Changing Identities: A Review of *Joyce, Aristotle, and Aquinas* by Fran O'Rourke

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Bababadalgharaghtakamminarronnkonnbronntonnerronntuonnthunntrovarrhounawnskawntoohoohoordenenthurnuk! Perkodhuskurunbarggruauyagokgorlayorgromgremmitghundhurthruma-thunaradidillifaititillibumullunukkunun! These two sesquipedalian onomatopoeias—the first for a fall and the second for closing shutters—hail from just the first chapter of Joyce's Finnegan's Wake. Intentionally arcane, they boast a litany of linguistic influences, including Hindi, Japanese, Finish, French, Italian, Portuguese, Swedish, Danish, Lithuanian, Breton, Persian, Turkish, Siberian, Malay, Rumanian, Kiswahili, Arabic, Samoan, and Albanian. This is only one of many eclecticisms found in Joyce's writings. Indeed, we may be hard pressed to find corners of the world that bear no influence whatsoever on Joyce's compositions.

Given the extensive fodder of *Finnegan's Wake*, Joyce must have been swayed by autochthonic forces *a fortiori*. Although Joyce was clearly at ends with the Church, his writing bears the indelible mark of his Irish Catholic upbringing. One would expect, then, that Joyce's large body of work—as bespeckled as it is by various hands, both well-known and obscure, local and foreign—would evince the influence of important Catholic figures.

The thesis of Fran O'Rourke's newest book would thus seem obvious: that Aristotle and Aquinas—two of *the* most important figures for Catholic Scholasticism—had a substantial influence on Joyce. What is to be gained by substantiating an already intuitive hypothesis in detail? Would we need a book on the specific Buddhist texts Hesse read to write *Siddhartha*? On which sources Toni Morrison consulted to learn about slavery and write *Beloved*? On how Wu Cheng'en gained sufficient knowledge about Chinese Buddhist monasticism to write his protagonist in *Journey to the West*? I do not ask these rhetorically or facetiously, but in earnest. Perhaps these would each be worthwhile projects. But their value is not obvious *prima facie,* save for those already initiated into their literary worlds, who may find any and everything related to their favorite work intrinsically of interest.

Demonstrating influences *can* be illuminating if through that connection we come to understand these sources more deeply. But this does not appear to be O'Rourke's aim, since he is "not concerned with the literary merit of the application by Joyce" (2022, 1). Indeed, O'Rourke even contends that early Joyce failed to have a "deep understanding" of these figures and in later works "controverted them" entirely (2022, 8). On the other hand, the connection might aid our understanding of the author's work itself, contextualizing their writing and thinking. But even here, O'Rourke makes no strong claims about Aristotle and Aquinas's preeminent saliency for Joyce, acknowledging that they were just two among a *myriad* of "philosophical trends" that Joyce sourced for his creative output (2022, 2).

Instead, O'Rourke's main case for such a study is its absence, arguing "a fundamental examination of Aristotle and Aquinas as sources of Joyce has been lacking" (2022, 1). But what are its merits? If Joyce did not get Aristotle and Aquinas particularly right, and these philosophers are only two among a much larger array of influences, one wonders why this exploration is a desideratum. Is this mere meeting of minds, however distorted they become in Joyce's mirror, compelling in of itself?

Some readers will answer unequivocally, "Yes." And bracketing the question of the comparison's necessity, O'Rourke assuredly delivers it with aplomb. I will return to his successes in this regard shortly. But I think O'Rourke's omission in justifying his project is more egregious than a failure to make his scholarship more accessible, since it belies a wider Eurocentrism. That Joyce's contact with Aristotle and Aquinas per se is compelling, or that its worth is obvious and needs no explanation, is indicative of an uncritical privileging—an expectation that the reader should regard any crumb out of the mouth of these greats as a feast, no matter how meager.

One thinks of Robert Eggers' film *The Lighthouse*. Describing his team's process of self-clarifying the central theme of the story, Eggers noted, "Then we realized, 'Well, Prometheus and Proteus never hung out in any Greek myths before, but that seems to be what is kind of happening here'" (Wilkinson 2019). This quote was cited repeatedly among film analysts in an effort to make sense of Eggers' work. But again, what assumptions are at play that this would be considered a sufficient

explanation of "what is happening" in *The Lighthouse*? Is the mere retelling of Prometheus and Proteus sufficient to endow the movie with meaning?

Let me be clear: I think there is a lot more "happening" in *The Lighthouse* than rehashing a Greek myth. Rather, I am focused on its reception, since this reference to Prometheus and Proteus alone seemed to satisfy its *raison d'être* among critics. Likewise, there is a lot more happening in *Joyce, Aristotle, and Aquinas* than a mere record of Joyce's citations of Aristotle and Aquinas. But the fact that O'Rourke does not feel it necessary to argue for this "more" belies a similar preferentialism, as if the book's merits derive from its topical personages *simpliciter*.

We should demand more from our comparisons. Otherwise, we are unduly privileging certain voices over others merely for their traditional position in the canon, and not for what their discussion might further. And in some places, it seems that O'Rourke succumbs to exactly this unjustified privileging. For example, one of his central foci is Joyce's philosophical preoccupation with identity despite change. That is, how does something retain its *what-it-is-ness* if what it is constantly changes from moment to moment? Indeed, O'Rourke claims that this is the central question Joyce inherits from Aristotle and Aquinas (2022, 6). He further claims that by pondering this ancient question, Joyce places himself in an intellectual lineage spawned from the earliest *Greek* philosophers, since "Questions of identity, unity, and permanence first emerged in Greek philosophy" (2022, 6).

But this is patently false. The farthest back we could push these philosophical discussions in a Greek context would be the sixth century BCE, when Heraclitus favored change over unity and Parmenides favored unity over change (Graham 2002). Even this would not become full-fledged discussions of personal identity until Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle a century later (Gill 2009). Yet even with this *terminus post quem*, the most charitable interpretation we could grant O'Rourke is that Greek discussions of identity were contemporary with Indian discourse. Such issues were thoroughly explored by Buddhists in the sixth century BCE, particularly with reference to their theory of no-self (*anātman*) (Taylor 1969; Siderits 2003). Still, Buddhism is likely not the genesis of these musings in India either, since these Buddhist theories were informed by several precursors, such as the Cārvāka physicalists (Jayatilleke 1963, sec. 103) and the Jain ascetics (Long 2009, 117–23), not to mention Upaṇiṣadic texts, such as the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka*, which explored them some three hundred years prior (Gombrich 1996, 31; Williams and Tribe 2000, 60).

I contend that O'Rourke's assumption about Greek philosophers' being the first to discuss identity and permanence falls under the same species of assumption that the need for a comparison between Joyce, Aristotle, and Aquinas is obvious. It is indicative of a favoritism for seminal Western thinkers, where their preeminence goes unquestioned, and the value of their comparison warrants no justification. Again, this is not to say that there is no value in O'Rourke's project. Far from it. But given current (and important) trends in academia to diversify the canon, the burden of proof required to justify the revisitation of well-documented figures falls increasingly on the author. And in providing this justification, O'Rourke falls short, leaving the uninitiated reader to wonder, "Why does this matter?" and, I hope, would compel the initiated to reconsider, "How can I make this matter?"

But, if we evaluate *Joyce, Aristotle, and Aquinas* on its own terms—and O'Rourke is transparent about his "limited and specific" aims (2022, 1)—it undeniably succeeds. O'Rourke's organization is intuitive and easily referenceable. Chapters 1 and 2 give a concise introduction to the philosophies of Aristotle and Aquinas respectively, focusing on the concepts that will be employed by Joyce. Subsequent chapters are organized thematically, examining how both thinker's theories of "Knowledge and Permanence," "Identity, Soul, and Substance," and "Totality, Diversity, and Order: The Unity of Analogy" manifest in Joyce's works. Chapter six concerns Thomist ascetics specifically. O'Rourke bookends his monograph with a reference chapter, giving an exhaustive analysis of Joyce's Aristotelian citations. O'Rourke thus gives equal weight to each of his topical figures.

In places, however, O'Rourke seems to expect too much of his reader, assuming they can make connections without his aid. Consider his analysis of the following passage:

> With oblique allusion to John Pentland Mahaffy's clever quip that "in Ireland the inevitable never happens, the unexpected always," the author of the *Wake* writes:
>
> in this madh vaal of tares [...] where the possible was the improbable and the improbable the inevitable. [...] we are in for a sequentiality of improbable possibles though possibly nobody after having grubbed up a lock of cwold cworn aboove his subject probably in Harrystotalies or the vivle will go out of his way to applaud him on the onboiassed back of his remark for utterly impossible as are all these events they are probably as like those which may have taken place as any others which never took person at all are ever likely to be. Ahahn! (*FW* 110.09-21)
>
> Joyce pokes fun here at Aristotle, as well as the Bible. The Ondt is described later as a "conformed aceticist and aristotaller" (*FW* 417.16) (2022, 25).

The "Ondt" here is a phonetic re-rendering of "Ant," Joyce's retelling of Aesop's fable "The Ant and the Grasshopper." But O'Rourke does not provide this context, nor explain how this passage is positioned within that larger narrative, nor explain exactly how the passage is meant to poke fun at Aristotle or the Bible, save for the quote where the Ondt is called an "aceticist and aristotaller." The connections are left untethered. And this is a missed opportunity. For I fully trust that they are there. But unless I were already sufficiently well-acquainted with Joyce to make these connections myself, I cannot glean them from O'Rourke's sweeping reference, in which case I would not need O'Rourke to identify them for me anyway.

In other sections, however, O'Rourke demonstrates his ability as an exegete *par excellence*. In chapter 4, he gives a lucid analysis of Aristotle's theory of the soul and its influence on Thomist theology. O'Rourke identifies that Aristotle's conception is essentially developmental. He argues that in utero, the vegetative soul develops into a sentient one, and from the sentient soul into a rational one. Aquinas appropriates this model but argues that the soul does not develop. Instead, it comes directly from God, fully formed. So, in place of a developmental model, he argues a supersessional one, where the sentient soul *replaces* the vegetative one, and the rational soul replaces the sentient one (2022, 94–95).

O'Rourke masterfully shows that the stakes of this discussion is, at root, the familiar issue of identity and change, what he calls the "dyadic character of human nature," "the interaction of that self-unity with the ever-changing flux of experience" (2022, 98), and "the *unchangeable* components of *changeable* things" (2022, 99)—that which maintains personal identity over time while we, as individuals, constantly change, develop, and evolve—especially, our bodies, the part of us most vulnerable to the sands of time. According to both Aristotle and Aquinas, the soul maintains identity despite that change. But while Aquinas argues that soul is completely immutable, and thus only "progresses" via replacement, Aristotle contends it grows in stages.

After demonstrating how Joyce inherited these preoccupations from his Catholic upbringing—which themselves derive from Aristotle and Aquinas—O'Rourke gives a detailed analysis of how they manifest in Joyce's works. In Joyce's understanding, the paradoxes of this dyadic character—both singular and multiple, constant and in flux, static yet changing—explain much of our existential angst. In a beautiful passage from *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Joyce writes:

> He pressed his face against the pane of the window and gazed out into the darkening street. Forms passed this way and that through the dull light. And that was life. […] His soul was flattening and congealing into a gross grease, plunging ever deeper in its dull fear into a sombre threatening dusk while the body was his stood, listless and dishonoured, gazing out of darkened eyes, helpless, perturbed, and human for a bovine god to stare upon (*P* III.341-50) (2022, 99–100).

As O'Rourke notes, "form" is synonymous for "soul" in Aristotle's system. So here we see the conflict between soul and flux that leaves the young artist listless. The condition of life is "forms" or souls moving this way and that—stasis and change. The sight of this tension infects the viewer's soul itself, "flattening and congealing" it. The young man also feels this tension as a conflict between mind and body. In a brilliant inversion, the soul becomes dynamic—passing this way and that—while the body is rendered motionless, stationed listless. There is even a reference to Aristotelian-Thomist notion of the sentient soul. This sentient soul, surpassed by the rational soul, allows the body to react and sense, but is not the immortal soul of the intellect. Furthermore, it is indicative of animality, permitting the animal *qua* body to interact with the world. The animal, however, never develops a rational soul like that of a human (2022, 96). In a sense, then, the animal is like a body without a human soul. So too does the young man, feeling the weight of his corporality, find himself reduced to the object of a bovine god—his animal sentience at ends with his rational consciousness.

O'Rourke also demonstrates the relevance of these themes to epistemology, how knowledge itself provokes the paradox of identity despite change. Knowledge necessitates some consistency from moment to moment—to know something requires the object of that knowledge obtain over time. Yet if reality is at base flux, it would seem nothing remains sufficiently consistent for us to have knowledge of it. Everything arises anew in each moment, disappearing before knowledge of it is acquired.

O'Rourke identifies two seminal responses to this question, one from Plato and the other from Aristotle. The former (following Parmenides) solves the problem by arguing transience is an illusion. All that ultimately exists are ideal forms, of which their seeming mutable instantiations are only a shade—a poor facsimile. (Here, O'Rourke nicely explains how Platonic forms connect with the discussion of forms *qua* soul: the soul is simply a token of a much larger category of forms that give an object its essence; in the case of persons, it is the soul that makes them who they are (2022, 81)). While we may *sense* flux, only the intellect can grasp the forms from which flux derives but fails to represent fully. It is thus only the intellect that can afford knowledge and recognize those permanent truths obfuscated by the senses' unending stream of mutability.

Aristotle largely agrees. And this linkage helps us make further sense of Aristotle's theory of the sentient soul versus the rational soul. The sentient soul senses experiential flux, while only the intellect has awareness of forms. Therefore, animals can participate in the world, but only *homo sapiens*—*"sapien"* itself a Latin adjective for "intelligent"—can have knowledge *per se*. But Aristotle offers an important caveat to Plato's conception. He denies that forms exist apart and independently from their instantiations, or in some distinct realm, as Plato asserts. Rather, they cannot be disentangled from the objects that instantiate them (2022, 81–82). Colloquially, we might say some object *takes* a given form, but that that form does not exist outside of its object. More technically, this is likely the earliest instance of a trope theory in the Greek milieu. That is, the essence of the object is local to it but also *shared* among other objects that fit its category. So, all horses have some quality that make them similar to other horses—namely, the *form* of a horse—even though there is no singular *horseness* that exists over and above each horse, eternal and unitary in the realm of ideal forms.

It is worth noting that this debate was also prevalent in India—again, likely predating that between Plato and Aristotle. The *Nyāyasūtras*, whose *terminus post quem* is the sixth century BCE, discusses perception (*pratyakṣa*) as the contact

between a sense organ and an object, while only inference (*anumāna*) is aware of universals (*sāmānya*) (Akṣapāda Gautama 1997, v. 1.1.4-5). These universals serve the same function as Platonic forms, since they are that which is *universal* to all objects who are members of that general class. Like Plato, early Nyāya followers believed that universals exist independently of their object. And like Plato and Aristotle, they argued change is sensible and forms are intelligible. Later, on the cusp of the common era, the Aristotelian concept of forms becomes a target of Buddhists. The *Questions of King Milinda* (*Milindapañha*) gives a (likely fictional) dialogue between a Buddhist monk and a Greek king. The monk rejects that forms are inherent in objects at all, arguing that this is only a projection of linguistic thinking (Milindapañha 3.1.1 Paññattipañha). Interestingly, the Buddhist agrees with Plato and Aristotle that forms are intelligible, but argues that this is a reason for their being epistemologically dodgy. We confuse what is linguistically projected onto objects for qualities of those objects themselves.

In any event, O'Rourke demonstrates that the Platonic-Aristotelian version of the debate is central to Joyce. Antisthenes (446-336 BCE) is said to have leveled against Plato the charge, "I see a horse, but I don't see horseness," challenging his notion of ideal forms. Plato purportedly replied, "No, for you have the eye with which a horse is seen, but you have not yet acquired the eye to see horseness," arguing that with a more refined intellect, Antisthenes could see that ideal form directly. (There are tempting parallels between this notion and ancient Indian theories of yogic perception (*yogipratyakṣa*) (Dunne 2007; Forman 2020; 2022), but I will not waylay us with those here.) Although O'Rourke contends that Joyce was never privy to this example, he gives an unmistakably Aristotelian answer to the conundrum in *Ulysees*: "Unsheathe your dagger definitions. Horseness is the whatness of allhorse" (U 9.84-85). That is, horseness is not some unitary entity that would be perceivable, *despite* its individual manifestations, with enough intellectual development. Rather, horseness is nothing but a quality that belongs to all horses themselves, reducible to them—a quintessential trope theory.

I have only given a small sample among a treasure trove of such connections to be found in *Joyce, Aristotle, and Aquinas*. If these tidbits entice the reader, then the book will surely satisfy and comes highly recommended. But as my reader is assuredly aware from my opening remarks, I have some reservations. On this point, O'Rourke's identification of the issue of unity over change serves as a useful hermeneutic for the purposes of critique.

As I alluded, the Buddhist view of identity runs counter to the Platonic or even Aristotelian conception. While these Greeks understood identity as central to knowledge, Buddhists saw it as largely obstructive—a cognitive heuristic that prevents us from seeing the world in its complexity, multiplicity, and constant change. Buddhists even go as far to argue that identity is predicated on exclusion, an almost Saussurean theory of signification, where a signifier refers to the signified by excluding its opposites.

Likewise, I wonder to what degree O'Rourke's effort to show a historical unity between Aristotle, Aquinas, and Joyce is also exclusionary. In an effort to demonstrate an occidental consistency through these thinkers, he insulates their insights from other influences. This is responsible both for their presentation as *sui generis* in the book, which is misrepresentative, as well as O'Rourke's peculiar resistance to illuminate their importance for wider spheres.

Perhaps, I am simply too preoccupied with diversity over unity. As someone who thinks philosophy has been hampered by its uncritical fixation on a relatively small sample of Greco-Euro-American thinkers, I find failures to broaden the conversation, or to justify the need to revisit well-known white men, frustrating. But perhaps I can morph this point about plurality over unity into a more conciliatory note. That is, taking these men as objects of study—whether Joyce, Aristotle, Aquinas, or whomever—does not bespeak unitary figures, who either are or are not worthy of further consideration *in and of themselves*. Rather, the phenomenon of their importance is multiple, relative to the myriad positionalities of their possible readers. *This* reader, a small node in vast network of persons who will weigh in and determine O'Rourke's reception, has certain scholarly desires that *Joyce, Aristotle, and Aquinas* failed to meet. But relative to others—especially those deeply steeped in Joycean studies and on board with the necessity of this comparison—will find it timely, profound, and excellently executed. As Aristotle would agree, the essence of the book's value will only become clear once its multitude of readers make up their minds. Only then will it have any essence at all.

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