

# **The Debt of James Joyce to Aristotle and Aquinas**

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*Joyce, Aristotle and Aquinas*

Fran O'Rourke

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Another book on Joyce? Indeed, and a very welcome one, filling an important lacuna, even when you look at the further eighty-plus Joycean titles in the Florida James Joyce Series.

Fran O'Rourke is Professor Emeritus of Philosophy at UCD who has published many distinguished works on Aquinas and Aristotle, and has a keen and practical interest in Joyce and his background, cultural and philosophical, even to the extent of performing celebrated recitals of traditional Irish songs featured in Joyce's work (he is in good company there: who could forget Frank Patterson's rendition of "The Lass of Aughrim" in John Huston's movie version of "The Dead"?). He was also director for many years of the UCD International Summer School in Irish Studies.

So what is the purpose of this book? The established wisdom is that Joyce was a refugee from Catholicism, that he left Ireland in order to leave behind the influence of the Church's thought, and forge in the smithy of his soul the uncreated conscience of the race. It is not nearly as simple as that, and Fran O'Rourke has written what will surely become a go-to book to get to the truth about Joyce and his acknowledged debt to the Catholic philosophical tradition, as incarnated in Aristotle and Aquinas.

The claim O'Rourke makes is that Joyce made extensive use of both these thinkers, due to the serious and profound formation in their thought which he received at school and university in Dublin. The book works at two levels: offering the non-philosophical reader a background to and explanation of the philosophical topics which occur, and presenting the scholarly world with themes that help in grappling with the philosophical background to Joyce's *oeuvre*.

### **Joyce's Dublin studies**

The book starts by pointing to Joyce's exposure at school and university to Aristotle and Aquinas. He reports a conversation in which Joyce remarked: "In my opinion the greatest thinker of all times was Aristotle. He defines everything with wonderful clarity and simplicity. Volumes were written later to define the same things .... All the great thinkers of past centuries have only re-cultivated the garden."

How did Joyce come to know and esteem Aristotle? Above all from his Catholic education. Christian theology had developed a sophisticated philosophical system, elaborated by natural reason, which served as a support to elucidate the higher truths of Revelation. Aristotle's principles – matter and form, substance and accident – came to be used to provide a substratum for Christian theology as a result of Aquinas's commentaries, helping to prove the existence of God and the immortality of the soul, as well as to explain the theology of the sacraments, and thus Joyce was exposed unwittingly to many of these concepts and categories. While Joyce rejected the Catholic religion, he retained its core philosophical tenets. His Jesuit masters in Belvedere College as well as in University College gave him a basis of this Aristotelian formation, which he was to develop himself as he re-read Aristotle in Paris in 1903, producing there a short review recommending the study of Aristotle in the face of the "whole cohort of Materialists who are cheapening the good name of philosophy".

### **Joyce and Aristotle**

Like many Irish youngsters before and since, James Joyce imbibed the practicality of Aristotle's metaphysics. As Thomas Merton remarked, "If he had abandoned St Thomas, he had not stepped much further down than Aristotle" or, in the words of his great biographer Harry Levin: "he lost his faith but he kept his (Aristotelian) categories". While he rejected the Catholic religion, he retained its core philosophical tenets.

Philosophy, for Aristotle, begins with wonder and admiration towards the central issues of life and being. Other traditions may differ: Descartes, for instance begins with doubt. Joyce was no Cartesian, and for him, like Aristotle, philosophy began with a fascination with the real and the particular, and for Joyce this included the familiar sounds and sights of his native city, many of which he reproduced with astonishing accuracy at a distance of over a thousand miles - and many years after he had left Ireland. The late Professor John De Courcy, also of UCD, author of *The Liffey in Dublin* (1996), has illustrated this in lectures on The Liffey and James Joyce and also on the *sounds* of Dublin, as echoed in *Ulysses*.

O'Rourke brings us on a tour of the matters which exercised Joyce: acquainted with other philosophical trends, pragmatism and empiricism for instance, his own fundamental outlook was that of the *philosophia perennis* and it is against the ancient background that we can best understand his approach since the questions preoccupying him: identity, change, beauty were essentially those first articulated in classical Philosophy.

## **Thomist Joyce**

And where does Thomas Aquinas fit in here? Joyce indeed rejected Catholicism, but in seeking a replacement, he invoked her greatest authority, St Thomas Aquinas, in the service of his artistic creed. As his friend Padraic Colum wrote: "Aristotle and St Thomas Aquinas had shown him everything, and who was there who could show him any more?"

O'Rourke points out that in the final years of the nineteenth century and the early years of the twentieth, the Aquinas Joyce encountered from his Jesuit masters and lecturers was a totally Aristotelian and empirical Aquinas. This suited Joyce's Aristotelian ability to take account of the small and unique

features of life, and find the pattern which enables us to understand them well. Asked by the sculptor August Suter what he retained from his Jesuit education, he replied, “I have learnt to arrange things in such a way that they become easy to survey and to judge.”

Joyce’s schooldays and university years coincided with the Thomistic revival instigated and inspired by Pope Leo XIII and his Encyclical *Aeterni Patris* (1878). As Cardinal Newman had found on his visit to Rome after his conversion in 1845, neither Aristotle nor St Thomas were particularly in favour at the time. Pope Leo inspired a new and systematic revival of Scholastic philosophy, with new centres of Thomist philosophy being set up (Cardinal Mercier’s Louvain comes to mind), journals and manuals published to help spread the message. Joyce’s formative years were contemporaneous with this revival.

This had its impact in Dublin too, through a number of Joyce’s teachers, Jesuits who had access to the Stonyhurst series of manuals, written for the Stonyhurst seminary classes by professors there. It was from these, which were available in University College, that Joyce gleaned much of his admiration for and information about Thomistic thought. Professor William Magennis was an influence too. For many years he was at the helm of philosophy faculty in UCD, he gets a mention in *A Portrait of the Artist* and it is clear that Joyce chose to move within that sphere of Thomist influence.

On the Continent during his stay in Paris, his interest in Aristotle and Aquinas deepened; he was an assiduous reader of the *Summa Contra Gentiles*, according to his brother Stanislaus, referring to 1903. He refers to Peter of Ireland in a 1907 lecture “Ireland, Island of Saints and Sages” as the theologian who had the supreme task of educating the mind of the author of the scholastic apology, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, St Thomas Aquinas, “perhaps the keenest and most lucid mind known to human history”.

### **Aristotle and Aquinas in Joyce’s works**

In broad terms, the central theme of my inquiry is the meaning of identity in Joyce’s writings. The question of identity is ultimately a philosophical question;

the principle of identity is considered the first law of reality, and in Joyce's work and life the question of the self and its identity loom large. Who is he? Irish, Catholic, European, himself? Identity also brings the questions of change and permanence, unity and diversity to the table. These are questions which Aristotle had found himself addressing, using the categories of potency and act, matter and form, substance, accident and soul. Joyce found these categories are invaluable in grounding the enduring identity of his characters.

Throughout *Ulysses*, dialogues between Stephen and Bloom and Buck Mulligan offer us a privileged view of the contrast between the reductionist, empiricist approach of Mulligan and Bloom to human identity, "sure it's all just corpuscles or whatever" and Stephen's Aristotelian sense of the presence of an *eidos*, form or rationale giving shape and animation to the material "stuff" of the world, be that stuff cells or atoms or corpuscles.

Finally, Joyce's theory of aesthetics owes much to Aquinas, though for O'Rourke he missed out on the metaphysical heart of Aquinas's thought on beauty as a quality of reality, turning Aquinas into an aesthete. Ironically, the aesthetics which drove him from the Church, according to one critic quoted by O'Rourke is derived from Aquinas, albeit from Joyce's partial reading of him.

*Joyce, Aristotle, and Aquinas* is a *tour de force* which helps to see him against the background of his initial philosophical formation in Aristotle and Aquinas, a formation which moulded his approach to the philosophical questions which arise in his works: questions which the *philosophia perennis*, the philosophical tradition emerging from classical thinkers such as Plato and Aristotle and creatively received and rethought by Aquinas and other medieval thinkers.

Obviously this is a book which can help the specialist, according to Michael Patrick Gillespie, in his foreword; but for many it can open up a neglected but important and fascinating side of Joyce and complete our sense of his personality. A rich and entertaining study.

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