

Joyce's "Grace": A Story of Ingratiation

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In the tradition of Western literature there exists a genre which deals with the salvation of a fallen man by the grace of God. Given the archetype in some biblical accounts and the typical structure in *The Divine Comedy*, the subject has offered not only the main theme but also a minor ingredient to numberless narratives in verse and prose, and the narrative pattern has become so familiar that a writer could produce a story of grace without intending it. But it is easily seen that Joyce is exceptionally conscious of following the tradition of this genre in "Grace"; perhaps he even intends to culminate it by dislocating the narrative pattern and presenting a parody of the genre. In the following remarks I would like to see how Joyce's story of grace is designed to dislocate itself, and to cast light on his device in short fiction.

1

It attracts a special attention that the religious theme emerges again in "Grace," the last of the first-planned fourteen stories and the last but one in the published form of *Dubliners*, more distinctly than

in the earliest piece "The Sisters," the other of the two focused mainly on the Catholic background that dominates the lives of Dubliners. This is partly the reason that "Grace" has been often seen as a religious tale, parable, allegory or something of the sort. Such a conventional reading is to be attributed to the author who shared with his brother an in-joke that the story had a parallel pattern with *The Divine Comedy* (Stanislaus Joyce 225). This in-joke has given a cause to those who liked to point out correspondences to *The Divine Comedy*. Some critics have been even induced to look for other intertextual references such as the doctrine of the holy trinity (Baker), Jonathan Swift's *A Tale of a Tub* (Kauver; Boyle), John Bunyan's *Grace Abounding* and *The Pilgrim's Progress* (Moseley), and The Book of Job (Gates). Under all of these parallel readings lies an assumption that "Grace" is a tale of the salvation of a fallen man by the grace of God, a story built upon the theological concept "grace," that is "The free and unmerited favour of God as manifested in the salvation of sinners and the bestowing of blessings" (*The Oxford English Dictionary* Sense 11.a). This assumption is partly right indeed as far as Joyce intentionally follows the tradition of stories of grace. But it is to be equally noticed that he does so with no serious, straight aim of offering a religious parable for the Catholic audience. His attitude towards the concept is of a complex sort. He talks about Catholicism as "the coherent absurdity" (*The Critical Writings* 169), and makes his fictitious counterpart, Stephen Dedalus, refer to it as "an absurdity which is logical and coherent" (*A Portrait* V.2468-9). "Grace" is a satire on the title word itself, which is constituent of the "logical and coherent" system of ideas which the Catholic Church holds. Those critics mentioned above, who are ready to find a Catholic concept of

grace dominating the story, miss the satirical tone of the story. Every piece of *Dubliners*, however, always requires us to have a perspective in which we may recognize the satire.

The point is paralysis as is usually the case with *Dubliners*. The main characters of "Grace" are all finally revealed to be paralyzed. Mr Kernan is introduced as a converted Catholic who, however, has been away from the church for twenty years and is fond of "giving side-thrusts at Catholicism" (230). At the bedside of his convalescence three of his friends, Mr Cunningham, Mr M'Coy, and Mr Power, with the intention of bringing him back to faith, plan to take him to the retreat in the first place. Mr Cunningham leads the conversation on the Jesuits and the Catholic Church, whose absurdity is betrayed in the course of discussion in spite of him. But what is remarkable is that everyone present is stupefied before coming into awareness of the absurdity. Only Mr Kernan's synecdoche creates "an effect" (716) on his audience: "I bar the candle. . . . I bar the magic lantern business" (715-7). Here is presented a view, though neither the speaker nor the hearers would recognize it, that the retreat is a pompous fraud and a mere business proposition. Careful reading of the preceding conversation would reveal that it necessarily leads to that view. "The Jesuits cater for the upper classes," says Mr M'Coy (463), and Mr Kernan declares his having a feeling for them for that very reason. Joyce does not overlook the reconciliation on the part of the Irish priests with the petits bourgeoisies and commercialism. The object of his severest criticism is Father Purdon who is to direct the retreat and gives a sermon in Section III of the story. Mr Cunningham tells Mr Kernan that Father Purdon is giving the retreat "for business men" (482), to which Mr Power adds, "He won't be too hard on us, Tom"

(483). His sermon is exactly of such a sort as one may well call “the magic lantern business.” Interpreting a passage from Luke, he affirms that it is “a text for business men and professional men” (784). The narrative reports his declaration of his purpose: “He came to speak to businessmen and he would speak to them in a businesslike way” (795 – 6). As the sermon goes on, Father Purdon compares himself to a “spiritual accountant” who is to make sure if one’s accounts, his spiritual life, is accurately tallied, adding that if there are some discrepancies one can rectify all of them “with God’s grace” (812). As Howard Lachtman correctly says, “‘Grace’ has a dark undercurrent of complaint about a faith which has become a social league and a business proposition” (89).

The fact is that Mr Kernan is far from being blessed with “grace” but just surrounded by absurdity without recognizing it. While the narrative structure on the surface aims at a story of the salvation of a fallen man, “Grace” does not reach what it is aimed at. The religious tale frustrates itself on the way and is replaced by a satire of religion.

2

As Father Purdon embodies, and tries to reconcile, in a sense, the spiritual and the financial coexist, sometimes corresponding with each other, in the world of “Grace.” In his perverted sermon, one’s spiritual life is compared to his financial relations. This analogy, if not having any effects upon his audience, gives us a perspective to see the story from a different angle. John Wise Jackson and Bernard McGinley attribute a second meaning to the title of the story. *The Oxford English Dictionary* defines “grace” in Sense 14.b. as “Favour shown by

granting a delay in the performance of an action, or the discharge of an obligation, or immunity from penalty during a specified period." Jackson and McGinley distinguish this "financial grace" from "spiritual grace" (156).

In fact, it is financially true, too, that Mr Kernan is "ery 'uch o'liged" (93) to others, as he says with an injured tongue. Though it is not made explicit why Mr Kernan had the trouble in the lavatory of a pub because Mr Kernan himself is reluctant to talk about it, no doubt money matters are concerned. Mr Harford, whose name Mr Kernan tells hesitantly, began his life as "an obscure financier" and lent money to workmen "at usurious interest" (311-3), and now he is in the Liffey Loan Bank. As Mr Cunningham is well informed, many Catholic clients suffer from Mr Harford's exaction according to "the jewish ethical code" he embraces (315-6). Probably Mr Kernan could not afford what he was in his debt and was involved in the trouble which, intentionally or unfortunately, caused a physical injury. Mr Kernan was not granted financial grace and fell out of "grace." But it is not always the case with him; he seems rather to enjoy financial grace with some of his intimate friends. One of them is Mr Power, who has granted him "many small but opportune loans," as Mrs Kernan remembers (158-9). Besides, another is Mr Fogarty, a "modest" (541) grocer in the neighbourhood, from whom Mrs Kernan might buy on tick something to offer to Mr Power who brought her injured husband home, as Donald Torchiana points out (Torchiana 210). Mr Fogarty, in addition, enters to inquire after him in the course of Section II with a half pint of special whisky. "Mr Kernan appreciated the gift all the more since he was aware that there was a small account for groceries unsettled between him and Mr Fogarty"

(551–4). The half-pint bottle is a gift in a double sense for Mr Kernan. It means, in the first place, that Mr Fogarty grants him financial grace for what Mr Kernan owes him at present, and, in addition, that he brought a half pint of whisky. Here financial grace is given to Mr Kernan, though for a small account, which he is to set right during grace is granted to him.

Now what seemed to be concerned with a religious theme requires to be reconstructed; Joyce's "Grace" presents economic life of middle-class businessmen in Dublin. Apart from the dual meaning of the title, the author is scrupulous in setting economic backgrounds which lie behind the story. In the course of Section I, two paragraphs are inserted, somewhat abruptly, in which is given important information about Mr Kernan's present state in his economic life. He is a commercial traveller "of the old school" (120), estimating dignity and decency, and says, "By grace of these two articles of clothing [a silk hat and a pair of gaiters], ... a man [can] always pass muster" (123–4). But the point is, "Modern business methods had spared him only so far as to allow him a little office in Crowe Street..." (126–8). Here is a conscientious businessman who is beginning to fall behind the times because he holds to the old style of dignity and decency. It may be safely said that his physical fall symbolically presented in the opening scene corresponds with his economic fall as well as his "spiritual" fall in the conventional reading. His economic fall is emphasized in contrast with Mr Power, employee of the Royal Irish Constabulary Office in Dublin Castle: "The arc of his social rise intersected the arc of his friend's [Mr Kernan's] decline" (137–8). Thus "Grace" is reconstructed on the basis of a fragment of the social scene in which one rises and another falls economically, as a story of Mr

Kernan who is fallen out of favour—grace—with the times.

But, it must be noticed, the times' "grace" which has forsaken Mr Kernan is not identical here with the "grace" which he attributes to articles of his dignity and decency, for example, a silk hat and a pair of gaiters (see my quotation above: 123-4). Mr Kernan, and perhaps Mrs Kernan, too ("In her days of courtship Mr Kernan had seemed to her a not ungallant figure... [Mr Kernan] was dressed smartly in a frock coat and lavender trousers and carried a silk hat *gracefully* balanced upon his other arm" (189-96; my italic)), believe in the elegance, the refinement, and the attractiveness of those articles; indeed by means of them the young Mr Kernan won the favour of, came into grace with, the young Mrs Kernan, but his "grace" did not reach his customers or the times, or Mr Harford, either. Their children betray their and their parents' gracelessness, by surprising Mr Power with their manners and accents (150-1). Here is the limitation of Mr Kernan's "grace." In this point Mr Fogarty is a good contrast. This "modest" grocer had formerly failed in business because of his financial condition at that time, and then he changed his business:

He had opened a small shop on the Glasnevin road where, he flattered himself, his manners would ingratiate him with the housewives of the district. He bore himself with a certain *grace*, complimented little children and spoke with a neat enunciation. He was not without culture. (543-8 ; my italic)

This description, though the inserted clause ("he flattered himself") may shake its value as an objective statement, seems to accurately account for his modest success in new business. "A neat enunciation"

supports the genuineness of his grace, in comparison with Mr Kernan's "grace" which does not allow his children to speak without "obviously low-class accents" (Brown 295). A vital difference lies in that Mr Fogarty thought he would be, and perhaps has been, admitted into favour with the housewives, and consequently into the times' grace, by means of those good qualities represented as "a certain grace," while Mr Kernan is not. The grocer may be successful in connecting two *graces*.

Seen as a story of business, "Grace" presents an old-fashioned businessman who would not be reconciled with the times. Mr Kernan's slow decline comes across a quick turn when he falls down the stairs at the pub, which might be fatal for his business, as Torchiana considers his bitten tongue possibly as "a hazard for a tea salesman whose chores include tea-tasting" (Torchiana 209). The way for him to recover economically as well as physically is, in the long run, to have his disposition softened so that he can adjust himself to "[m]odern business method," and to attain genuine "grace" so that he may come into favour with his customers. Practically these two are one thing. Notice part of the above quotation: "... his manners would *ingratiate* him with the housewives of the district" (my italic). The transitive verb *ingratiate* is derivative of *grace*, coined from the Latin *in* and *gratia*. It certainly suggests that to come into grace with somebody is to ingratiate oneself with him. Indeed the main cause of Mr Kernan's bad luck in business is his lack of genuine "grace" which is no doubt related with his inflexible disposition. What he wants in the world of business is, in short, the ability of ingratiation.

There is obviously an opposition dominating the story between “a stiff neck,” to borrow an expression from the narrative (441), and ingratiation, or between the stiff-necked and the ingratiatory. The former is represented by Mr Kernan, for whom “a stiff neck” means more than a metaphor. When he was laid down on the floor after the fall at the bar, “[h]is collar was unfastened and his necktie undone” (24) so that he might feel better; but the reader would witness him “pulling the collar of his filthy frock coat across his neck” (119) in the car bringing him home. Certainly the collar is one of the items for his dignity and exactly stands for his stiff-necked way in business. Thus “a stiff neck” is the word for him. On the other hand, among the ingratiatory are Mr Fogarty and Father Purdon, as I argued. In addition to these two, there can be included some more who know well how to ingratiate themselves. For example, those whom Mrs Kernan calls “those others he [Mr Kernan] does be with” (161); as she complains, “They’re all right so long as he has money in his pocket to keep him out from his wife and family” (162–3). They are like what Mulligan is to Stephen in the opening episode of *Ulysses*, flattering him like a friend only before he borrows from him. Mrs Kernan suspects that her husband had been with some of them before he had trouble, but the fact is that he had been with Mr Harford, not a man of ingratiation. Rather his Catholic clients are ingratiatory. They speak of Mr Harford bitterly “as an Irish Jew and an illiterate” and even ill of his “idiot” son (318–9), but when they need to borrow money from him “they remembered his good points” (320). Friendship

as well as financial relations among Dubliners is structured on ingratiating.

Ingratiation pervades even in the world of religion. Father Purdon tries to appeal to businessmen and makes “a kind of friendly talk...in a commonsense way,” which is estimated by Mr Cunningham as “not exactly a sermon” (491–2). As Father Purdon’s example shows, the Catholic Church in Dublin seems to be ingratiating itself with the commercial world. The Jesuits are criticized by Mr M’Coy, too, as “cater for the upper class” (463). But the problem is not only between the church and people who go there. The opposition between the ingratiating and the stiff-necked is brought to the front by the event misrepresented by Mr Cunningham, the decision of papal infallibility at the Vatican Council in 1870.

The topic has been argued a lot of times. But in most cases the point of arguments has been the misrepresentation of historical events. Let alone annotators like Gifford (107–8), those critics as Robert Martin Adams (177–81), Richard M. Kain (145–6), and Warren Beck (291–6), point out Mr Cunningham’s distortions of historical facts in their studies which are regarded as standard references on “Grace”. Here, however, is concerned mainly with Mr Cunningham’s erred version of the events because no other but that version could have effects on the characters. The vote on the proposal of papal infallibility at the Vatican Council was, in Mr Cunningham’s words, “the greatest scene in the whole history of the Church” (627–8). To insert a comment on the historical significance of the decree, it points to the peak of ultramontaniam at the age of conflict with the political liberalism that had emerged since the French Revolution; it is not so much the decree itself as its proposer Pius IX’s hard attitudes to the

modern world that left unchanged “the authoritarian pattern” of the Church until the reign of John XXIII (Vidler 156). After a certain term of procedure, during which most of the original opposers to the proposal had left Rome, the decree of a symbolical significance was finally adopted at the solemn session by 433 to 2. Mr Cunningham incorrectly supposes that the two opposers are a German Dr J. J. I. Döllinger, who is misrepresented as “Dolling” or “Dowling,” and an Irish John MacHale, archbishop of Tuam, who is known by his command of the Irish language and his aversion to English (*Dictionary of National Biography* 12: 550–2). But in the historical fact, Döllinger did not attend the council and MacHale, first attendant at the council, had left Rome by the time of the final voting; the two opposers were Luigi Riccio of Caiazzo, Italy, and Edward Fitzgerald, of Little Rock, Ark, and both of them accepted the decision immediately (*New Catholic Encyclopedia* 14: 559–63).

The point of Mr Cunningham’s, probably unintentional, distortion lies in the contrast between “Dowling” and MacHale in their reaction to the decision. One of the opposers to papal infallibility, “Dowling,” according to him, would not submit to it and left the Church; though in fact he was excommunicated, Mr Cunningham speaks as if he had left it voluntarily. On the other hand, the other opposer MacHale went over for the decree at once when it was declared, and shouted out, “*Credo!*” (654). This immediate change of attitudes is obviously intended to form a distinct contrast to the immovable credo of “Dowling” which resulted in his departure from the Church. The case of MacHale represents, in a way, the ingratiatory who are subject to their superior so that they can enjoy his favour, and reveals their absurdity. But what is interesting is Mr Cunningham’s comment and

its effect on others. Saying, "That showed the faith he had. He submitted the moment the Pope spoke" (656-7), Mr Cunningham finds an example of genuine faith in the case of MacHale and is rather indifferent to "Dowling." Others are also subject to his view: "Mr Cunningham's words had built up the vast image of the Church in the minds of his hearers" (660-1). The adjective *vast* here may be associated, for Joyce, with such as *vain*, *vacant*, and even *vaunted*. The irony lies in that everyone present regards the ingratiatory MacHale as a bearer of genuine faith.

MacHale's shout "*Credo!*" reveals cunningly, however, that declaring faith or, in a word, believing is identical with or leads to ingratiating oneself with the Church. In fact a Latin phrase *in gratiam*, original of the English word *ingratiating*, can signify in the New Testament the act of coming into grace with God, entering the state in which one may hope God's glory, coming to have faith in God, and even imply coming to be connected with the institution of believers, what is to be established as the Catholic Church: "Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ: By whom also we have access by faith into this grace (*in gratiam istam*) wherein we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God" (Rom. 5 : 1-2) (The Holy Bible; Nouum Testamentum Latine). The process of coming into grace is to be termed, as it were, for Joyce, *in-grati-ation*, which is easily overlapped and undermined by the concept *ingratiating*. Corruption of the faith is hinted at in the contrast between the stiff-necked "Dowling" and the ingratiatory MacHale.

The opposition may affect our reading of the main event of the story, in which Mr Kernan is persuaded to join his friends in going to

make a retreat. It is exactly Mr Kernan's *in-grati-ation*, in our coined expression, that happens there ; and as far as the focus is concentrated on his stance with his friends, the supernatural and spiritual concept of *in-grati-ation* is replaced by the personal and psychological one of *ingrati-ation*. Mr Power's plot to convert him into "a good holy pious and God-fearing Roman Catholic" (683-4) is achieved in the conversation led by Mr Cunningham when Mr Kernan is too involved in it to make himself detached any more in answering the proposal. There is no room for any religious motivation of his to urge him to "conversion," if this term is allowed here. In the situation as it is, he just cannot help making himself agreeable and getting into favour with his friends finally : "—I don't mind, said Mr Kernan, smiling a little nervously" (688). The nervous smile testifies his involuntary submission to ingrati-ation.

Stiff-neckedness and ingrati-ation compete with each other in Mr Kernan's mind in the course of the conversation scene until the former yields to the latter in the end. The competition determining not only Mr Kernan's stance but also the structure of "Grace" sometimes affects the language in which the story is told. Just one example will be enough to illustrate the competition reflected in the style. The passage is from the scene when Mr Kernan suspects a design in the proposal that he should join his friends in making a retreat and cautions himself against it. He is still bigoted against the church, but at the same time he is afraid of being away from his friends' confidence. The narrative describes his oscillation :

Mr Kernan was silent. The proposal conveyed very little meaning to his mind but, understanding that some spiritual agencies were

about to concern themselves on his behalf, he thought he owed it to his dignity to show a stiff neck. He took no part in the conversation for a long while but listened, with an air of calm enmity, while his friends discussed the Jesuits. (438-44)

Mr Kernan's silence points to the silence in the narrative at the same time. Part of the conversation which must be going on among others is omitted while he keeps quiet. In the interim the narrative is focused instead into Mr Kernan's self-conscious mind and reports his confirmation against the proposal. At first sight the description seems to emphasize just Mr Kernan's bigoted stance. But notice the awkward syntax; it suggests that the language is partly affected by a character's thought, as is often the case with Joyce's fiction. Both of the two long sentences in the quotation fail to end up shortly, but they are turned around by the conjunctive *but*, which is followed by an inserted phrase, and prolonged windingly. The first sentence says that Mr Cunningham's proposal has little meaning for him—*but*—he tells himself to show a stiff neck as in duty bound in order to defend his dignity. The second one says that he is away from the conversation—*but*—he listens to the discussion all the while until at last he breaks his silence and puts in a word in defense of the Jesuits, "I haven't such a bad opinion of the Jesuits" (445). Practically the narrative represents Mr Kernan's oscillation in mind. He keeps a stiff neck, on the one hand, being indifferent to the proposal and away from the conversation; but, on the other hand, he is aware of his being gradually inclined to turn around. Scrupulous reading will reveal that "Grace" is full of such turning spots as the conjunctive *but* here at which one may be turned around (*con-verted*). Conversion

occurs on the level of syntax, too.

The reader of “Grace” witnesses the dominance of ingratiating over a stiff neck in Mr Kernan after all. But this does not mean that Joyce takes sides with ingratiating, nor that he takes the opposite side. The point is that Mr Kernan’s conversion is interpreted in terms of ingratiating, which in fact reveals the mentality of Dubliners who yield to their superior and find relief in a state of grace. Thus the most remarkable feature of “Grace” as a satire is that the story of grace dislocates itself and turns into a story of ingratiating.

※All citations from *Dubliners* and *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* are from the Gabler editions, and the line numbers are put in parentheses after the citation.

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