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## JOYCE AND DUMAS: *THE COUNT OF MONTE CRISTO* AND “THE SISTERS”

CÓILÍN OWENS

*Abstract:* Alexandre Dumas's *The Count of Monte Cristo* provided Joyce with some of the imaginative apparatus for his story, “The Sisters.” A careful comparison of the Chateau d'If episode with Joyce's text shows that Dumas's dramatization of the relationship between Edmond Dantès and l'Abbé Faria informs Joyce's handling of that between the narrator and Father Flynn. Just as these relationships are spiritual and intellectual, they are depicted within similarly forbidding settings from which the respective heroes escape. The figure of the gnomon, the sin of simony, and the condition of paralysis mark each work. Thus, Joyce has converted melodramatic suspense into the tensions of a profound existential meditation.

### First Encounter

James Joyce first encountered the novels of Alexandre Dumas as he approached his tenth birthday (1891-92). During the fifteen-month interlude between his withdrawal from Clongowes Wood and his admission to Belvedere College, and as the Parnell crisis raged above his head, he read *The Three Musketeers*, *The Man in the Iron Mask*, and a “ragged translation” of *The Count of Monte Cristo* (P 64).<sup>1</sup> Thus the first discernible extra-curricular influence on the young Joyce's literary tastes came from

1. Peter Costello, *James Joyce: The Years of Growth, 1882-1915* (New York: Pantheon, 1993), pp. 104-5. In his *Alexandre Dumas Père: A Bibliography of Works Translated in English to 1910* (New York & London: Garland, 1978), Douglas Munro lists over a score of English editions appearing between 1846 and 1891. Most of these were based on the anonymous translation published by Chapman and Hall (London, 1846). Joyce's reading text was most likely to be one of the numerous reprints of the edition published by Routledge & Sons (London, 1871). The one-volume illustrated reprint (London & New York, 1886) will be cited here as *The Count*.

the romances of Dumas père: in the derring-do of d'Artagnan and his companions and the grim convolutions of Edmond Dantès's pursuit of vengeance.

The immediate effect of these forays into French literature may have been akin to Stephen Dedalus's joining "a gang of adventurers" in which he played the remote but numinous part of Napoleon (*P* 65). The more significant outcome was the writing (in collaboration with a fellow imaginary adventurer, a boy named Aubrey Raynold (the Aubrey Mills of *A Portrait*)) of his first novel, which is now lost (*JJII* 34-35).

The young Joyce's fervent personal and literary response to *The Count* may have been affected by the loss of his earliest romantic crush, Eileen Vance.<sup>2</sup> This aspect of the Dumas novel Joyce expressly and ironically cites in *A Portrait*, where Stephen identifies with Dantès's infatuation with and loss of Mercédès. From chocolate wrappings he made a model of the Chateau d'If (*P* 65) while imagining Mercédès living in "a small white-washed house" surrounded by rose bushes as his pursuit of her love reached its sad end (*P* 65). Joyce's own account, bent to the services of his portrait of the young Stephen Dedalus, exalts the images of the prison of the Chateau d'If, Mercédès's residence in Marseilles, and the hero's disdain of her overtures (*P* 65). Besotted with grief and rage and financed by the fabulous treasure, he saw himself as the "dark avenger," embarking on a career as the dispenser of providential punishment. His adventures ended with his dispatch of his enemies, and in his refusal to commune with Mercédès because of her betrayal of his devotion, citing the disdainful touchstone of *The Count*, "Madam, I never eat muscatel grapes" (*P* 65).<sup>3</sup>

The formative influence of *The Count* on Joyce's notion of himself as the declaimer of proud refusals and the pursuer of vengeance upon his putative betrayers can be seen in his subsequent endowment of Stephen Dedalus with the determination to fulfill his artistic purposes by Balzac's devious stratagems of "silence, exile, and cunning" (*P* 269).<sup>4</sup> Thus Joyce's imaginative assimilation at this impressionable age of the stories according to which distinguished men—Edmond Dantès and Charles Stewart Parnell—were betrayed by their lesser rivals seems to have contributed to Joyce's own lifelong fear of personal betrayal.

These linear amalgamations of personal, historical, and literary influences are familiar to readers of Joyce's biography. Although the initial

2. Costello, *James Joyce*, pp. 92-93.

3. *The Count*, pp. 485, 486.

4. See Don MacLennan, "Metastasis; or Dumas, Joyce and the Dark Avenger," *English Studies in Africa* 31.1 (1988): pp. 119-27.

impression made by Dumas's adventures faded as Joyce matured, one can discern many scattered references to *The Count* in Joyce's *oeuvre*. For instance, among his "rapid but secure means to opulence," Leopold Bloom imagines that like the wealth of "a learned Italian" (read l'Abbé Faria), he could invest "[a] Spanish prisoner's donation of a distant treasure of valuables lodged with a solvent banking corporation 100 years previously at 5% compound interest of the collective worth of five million pounds sterling" (*U* 17.1687), a version of the plot of Dantès's material redemption. Similarly, after his domestic betrayal, and in the spirit of Edmond Dantès, Bloom momentarily fantasizes that he:

would somehow reappear reborn above delta in the constellation of Cassiopeia and after incalculable eons of peregrination return an estranged avenger, a wrecker of justice on malefactors, a dark crusader, a sleeper awakened, with financial resources (by supposition) surpassing those of Rothschild or the silver king (*U* 17.2020-22).

Bloom's resemblance to the "dark avenger" does not go beyond his Jewish complexion, because unlike Dantès, the unidentified hero of his romantic fantasy, he hatches no devious plots of revenge, but ungallantly acquiesces in Molly's betrayal in a mood of resignation, guilt, and forgiveness.

These instances illustrate how Joyce's youthful acquaintance with Dumas provided momentary glosses to his own subsequent serious literary purposes. Behind them lies a more complex, revealing, unexpected, and to date unobserved aspect of the relationship between his reading of *The Count of Monte Cristo*, and some key structural and thematic elements of his first venture in short fiction, "The Sisters." There is a considerable amount of specific textual evidence that Joyce's development of the figuration of the human condition is traceable to a set of plot devices in Dumas's popular thriller. These include the gnomon as a figure of a condition which is marked by fallibility, and while trammled by proclivities to simony and paralysis, yet retains a grasp on some frayed hope in divine Providence.

### The Count

The vivid scenes, dramatic dialogue, suspense, and romantic extravagance which made *The Count of Monte Cristo* into one of the nineteenth century's best sellers evidently gripped the immature imagination of the young Joyce. The scenes in *The Count* relevant to the consideration of "The Sisters" are not drawn from the byzantine plot concerned with Mercédès or the quest for vengeance, as we read in *A Portrait*, but rather from the episodes which depict Dantès's relationship with the Abbé Faria. These comprise his

incarceration at the Chateau d'If, his encounter with and education by the imprisoned priest, his hearing the story of the simoniac Cardinal Spada's treasure, the decoding of the damaged letter (a gnomon), the Abbé's death from paralysis after his third cataleptic attack, his instruction of Dantès to trust in Providence and retain hope in the future, and his furnishing his protégé with the means of escape through an exchange of clothes.<sup>5</sup>

In Chapter 15, Edmond Dantès finds himself inexplicably committed to spending what might be the rest of his life in a dark prison cell. He meets his fellow inmate, the political prisoner, the Abbé Faria, who dreamed a Napoleonic dream of a united Italy in 1807, even four years before Napoleon attempted to carry out the plan.<sup>6</sup> The Abbé discerns the true causes of Dantès's imprisonment, instructs him in many branches of learning, teaches him creative resourcefulness, and inspires him with hope and trust in Providence. Unlike Dantès, the Abbé accepts his punishment in the Chateau d'If as just and Providential; he nevertheless considers it a proper use of his intelligence to attempt a joint escape. However, as they are about to put this plan into action, the Abbé, having endowed Dantès with information that will enrich him, dies following a third stroke. By exchanging clothes with his dead mentor, Dantès escapes from the Chateau d'If.

Now, it could be entirely coincidental that Joyce's story shares what are, at first glance, fairly typical elements with Dumas's account of the relationship between a sagacious mentor and a naïve protégé leading to liberty and enlightenment. Nevertheless, given the circumstances of Joyce's reading of Dumas and his citations of him elsewhere in *A Portrait*, we are entitled to entertain the suspicion that in composing "The Sisters," Joyce may have been transforming the bones of Dumas's implausible but thrilling plot into an account of a serious intellectual and spiritual quest. There is at least a parallel between Dantès's life sentence in the dungeons of the Chateau d'If, the stifling environment of Dublin, and Dante's *Inferno* ("There was no hope for him"/ "Abandon ye all hope who enter here"). The choral characters in Joyce's story—Mr. Cotter, the boy's aunt, and Father Flynn's sisters—function in much the same ways as do Dumas's prison officers, that is, as purveyors of misapprehension. It is through overheard and unreliable conversations that the boy first hears the news of the priest (his madness, his death), and the adults in the story function as figures of

5. Chapters 14-20, pp. 70-122.

6. *The Count*, p. 86. Dumas's admiration for Napoleon inspired his drama (1830) and biography (1836) of the Emperor of the French whom his father had served as a general in the Italian and Egyptian campaigns (1796-99).

convention, conformity, physical discipline, and vacuous routine. Pursuing the analogies, when we observe the way in which Joyce's narrator introduces the image of the second-storey window (to which the boy "gazed up" (*D* 9)), the themes of hope (natural and theological), the contrast between instinctive and instructed lives (orality and literacy), and the thematic elements of simony and paralysis, the impression grows that there is a genealogical relationship between these two works.

### Father Faria

L'Abbé Faria's learning is based on his 5,000-volume library in Rome. One hundred and fifty of these, which he has committed to memory, comprise the cultural canon. Recognizing Dantès's appetite and aptitude for learning, he agrees to teach him what he knows of the various branches of learning: mathematics, physics, history and the three or four modern languages. For his part, Dantès, who was until then only an aspiring ship's captain, realizes that by contrast with the Abbé, he is an ignoramus. With affecting enthusiasm and admiration, he listens to every word. His "prodigious memory" and great facility for assimilation allied to what he already knows from his experience as a seaman lead him to apprehend "new horizons, illumined by the wild meteoric flash, enabling him justly to estimate the delight an intellectual mind would have in following the high and towering spirit of one so richly gifted as Faria in all the giddiest heights or lowest depths of science."<sup>7</sup>

They spend their prison years as master and student. He teaches him languages, history, and especially philosophy, "the amalgamation of all the sciences, the golden cloud which bears the soul to heaven."<sup>8</sup> He therefore conducts Dantès on a tour of the development of Western Civilization, but one that shows in a priest a peculiarly Gnostic partiality. For his part, however, Dantès never exhibits in his own mental or narrative style any substantial evidence of these putative illuminations: as Dumas presents him, he is first and last a man of action.

The primary relationship between Joyce's priest and boy is similar to that between Dumas's pair: intellectual and philosophical. In Joyce's hands they become spiritual father and son. Father Flynn impresses the young boy with the complexities, philosophical, moral, and legal, of what the boy has hitherto considered transparent issues. He also introduces him to Latin and European history; consequently, the boy associates his relationship with Father Flynn's "higher literacy" with words of Greek and Hebrew origin:

7. *The Count*, p. 100.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 100.

“paralysis,” “gnomon,” and “simony.” The sophisticated narrator has evidently heard the colloquial approximations of these words (“stroke,” “box his corner,” and “something gone wrong,” (*D* 9, 11, 18)) and exhibits them as lacking intrigue by contrast with Father Flynn’s bookishness. Joyce’s Father Flynn is more pious and pastoral than his Italian model: he has ended his career in a poor, inner-city parish, retiring close to his sisters, and bequeathing his worldly goods to charity. Nevertheless, the impression that each of these clerics leaves upon his respective protégé is philosophical and intellectual rather than pious, religious, or imbued with the spirit of Christian charity. As the Abbé Faria represents the Western cultural tradition in its many dimensions—political, linguistic, philosophical, scientific, and spiritual—so Father Flynn appears as someone closer to Gnosticism or Quietism rather than as a pastor to semi-literate philistines like Mr. Cotter. Both of these Christian clerics embody intellectual superiority rather than the cardinal theological virtue of hope: neither of them seems confident in the belief that beneath what appears as the “deadly work” (*D* 9) of human existence lies the mystery of God’s sustaining grace. Joyce’s narrator, by contrast with Dumas’s, is a convincing son of a symbolic father: he is fascinated with language, ritual, and social convention, and by concentrating quiet attention on apparently inconsequential scenes and images he presses on to serious meditations, aesthetic, philosophical, and theological.

### Gnomon

One of the immediately practical lessons that Dantès learns from the Abbé is how to calculate time. By looking at the window high above his cell, he is able to tell the time of day by the sun’s rays shining through. A substantial function of the “gnomon”—though this is usually minimized in criticism of this story in favor of its purely geometric reference—is its association as a sundial. Producing the treasure map which is at first unintelligible to Dantès, Faria is able to reconstruct from this fragment the complete document. He explains that “aided by the remaining fragment, I guessed the rest; measuring the length of the lines by those of the paper, and divining the hidden meaning, by means of what was in part revealed, as we are guided in a cavern by the small ray of light above us.”<sup>9</sup> With that demonstration, he bequeaths the treasure—an enormous sum of money, equivalent to the fortunes of ten wealthy families—to his protégé,

9. *Ibid.*, p. 112.

explaining to him that “You are my son, Dantès [. . .] You are the child of my captivity.”<sup>10</sup>

The evidence converges, then, not only on the fact that these melodramatic scenes in the Chateau d’If remained vividly in Joyce’s sensitive and retentive imagination, but that he turned them, brilliantly, into the devices of luminous epiphany. As every attentive reader of “The Sisters” has noticed, there is a complex imagistic and thematic linkage between the boy’s observation of the lighted window, his recollection of the figure of the gnomon from his Euclid, and the technique of incompleteness which dictates the shape of his story. Two of these linkages Joyce had observed in these chapters of the Dumas romance. Although the word “gnomon” does not occur in *The Count*, the image of the light in the upper corner of the dark room, its explicit function as an instrument in the measurement of time with freedom from the world of darkness and ignorance, and its subsequent relationship with the reconstruction of the treasure map inform Joyce’s technique and theme in “The Sisters.” When Joyce set about writing a sophisticated story about the ways of discerning truth from uncertainty, the scenes of the Chateau d’If that had so impressed him fourteen years before seem to have offered his imagination some points of ignition. He turned the details of Dumas’s gothic thriller into complex literary symbols and the univocal language of Dumas’s headlong pseudo-realism into a multivalent narrative in which the language is polysemous: simultaneously realistic, allusive, and allegorical.

Between his reading of Dumas and the writing of “The Sisters,” of the many writers he had assimilated to the constitution of his own voice, the chief was Dante Alighieri. In his powers of language, his vision, and his subject, Joyce found a more sympathetic model than Dumas, whose gifts were for dramatic plotting and not for poetic nuance, depth of character, or ethical and cosmic vision. In “The Sisters,” then, the figure of the gnomon does, indeed, synthesize the various meanings found for it in the *OED*. These include its significations as a sundial and as a figure of the incompleteness and relative ignorance or imperfection in the human condition. These significations, which he evidently recognized *in potentia* in the unlikely plot, sentimental spirit, and escapist themes of Dumas’s chapters, Joyce attached to the Gnostic-knowledge themes of “The Sisters,” and, again as many scholars have observed, to the human (and theological) drama of the mystical relationship of creator to created, father to son.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 113.



## Paralysis

As the pair are about to escape—their fifteen-month work on the tunnel completed—the Abbé tells Dantès that he has an illness that predisposes him to cataleptic fits. The climax of the Chateau d'If section of the novel comes, then, with the Abbé's third stroke (Chapter 19, "The Third Attack").<sup>11</sup> Remaining by his friend's side, and transfixed by the livid face and staring eyes, Dantès waits until dawn and "singular shadows passed over the countenance of the dead man, which at times give it the appearance of life [until] . . . he saw that he was alone with a corpse."<sup>12</sup> Returning to the cell, Dantès contemplates the face of his dead friend. He resolves that he will do everything in his power to recover the happiness of life that has been taken away from him and to punish his enemies. He decides to escape by switching places with Faria's corpse, confronting again "the resisting eyes, which glared horribly."<sup>13</sup>

These melodramatic incidents, compressed in summary, Joyce assimilates, abridges, and synthesizes in his apparently static and plotless account of the death of Father Flynn. The opening sentence, for instance, "There was no hope for him this time: it was the third stroke," virtually cites the Abbé Faria and the narrator of *The Count*. The Abbé explains to Dantès that he has already had two attacks and predicts that "the next of these fits will either carry me off or leave me paralysed for life."<sup>14</sup> When it eventually strikes, the Abbé, observing the paralysis presaging his death spreading through his paralyzed arm and leg, exclaims that "There is not a hope [. . .] in five minutes the malady will reach its height, and in a quarter of an hour there will be nothing left of me but a dead corpse."<sup>15</sup> Similarly, the boy's search for the certitude of Father Flynn's death, his overhearing the misinformed fumbblings of the relict, his horror in beholding the "truculent" face of the corpse (*D* 14), and his registering the peculiar smell in the wake room, each has its specific precedence in Dumas's story. Again, when Joyce's narrator admits to "discovering in myself a sensation of freedom as if I had been freed from something by his death" (*D* 12), he is both echoing and mystifying a particularly melodramatic and poignant plot element in the Dumas novel.

11. *Ibid.*, pp 113-19.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 117.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 120.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 104.

15. *Ibid.*, pp. 115-16.

Dumas's Dantès progresses from a naïve realism to a putative acknowledgement of the hand of Providence, whereas Joyce's protagonist moves from a Gnostic sense of superiority over the ignorant laity to an agnostic diffidence about religious answers to existential questions. Finally, in the boy's imagining himself cast in the role of confessor to the dead priest, Joyce has adapted Dumas's device of the exchange of clothes to produce the effect of a role reversal and the identification of spiritual son with his father. It is worth observing, here, that Joyce has provided no evidence for the boy's imagining Father Flynn as a "simoniac": ending his clerical career in St. Catherine's, Meath Street suggests the opposite. Dumas's Abbé, on the other hand, without any apparent twinges of conscience, by accepting the Spada fortune as his property, has gone to meet his Maker without confessing any such mortal transgression. In this respect, flaw or not, the confessional scene in Joyce's narrative becomes more intelligible with the recognition of its imaginative debt to *The Count*.

### Vengeance and Providence

A central dramatic irony in Dumas's *The Count* is that Dantès's inheritance of the treasure enables him to defy the Abbé's moral counsel that he should not seek vengeance upon those who were the cause of his incarceration. The Abbé Faria's spiritual life centers on the mystery of divine Providence: what is impenetrable or apparently unjust by human reckoning—his own incarceration and the affliction that thwarts his effort to escape—he has confidence that it is both right and just in the mind of the Creator. Dantès has reason to reconsider these questions when subsequently confronting the death of Caderousse: his dialogue with the Count on that subject reviews the relationship between Providence and the proper conduct of human affairs. Despite the Abbé's profession of faith and Christian example, Dantès arrogates to himself the role of just administrator of God's justice. His avenger, to lay the hand of Providence on those who wronged him.

Just as the convolutions of the action thrilled generations of readers, it did the same for the preadolescent Joyce. With all its sentimentalities, it impressed itself upon his imagination so that when he was called upon to write something serious, he turned to some of its structures to support his reflections on the mystery of evil (Original Sin) and the relationship between the Divine will and human freedom and fallibility. That Joyce was conscious of the deficiencies in Dumas's treatment of human action under the aegis of a belief in Divine Providence is indicated by the appearance of the word "Providence" no fewer than four times in the opening twelve lines of the original version of the story and its total excision in the final text. Joyce's intention in "The Sisters" is to avoid terms so easily misunderstood or mishandled, and to focus, instead, on a genuine crisis of faith provoked

by the tensions among the young Father Flynn's Catholic Christian inherited faith, the hazards of the clerical life (where he ran the apparently contrary risks of simony and scrupulosity), a series of apparent disappointments, and the apparent spiritual despair of his later years. Joyce's intellectual and spiritual honesty in representing each of his major characters and his technical skill in evoking an identification between the boy and the priest allow us to see as if in a double parallax both the narrator's own past and a potentially futile future avoided. In these respects, "The Sisters" far transcends its crude origins in the Dumas novel in which romantic adventure poses as a spiritual quest.

### Liberation

Finally, to conclude these observations on a piquant—and very Joycean—note, we consider how lurking in the background of both works is the image of Napoleon Bonaparte. His figure presides over the quarter century of the action of *The Count*. It is as an unwitting conspirator on Napoleon's behalf that Dantès loses his personal freedom. In the course of his incarceration he becomes a natural ally of the politically dangerous Abbé. As their practical collaboration and close relationship develop, the objects of their aspiration—personal, intellectual, and spiritual—are seen to coalesce under the vaguely sketched political cause personified by Napoleon. These associated aspirations reemerge in the text of "The Sisters," when the narrator, in exemplifying what he learned of moral theology and history from Father Flynn, conflates accounts of the dissertations of the Church Fathers, the catacombs, the ceremonies and vestments of the priest at Mass, and Napoleon (*D* 13). When the narrator subsequently reports the writing of Father Flynn's obituary for the *Freeman's Journal*, the newspaper founded by Parnell, the political leader whose objective was Home Rule for Ireland, readers may derive some satisfaction from recognizing in Eliza's malapropism, the "*Freeman's General*" (*D* 16) the narrator's sly and superior ventriloquized allusion to Napoleon. Despite his reputation as a false Messiah among Irish revolutionaries, the glamourised image of "The Green Linnet" as one who offered political hope remained largely intact in the popular mind throughout the nineteenth century.<sup>16</sup> This image was apparently part of the young Joyce's tribal inheritance (the conflation of the images of Napoleon

16. The ballad tradition, which preserves more than a dozen nineteenth-century ballads celebrating Napoleon, bears witness to this. See Frank Harte and Dónal Lunny's CD, *My Name is Napoleon Bonaparte* (Hummingbird HBCD0027).

and Parnell) to which he attached notions of artistic energy and detachment, personal liberation, and charismatic national liberation. The satisfaction is enlarged, of course, when one recognizes the ways in which “The Sisters” emanates from Dumas’s oblique tribute to the memory of Ireland’s would-be liberator.

**Mount Vernon, Virginia**