The Crisis of Control in James Joyce’s Dubliners and A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*

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I

....for the purpose of playing,
whose end, both at the first and now, was and is to hold as ‘twere the mirror up to nature, to show virtue her feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure. (Shakespeare 3.2.20-4)

I seriously believe that you will retard the course of civilization in Ireland by preventing the Irish people from having one good look at themselves in my nicely polished looking-glass. (Letters 62)

A major theme of James Joyce’s writing is the paralysis of the Irish people caused by the monolithic influences of the Catholic Church and the British Empire. At the turn of the century, these two patriarchal institutions had cast a large net over the Irish people, and their insistence on absolute conformity, a demand which Joyce vehemently resisted, had a debilitating effect on the Irish. The Church and Crown exercised enormous control over almost every aspect of Irish society. From public life to private life, these two institutions of power worked in the background of Irish society to forge what Joyce called “the gratefully oppressed” (D 30). Joyce deeply resented the power exercised over the Irish by the Church and Crown but he felt that the Irish people were also partly responsible for their willing conformity to the expectations of the colonial powers which controlled them. One of the main purposes of Joyce’s writing was to shock the Irish people into confronting their servitude and maybe even impelling them to resist their colonial oppressors. Joyce strove to create a “nicely polished looking-glass” (D vii) so that the Irish people could get a clear picture of their plight. It was Joyce’s hope that if the Irish read Dubliners, the “scales would fall from their eyes, they would recognize their paralysis, that recognition would stimulate movement, ‘a first step’ towards freedom, towards ‘civilization’” (D xii). His subsequent works, most notably, A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, and Ulysses, also highlight the harmful effects that the Catholic Church and the British Empire have on the individuals they wish to subjugate. In this paper, I will employ a Foucauldian lens to show how the process of socialization causes children in Joyce’s writing to suffer a crisis of control as they struggle against the conformity that is expected of them by the panoptic society in which they live.

II

Over the past fifty years the word “paralysis” has emerged as a major theme in almost every critical analysis of Dubliners.1) Gerald Doherty states that in the