: Dante's *Divine Comedy*.

Reading some episodes from Joyce's life, we can immediately notice how much Dante influenced his mind: in 1887, when Joyce moved to the outskirts of Bray, Dante and Hell, had already become important histrionic ideas for him, in fact he created small performances and his brother Stanislaus particularly remembers a play in which he and his sister Margaret played respectively the parts of Adam and Eve, while James crawled around them in the role of serpent (Gorman 1939: 9).

Eileen Vance<sup>1</sup> remembers that, when Joyce wanted to punish someone, he threw the offender to the ground, placed a red wheelbarrow over him, donned a red cap on his head, and made macabre cries, as if he were burning the sinner in the fire of hell (*JIII*: 26). He studied Italian in Belvedere College, learned a lot thanks to the great Dante, and Oliver Gogarty baptized him "Dante from Dublin" (*JIII*: 77).

Before leaving Dublin, Joyce had not yet spoken of exile, but he realized that his escape from the city lacked the moral charge of his hero Dante, who had been exiled from Florence. Joyce and Dante share an attitude of hostility towards their native cities, often expressing a contempt for the inhabitants and for the institutions. Irish politics and the Catholic Church are the causes of the social, political, psychological, spiritual and artistic paralysis that Joyce portrays, and he saw this paralysis as an obstruction to achieve authenticity. Dante on his journey to Hell, through the interactions he has with real characters of his time, immortalizes the political scandals, religious corruption, and the moral lack of his homeland (Lecuyer 2009: 15). Joyce does the same in *Dubliners*: he describes the stories of real characters – who probably really existed in Dublin –, and shows, through them, the scandals, the corruption, and mostly, the lack of morals.

Joyce knew the *Divine Comedy* and decided to take it as a model for his very first works. In *Dubliners*, for example, there is a strong Dantean scheme: the first story, *The Sisters*, opens with an echo of the inscription of *Inferno III*: "There was no hope" (*D* 9), and *The Dead*, the last one, ends with a vision of frozen Ireland, which is the metamorphosis of *Cocytus*.

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<sup>1</sup> Eldest daughter of the Vance family, neighbours of Joyce in Bray.

One of *Dubliners*' first critics, Gerald Gould (1914), describes the work as "the dirty and crawling activities of a city that, in Joyce's view, was paralyzed in a state of moral depravity" (Deming 1970: 62-63). In fact, in all the stories, Dubliners are presented as manipulators, losers, hypocrites and sinners in general, trapped in their "self-built hells" (Lecuyer 2019: 4). The stories in *Dubliners* move in a circular flow: the book begins with a boy, surrounded by darkness, staring out of a window, lit with "faintly and evenly" (*D* 9) light, and when he thinks about death, he feels his soul "receding into some pleasant and vicious region" (*D* 11). It ends with a man who, while the snow falls "faintly" (*D* 224) in the darkness, stares at a window thinking about death, and feels that "his soul had approached that region where dwell the vast hosts of the dead" (*D* 223). Dante's *Inferno* is characterized by a repetitive and obsessive circularity. This is given, not only by the concentric structure of the circles, but also by the fact that we are in the reign of eternity, where there is no possibility of change. Souls will suffer the same pain forever, and there will never be a possibility of redemption. The same thing happened in Dublin, where everyone lives in constant paralysis.

Joyce's work, like Dante's, is both allegorical and realistic, because it presents Dublin realistically and precisely, but the state of paralysis in which the characters live, is also the state of souls after death. Joyce imagines a journey through the hellish Dublin, surrounded by souls, not dead physically, but spiritually and morally.

## **2. Childhood: The Sisters and An Encounter**

After submitting the stories to Richards, Joyce revises *The Sisters*, doubles its length, and increases its complexity. In particular, he revisits the opening line, adding a thick literary allusion: "There was no hope for him" (*D* 9). He decides to inaugurate his work with something sinful, and chooses the precise words used by Dante when he finds himself in front of



the gates of Hell: “Lasciate ogne speranza, voi ch’intrate”<sup>2</sup> (Inferno III: 9). Alluding to Dante, Joyce not only fits into a literary tradition, but rewrites it (Bulson 2006: 36). From the first words of the story, we immediately notice that something immoral and sinful has happened, or is about to happen:

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. But now it sounded to me like the name of some maleficent and sinful being. It filled me with fear, and yet I longed to be nearer to it and to look upon its deadly work. (D 9)

In the boy’s speech, the word “paralysis” is associated with simony, the sale of ecclesiastical dignities, and the sin of the same name. This is another clear reference to Dante, who places the sinners of simony in the VIII circle of Hell. In the III *bolgia*, the simonists are located upside down in holes, from which legs only emerge, while the flames burn the feet and cause pain, forcing sinners to move lower limbs quickly. We immediately see how Joyce contrasts the dynamism of simonists with the static nature of the priest’s paralysis. The word simony re-emerges in the boy’s mind later on:

In the dark of my room I imagined that I saw again the heavy grey face of the paralytic. [...] But the grey face still followed me. It murmured, and I understood that it desired to confess something. I felt my soul receding into some pleasant and vicious region; and there again I found it waiting for me. It began to confess to me in a murmuring voice and I wondered why it smiled continually and why the lips were so moist with spittle. But then I remembered that it had died of paralysis and I felt that I too was smiling feebly as if to absolve the simoniac of his sin. (D 11)

The grey face of the old priest haunts the boy, forcing him to go down to Hell, in that pleasant and vicious region, creating a coexistence between

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<sup>2</sup> Italian quotations from Dante’s *Inferno* are taken from the following edition: *Dante, La Divina Commedia. Inferno*, edited by Anna Maria Chiavacci Leonardi, Mondadori, 2016. English translation: “Abandon every hope, you who enter”. The translations are all taken from *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri*, Volume 1 *Inferno*, edited and translated by Robert M. Durling, introduction and notes by Ronald L. Martinez and Robert M. Durling, illustrations by Robert Turner, Oxford University Press New York, Oxford, 1996.

the reign of the living and the dead. Upon learning of the priest's death, the boy remembers his recent visits to him:

Even as he raised his large trembling hand to his nose little clouds of smoke dribbled through his fingers over the front of his coat. It may have been these constant showers of snuff which gave his ancient priestly garments their green faded look for the red handkerchief, blackened, as it always was, with the snuff-stains of a week, with which he tried to brush away the fallen grains, was quite inefficacious. (*D* 12)

This image is an evident allusion to Dante's description of *sabbia ardente* in the VII circle, where souls are tortured by an endless rain of fire: "Sovra tutto 'l sabbion, d'un cader lento, / piovean di foco dilatate falde"<sup>3</sup> (*Inferno* XIV: 28-29). "de le misere mani, or quindi or quinci / escotendo da sé l'arsura fresca"<sup>4</sup> (*Inferno* XIV. 41-42). Joyce replaces Dante's image of falling flames with the image of snuff, which produces a shower of black grains in the trembling hands of the priest (Lecuyer 2009: 51). Therefore, the trembling movement of the priest's hands, evokes the dance of the ever-moving hands of sinners. In the plain of *sabbia ardente*, blasphemers, sodomites and usurers are punished. Joyce limits the possibilities by describing the priest's clothes as green and faded, and this could be an important detail, because Dante associates the colour green with sodomites. (Lecuyer 2009: 52) "Poi si rivolse, e parve di coloro/ che corrono a Verona il drappo verde"<sup>5</sup> (*Inferno* XV, 121-122).

Dante populates Hell with Florentine characters to criticize the moral state of the citizens: he paints Florence as hell; Joyce reverses this idea and draws hell like Dublin. Although he uses the real settings of Dublin, he often emphasizes them when he describes the places in the city, taking Dante's *Inferno* as a model. In *An Encounter*, the two boys, tired, stop in a large field: "We both felt rather tired and when we reached the field we made at once for a sloping bank over the ridge of which we could see the Dodder" (*D* 24). Mary Reynolds (1981) identified this quote as an allusion to the opening of Canto XV, in which the sodomites, as already seen, are among the sinners punished in a plain of burning sand.

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<sup>3</sup> Over all the sand there rained, with a slow falling, / broad flakes of fire.

<sup>4</sup> Wretched hands, brushing away the fresh burning, / now from there, now from here.

<sup>5</sup> Then he turned back, and he seemed one of those / who at Verona race for the green cloth.

Ora cen porta l'un de' margini;  
e 'l fummo del ruscel di sopra aduggia,  
sì che dal foco salva l'acqua e li argini.  
(Inferno XV. 1-3)<sup>6</sup>

a tale immagine eran fatti quelli,  
tutto che né sì alti né sì grossi,  
qual che si fosse, lo maestro félli.  
(Inferno XV. 10-12)<sup>7</sup>

Dante and Virgil, as soon as they cross the *Flegetonte* river, have to walk on banks of stone. This recalls the setting of *An Encounter*, which Joyce may have modelled inspired by the *canto* of sodomites. The references to the settings of canto XV, however, are not finished: "I saw a man approaching from the far end of the field. [...] When he passed at our feet he glanced up at us quickly and then continued his way. [...] He stopped when he came level with us and bade us good-day" (*D* 24). The arrival of the man, who appears from afar, the gaze he turns to the two boys, and the greeting he gives them, recall Dante's description of souls in circle III of Hell. The damned walk along the riverbank, and they carefully observe Dante and Virgil. One of the souls, recognizes the poet, and greets him.

Quando incontrammo d'anime una schiera  
Che venian lungo l'argine, e ciascuna  
ci guardava come suol da sera  
(Inferno XV. 16-18)<sup>8</sup>

Fui conosciuto da un, che mi prese  
Per lo lembo e gridò: "Qual  
maraviglia!"  
(Inferno XV. 23-24)<sup>9</sup>

The description of the place recalls what Dante sees on his arrival in circle VIII, in *Malebolge*, a large circular expanse of stone, inclined towards the centre, which inside has ten circular ditches called *bolge*:

Luogo è in inferno detto Malebolge,  
tutto di pietra di color ferrigno,  
come la cerchia che dintorno il volge.  
Nel dritto mezzo del campo maligno  
vaneggia un pozzo assai largo e profondo,

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<sup>6</sup> Now one of the hard margins carries us along, / and the vapor from the river gives a shelter that / protects the water and the banks from the fire.

<sup>7</sup> After that image were these made, though not so / high nor so thick, whoever he may have been, the / master-builder made them.

<sup>8</sup> When we encountered a band of souls coming / along the barrier, and each was gazing at us as in the / evening.

<sup>9</sup> Was recognized by one, who seized me by the hem / and cried: "What a marvel!"

di cui suo loco dicerò l'ordigno.  
 Quel cinghio che rimane adunque e tondo  
 tra 'l pozzo e 'l piè de l'alta ripa dura,  
 e ha distinto in dieci valli il fondo.  
 Quale, dove per guardia de le mura  
 più e più fossi cingon li castelli,  
 la parte dove son rende figura,  
 tale imagine quivi facean quelli;  
 e come a tai fortezze da' lor sogli  
 a la ripa di fuor son ponticelli,  
 così da imo de la roccia scogli  
 movien che ricidien li argini e' fossi  
 infino al pozzo che i tronca e raccogli.  
 (Inferno XVIII. 1-18)<sup>10</sup>

When Dante describes the *Malebolge*, he speaks about a field, a sloping bank, and a valley full of sinners. The two boys are in Dublin, in a field and sitting on a bank. There is not a valley full of sinners, but we know for sure that there is one. Dante sees sinners at the bottom of the first *bolgia* walking quickly, in opposite directions, all whipped by the devils who are on the bank from one side to the other (Ledda 2016: 26): “Di qua, di là, su per lo sasso tetro / vidi demon cornuti con gran ferze, / che li battien crudelmente di retro”<sup>11</sup> (Inferno XVIII. 34-6).

The demons are equipped with great whips, and with them, they beat the damned. Analysing the words of the old man, we notice how they revolve around his desire to whip the misbehaving boys, and around his insatiable desire to punish young boys who lie.

He began to speak on the subject of chastising boys. [...] He said that when boys were that kind they ought to be whipped and well whipped. When a boy

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<sup>10</sup> There is in Hell a place called Malebolge, made of / scone the color of iron, like the circle that encloses it. / In the exact center of the evil field there gapes a / broad, deep pit, whose fashion I will tell suo loco. / The belt that remains, then, is round, between the / pit and the foot of the high hard bank, and its / bottom is divided into ten valleys. / As, where to guard the walls many moats gird / castles, their placing traces a pattern: / such an image these valleys made there; and as / from the thresholds of such fortresses bridges lead to / the outside bank: / so, from the base of the cliff, ridges moved that / cut across the banks and the ditches, as far as the pit / that truncates and gathers them in.

<sup>11</sup> Here and there, along the dark rock, I saw horned / demons with great whips, who were beating them / from behind.

was rough and unruly there was nothing would do him any good but a good sound whipping. A slap on the hand or a box on the ear was no good: what he wanted was to get a nice warm whipping. [...] He described to me how he would whip such a boy as if he were unfolding some elaborate mystery. He would love that, he said, better than anything in this world. (D 27)

Dante, as soon as he arrives in *Malebolge*, does not immediately cross the threshold, but describes what he sees from the slope that turns towards the well. Similarly, the narrator throughout the scene remains on the sloping bank, looking down. It is as if he sat on the threshold of sin, on the precipice of the first valley of *Malebolge*. The old man tries to convince him to cross that threshold, to guide him through the sin, but he cannot. The boy, frightened, stands up, goes to the top of the slope and runs with his friend towards safety (Lecuyer 2009: 46).

## 2. The maturity: A Little Cloud and A Painful Case

The first element that makes us think about a connection with Dante is certainly the choice of the title of the short story: *A Little cloud*, “una piccola nube”, o “nuvoletta”. This is a clear allusion to verse 39 of canto XXVI of *Inferno* (Reynolds 1981: 159), which reads: “sì come nuvoletta, in sù salire”<sup>12</sup>. We are in the eighth circle, in the eighth *bolgia*, where false counsellors are trapped, those who placed their acute intelligence, not at the service of truth, but at the service of fraud and deception. Reflecting on how Gallaher became a successful man, Chandler looks out of the window and describes the landscape:

The glow of a late autumn sunset covered the grass plots and walks. It cast a shower of kindly golden dust on the untidy nurses and decrepit old men who drowsed on the benches; it flickered upon all the moving figures – on the children who ran screaming along the gravel paths and on everyone who passed through the gardens. (D 71)

The description of the landscape is similar to Dante’s first vision of the flames that crowd the eighth *bolgia*. The bottom of it, is illuminated by many flames that beat with bright light, like summer fireflies in the night.

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<sup>12</sup> Like a little cloud, / rising up.

Come la mosca cede alla zanzara,  
vede lucciole giù per la valle,  
forse colà dov'è vendemmia e ara:  
di tante fiamme tutta risplendea  
l'ottava bolgia, sì com'io m'accorsi  
tosto che fui là 've 'l fondo para.  
(Inferno XXVI, 28-35)<sup>13</sup>

The protagonist of canto XXVI is Ulysses, who can be compared to the figure of Gallaher. Ulysses is a prisoner of fire, enveloped in flame, like Gallaher, who “emerging after some time from the clouds of smoke in which he had taken refuge” (*D* 78). The Greek hero, cunning and wretched, followed a false prudence and pursued only personal gains (Seriacopi 2020: 31-53).

He takes a journey because neither the affection towards his son, nor the pity towards the old father, and nor the love for Penelope, manage to win the ardent desire to become expert of the world, of human vices and virtue. Gallaher doesn't want to get married, doesn't want ties, and only thinks about travel and fun; just like Ulysses, who urges his crew to continue the journey, putting knowledge and experience first, Gallaher reproaches Chandler for always being the same, and never going in search of adventures.

However, this thirst for adventure and discovery can be also fatal: Ulysses is not satisfied with returning home, but continues to sail in the open sea, finding his death. Ulysses' arrogance leads him to guide his crew to death, and he proves to be an inadequate guide. Gallaher is as arrogant as Ulysses, he is not satisfied with Ireland and its limits; he is fascinated by vices, and is almost cruel when tries to convince his friend Chandler to travel and break free from his conditions.

When Ulysses tells the journey that will lead him to his tragic end, Dante feels something similar between his path and that of the Homeric hero. Circe proposes to Ulysses a journey through underworld, like the one Virgil proposes to Dante (Pertile 2007: 25-30). If Dante's journey is

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<sup>13</sup> When the fly gives way to the mosquito - sees / down along the valley, perhaps where he harvests / and plows: / with so many flames the eighth pocket was all / shining, as I perceived when I was where I could / see its depths.

compared to that of Ulysses, Gallaher's exile can be compared to that of Joyce. Ulysses goes beyond human limits, he wants to go where no one has ever gone, and endangers his life. Dante chose to embark on a journey that goes beyond human limits, risking to not return home, and to be trapped in the underworld forever. Joyce saw no future in Ireland, he criticized the closed mind of his fellow citizens, and their fear of going further, and for this reason he decided to leave for voluntary exile. He moves away from his homeland, seeks fortune elsewhere, and will continue to look at Ireland with a little contempt. Gallaher does the same, seeks success in a foreign country and criticizes his friend, because he has decided to stay there, with his family and his monotonous work.

In *A Painful Case*, Joyce talks about a suicide, placing Mrs. Sinico in Dante's *selva dei suicidi*, where those who have exercised violence against themselves are punished. Suicides are transformed into dry trees, and immediately they become part of a pathless, dark and scary forest, a true *locus inferni*:

quando noi ci mettemmo per un bosco  
che da neun sentiero era segnato.  
Non fronda verde, ma di color fosco;  
non rami schietti, ma nodosi e 'nvolti;  
non pomi v'eran, ma stecchi con tòsco:  
(Inferno XIII, 2-6)<sup>14</sup>

In *selva dei suicidi*, the presence of bare trees characterizes the place, and create a macabre and frightening atmosphere; but also the darkness, which does not allow to see well, leads to a great sense of perception of hearing and smell. In the forest there are hundreds of laments, but no one is seen, and to overcome Dante's bewilderment, Vigil invites him to break the branch of a tree. Before even pulling back his hand, a voice coming out of the tree reproaches him for that gesture. At the end of *A Painful Case*, Mr. Duffy returns home and thinks about his old friend's suicide. He passes through a park, and the description of the place recalls the landscape of *selva dei suicidi*:

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<sup>14</sup> We entered a wood that no path marked. / Not green leaves, but dark in color, not smooth / branches, but knotted and twisted, no fruit was there, / but thorns with poison.

The night was cold and gloomy. He entered the Park by the first gate and walked along under the gaunt trees. He walked through the bleak alleys where they had walked four years before. She seemed to be near him in the darkness. At moments he seemed to feel her voice touch his ear, her hand touch his. He stood still to listen. (*D* 116, 117)

In addition to the landscape of the short story, which seems to take inspiration from Dante's *selva dei suicidi*, we also notice the auditory and tactile perception of Mr. Duffy, who, in the darkness, seems to hear Mrs. Sinico's voice, and he seems to feel the weight of her hand touching him. The same thing happens to Dante, when "sentia d'ogne parte trarre guai / e non vedea persona che 'l facesse"<sup>15</sup> (*Inferno* XIII: 22-3), or "porsi la mano un poco avante"<sup>16</sup> (*Inferno* XIII: 31).

This short story is not modelled only on the description of *selva dei suicidi*, but contains many other references to Dante's *Inferno*, and in particular to the last circle, the closest to Lucifer (Lecuyer 2009 :57). Mr. Duffy, after seeing the two young lovers, turns his eyes towards the river:

He turned his eyes to the grey gleaming river, winding along towards Dublin. Beyond the river he saw a goods train winding out of Kingsbridge Station, like a worm with a fiery head winding through the darkness, obstinately and laboriously. It passed slowly out of sight; but still he heard in his ears the laborious drone of the engine reiterating the syllables of her name. (*D* 117)

The three references to meandering, make us think immediately of the devil, who since the genesis is represented as a snake. But the way in which Virgil describes Lucifer in the last canto of Hell is also important: "vermo reo che 'l mondo fôra"<sup>17</sup> (*Inferno* XXXIV: 108). The repetitive rhythm of the train could be compared to the rhythmic flapping of the wings of Lucifer (Lecuyer 2009: 57) "Non avean penne, ma di vispistrello / era lor modo; e quelle svolazzava, / sì che tre venti si movean da ello"<sup>18</sup> (*Inferno* XXXIV: 49-51).

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<sup>15</sup> I heard cries of woe on every side but saw no / person uttering them.

<sup>16</sup> I stretched out my hand a little before me.

<sup>17</sup> Evil worm that gnaws the world.

<sup>18</sup> They did not have feathers; their mode was like a / bat's; and he was fanning them, so that three winds / went out from him:



### 3. Conclusions

Joyce, to reinforce his idea of infernal Dublin, takes many details from Dante, in particular uses settings of Dante's Hell in his Dublin. We also see how not everyone is destined for eternal damnation for Joyce: in fact, the child of *The Sisters* and the two boys in *An Encounter* can still be saved, while the priest and the old man are already locked up in their hellish circle. Same thing for Gallaher and Mrs. Sinico, who, by mature people, have no possibility of redemption.

In Joyce's works there are many references to Dante and in particular to Hell, and they are not limited only to these four short stories and to *Dubliners*. Mary Reynolds (1981) provides a detailed pattern that compares Dante's circle to the short stories of *Dubliners*, placing each character in an area of Dante's Hell. The vision of a hellish Dublin is present in every *Dubliners* short story, from the indifferent of *Eveline*, to the traitors of *The Dead*, through the lustful, the violent, the sodomites, the seducers, the simoniacs and the false counsellors.

However, there is a difference with Dante, precisely in the creation of the work. Dante participates in the journey and speaks with sinful souls; Joyce tells from the outside, he does not ask anything of the characters, but he is a demiurge who creates and observes them. There is no compassion, as happens in Dante. The author remains detached, indifferent. Both want to reveal or evoke the essence of things and the awakening of consciences. Dante writes the Comedy after having already learned the way to salvation and intends to show his readers how to free themselves from sin. He embarks on a journey to know the nature of human sin. After *Inferno*, he is ready to go through *Purgatorio*, and finally through *Paradiso*, to reach spiritual salvation. In *Dubliners*, on the other hand, there is not a single traveling protagonist, but the reader is the only person who plays the coherent role of this wandering around the city, while he progresses through each stage of moral depravity. Moreover, there is no guide, and neither the characters nor the readers are directed toward salvation, but they remain forever damned.

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