



'Taking Arms': Reading homosocial anxiety through Cranly's absence in *Ulysses*

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This essay revolves on a simple idea: that we should treat Joyce's insertion of Cranly into *Ulysses* as a note to read absences in the text.¹ By tracking Joyce's insertions of Cranly, this essay uncovers a complex language of homosexuality and homosociality that surrounds him in Stephen's mind. Cranly becomes a command word for interpreting absences in Stephen's speech. By noticing these calculated absences, what emerges is Stephen's motivation: avoidance of homosexual interpretation by the men around him. Cranly only appears in two parts of the novel, the Telemachiad and later in Scylla and Charybdis². This essay establishes what Cranly signifies in Stephen's thinking in the Telemachiad and then explores how Joyce deploys these absences in Stephen's homosocial interactions in Scylla and Charybdis. Joyce first presents Stephen's apprehension of the power of absence and then presents its social deployment.

Cranly's first role in *Ulysses* is getting the reader to notice absence. *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* closes with Stephen Dedalus bidding an emotionally charged farewell to his closest friend before leaving Dublin.³ *Ulysses* opens onto Stephen's return to Dublin, penniless and friendless. The first question a reader of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* might raise is 'what has happened in this absent time?'. Although Joyce refuses to proffer any definitive answers, he is keen to acknowledge the importance of the question.⁴ Over the course of *Ulysses*, Joyce inserts Cranly into Stephen's interior monologue 7 times.⁵ Perhaps the most notable of the 'Cranly interjections' are the triptych of "Cranly's Arm. His Arm." (Telemachus), His Arm. Cranly's arm." (Proteus) and "Smile. Cranly's smile (Scylla and Charybdis).⁶ Joyce, at particular moments, makes Cranly's absence highly conspicuous, and it is therefore worth dissecting these moments.

Cranly's conspicuous absence, alone is not hugely significant. What makes him significant is Joyce's use of Cranly as a figurehead for the key absences that are constructed around him. Firstly, in Telemachus and Proteus, Cranly's appearance is accompanied by Wildean allusions. In Telemachus the passage evokes Wilde in two ways.

It is a symbol of Irish art. The cracked lookingglass of a servant. Buck Mulligan suddenly

linked his arm in Stephen's and walked with him round the tower [...] God, Kinch, if you and I could only work together we might do something for the island. Hellénise it.

¹ James Joyce, *Ulysses*, ed. by Jeri Johnson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008)

² The first three chapters of *Ulysses* are often grouped as the "Telemachiad"

³ James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Classics, 1992)

⁴ Where the essay states that Cranly is absent, it means narratively so: he is never physically present or discussed out loud.

⁵ *Ulysses*, p.7, p.36, p.49, p.176, p.177, p.180, p.203

⁶ *Ulysses*, p.7, p.49, p.176

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Cranly's arm. His arm.

As Stuart Gilbert has identified, the "cracked looking glass" is a direct quotation from Wilde's essay "The Decay of Lying".⁷ Furthermore, the wider motif of Wilde's obsession with reflection evokes Thomas Nast's critical satirical cartoon of Wilde ("Mr O'Wilde") as narcissus.⁸ Proteus's allusion is more explicit.

Staunch friend, a brother soul: Wilde's love that dare not speak its name.

His Arm. Cranly's Arm.

Why then is Cranly linked so closely with Wilde?

One reading is that Wilde's presence supports Joseph Valente's notion of Stephen's "homosexual panic" and extends its reach from *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* into *Ulysses*.⁹ Valente suggests that the reason for Stephen's departure (in *Portrait of an Artist*) is a panic provoked by his homosexual desire for Cranly. Colleen Lamos suggests that here, in *Ulysses*, the evocation of Cranly's arms are "corporeal metonymies of his body that carry a sexual charge" and therefore indicate Stephen's continuing homosexual desire.¹⁰ This, initially, seems to fit with the evocation of Wilde, the only 'infamously' homosexual public figure to draw upon for Stephen's comparison. This proposal of Stephen's homosexuality places Cranly and Wilde as one conflated trigger for uncovering Stephen's hidden homosexual desires.

This way of reading Cranly (as trigger word for moments of homosexual desire) is an unhelpful simplification, however. Given that Cranly is a figure of absence, we should not read what Stephen desires, but what he does not desire (or fears). This assertion is not seeking to erase queer readings, or even to deny the possibility of Stephen's homosexuality, but to uncover a more complex pattern of absence in the discussion of male relationships.¹¹ Instead, this essay poses that allusions to homosexuality must be read in terms of their absences, their "expressive silence and knowing ignorance".¹² In the wake of what Frances Devlin-Glass calls "Wildean Trauma", the significations of Wilde are more complex than simply as indicator of homosexuality.¹³ "A Love that dare not speak its name" is not Wilde's quote, it is a line from Lord Alfred Douglas' poem which was used to condemn Wilde in his trial for Gross Indecency.¹⁴ Wilde is not merely significant because of his homosexuality, but because of the very public downfall that resulted from it. Moreover, it is significant because it poses ambiguity around signifiers of his homosexuality. Douglas dared not speak the name of his love and yet, this absence of speech was *still* used in a court of law to identify his love as homosexual. Indeed, the fact that Stephen misattributes this quote (it is not Wilde's love but Douglas') indicates the confusion surrounding homosexual signifiers. Joyce poses that Stephen is hyper aware of these ambiguous and sometimes absent 'signs' of homosexuality.

⁷ According to Albert J. Solomon, 'Another Broken Mirror' in *James Joyce Quarterly*, 5.3, p.206

⁸ Thomas Nast, 'Caricature of Oscar Wilde as Narcissus from a collection of portraits etc.', 1894, ink print, possession of The British Library, <https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/caricature-of-oscar-wilde-as-narcissus>, accessed 10.12.21

⁹ Joseph Valente, 'Thrilled by His Touch: Homosexual Panic and the Will to Artistry in "A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man"', *James Joyce Quarterly*, 31.3, pp.167-188

¹⁰ Colleen Lamos, 'Signatures of the Invisible: Homosexual Secrecy and Knowledge in "Ulysses"', *James Joyce Quarterly*, 31.3, p.345

¹¹ Although contemporary criticism generally adopts the term "queer", this essay will use "homosexual" because of the word's significance in the context of the argument

¹² Colleen Lamos, 'Signatures of the Invisible', p.338

¹³ Frances Devlin-Glass, 'Writing in the Slipstream of the Wildean Trauma: Joyce, Buck Mulligan and Homophobia Reconsidered', *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies*, 31.2, pp.27-33

¹⁴ Alfred Douglas, 'Two Loves', <https://poets.org/poem/two-loves>, accessed 05.12.21

Joyce is writing Stephen in the wake of a post Wildean realisation: that the “referent of homosexual signs is never finally verifiable or deniable”.¹⁵

The repeated significance of Cranly’s arms is a perfect example of this. The nuance of the point is exhibited by returning to Lamos’s insinuation that Cranly’s arms are “corporeal metonymies of his body that carry a sexual charge”. This must be acknowledged as a post Wildean reading. For much of the 19th century arm linking between men was a signifier of homosociality rather than homosexuality. Joyce uses Stephen’s recollection of Cranly’s arm-linking not as a ‘sexually charged’ indicator of homosexuality, but as an example of a homosocial signifier that has become unstable. Stephen recollects this moment, not necessarily because it was sexually charged, but because it reminds him to be wary of how he discusses homosocial acts in a post Wildean context of homosexual accusation. When exactly these shifts in signification are occurring (whether as an immediate consequence of ‘Wildean trauma’ or gradually over the century), is impossible to pin. Evidently however, they are changes in homosocial discourse that Joyce is aware of, and we must be careful to avoid polarised ideas of signification in a moment where signifying a difference between homosociality and homosexuality is neither “verifiable or deniable”. Joyce’s pairing of Cranly, Stephen’s dearest ever friend, and Wilde is not for the purpose of conflating the homosocial into the homosexuality, but to point towards Stephen’s anxiety about the possibility of these very connotations. A useful way to consider Cranly is as an embodiment of this grey space between the homosocial and homosexual, a figure of that for Stephen reminds him to be cautious of absent boundaries.

Where Joyce introduces Stephen’s homosocial anxieties in the Telemachiad, in Scylla, he employs Cranly again to highlight the manifestation and escalation of Stephen’s anxieties in a homosocial space. The chapter is structured around Stephen’s speech on Hamlet, and his theory on its applications to Shakespeare’s life. Using the established system of reading absence, we can read the gaps in his theory, the flaws in his thinking to elaborate on the specific areas of his homosocial anxiety. The chapter opens:

Urbane, to comfort them, the quaker librarian purred : — And we have, have we not, those priceless pages of Wilhelm Meister ? A great poet on a great brother poet. A hesitating soul taking arms against a sea of troubles, torn by conflicting doubts, as one sees in real life.

[...]

*Smile. Smile Cranly’s Smile*¹⁶

Having been interrupted for five chapters by Bloom’s narrative, Joyce uses Cranly to acquaint his reader with Stephen’s Telemachiad concerns. “A great brother poet” mirrors “brother soul” and once again the instability of “taking arms” arises. By inserting Cranly, Joyce ensures that this is not a connection that is missed. “Taking arms against a sea of troubles” is, of course, a play on Hamlet’s most famous soliloquy:

*To be, or not to be, that is the question:
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles*¹⁷

¹⁵ *Signatures of the Invisible*, p.338

¹⁶ *Ulysses*, p.176

¹⁷ William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, ed.by G.R. Hibbard, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987) p.3.1.56-60

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Significantly, developing on the Telemachiad, it continues to confuse the implication of taking arms. The more obvious implication in the soliloquy is 'arms' as weaponry, 'to arm yourself against a sea of troubles'. Joyce subverts it under the librarian's allusion to mean a joining of two 'great brother poets' against a sea of troubles. Stephen notices the misinterpretation of the image and thinks of the potential (mis)interpretations of his own homosocial relationship with Cranly. Thus is set into motion Stephen's anxious framing of Hamlet.

Firstly, Joyce points us towards brotherhood as a site of anxious absences. Stephen's discussion of Shakespeare revolves around the idea that he can apply familial structures in *Hamlet* onto biographical information about Shakespeare in order to gain insight on Shakespeare's life. When the discussion reaches brotherhood however, there are gaping gaps in Stephen's logic.

*You will say those names were already in the chronicles from which he took the stuff of his plays. Why did he take them rather than others ? Richard, a whoreson crookback, misbegotten, makes love to a widowed Ann (what's in a name ?), woos and wins her, a whoreson merry widow. Richard the conqueror, third brother, came after William the conquered.*¹⁸

Stephen, purely on the basis of namesake, moves away from Hamlet to provide an ill-fitting explanation within Richard III (Edmund and Richard are not even brothers in the play).

Edward Duncan clarifies the absurdity of this arguments.

*"Stephen concludes on what grounds it is impossible to say (and Stephen's argument supplies no clue) that he had been cuckolded by one or both of his brothers, ;Edmund and ·Richard. Stephen's reasons for picking on Edmund and Richard are the slightest. They depend on the fact that in the play Gertrude was guilty of incest with her brother-in-law, Claudius."*¹⁹

As Duncan suggests, there is little point in attempting to dissect a logic which is evidently absent. Instead a better approach is to challenge why discussion of Hamlet is absent here in favour of the ill-fitted Richard III.

Before this tirade, Joyce presents Stephen's interior anxiety.

*A brother is as easily forgotten as an umbrella. Lapwing. Where is your brother ? Apothecaries' hall. My whetstone. Him, then Cranly, Mulligan : now these.*²⁰

This moment reminds the reader of Stephen's anxiety around the conflation of "brotherhood". As discussed, the librarian's use of "great brother Poet" moves away from simple biological brotherhood and echoes "brother soul", a term that has in turn been conflated by Stephen with Wilde's 'love that dare not speak its name' in Proteus. Where Hamlet offers the potential to discuss brotherhood in a more metaphorical sense, he refuses for fear of homosexual interpretation.

Indeed, as with Cranly, Joyce makes one character's absence particularly conspicuous. While there are multiple homosocial dynamics in Hamlet, the most overt example of brotherliness is Horatio. Joyce states as much in his use of "Lapwing". In a scene that mirrors the parting of Stephen and Cranly, Act V Scene 2 of Hamlet stages Hamlet's

¹⁸ *Ulysses*, p. 203

¹⁹ Edward Duncan, 'Unsubstantial Father: A Study of the *Hamlet* Symbolism in Joyce's *Ulysses*', *University of Toronto Quarterly*, 19. 2, 1950, p.128

²⁰ *Ulysses*, p. 203

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self-imposed exile (of sorts) as he leaves Horatio to face his almost certain death. Osric is the harbinger of this exile and as Osric exits Horatio taunts him.

*HORATIO - This lapwing runs away with the shell on his head.*²¹

As George L. Geckle states, "it is practically impossible for Stephen to be unaware of Horatio's [...] comment on Osric".²² While the uses of "Lapwing" throughout this chapter are multifarious, here it demands that its reader identifies Stephen's refusal to discuss Horatio. Stephen refuses to discuss Horatio, because his role throughout Hamlet (exemplified in this moment) is of a "true brother soul", a character who acts consistently out of homosocial compassion for Hamlet. Horatio disrupts Stephen's attempt to disentangle notions of brotherhood. Edmund and Richard are presented as brothers in a purely biological sense, by supposedly cuckolding Shakespeare, they are presented without homosocial compassion for him, and so are brothers only in a biologically "verifiable" sense.

Interestingly, fatherhood (in its centrality to Hamlet) cannot be treated in the same way: it cannot be dismissed so casually. Nevertheless, when treated with the question of absence, the subject reveals an even wider circumvention of homosocial ambiguities. As with brotherhood, the most striking absence in discussion of fatherhood is an absence of compassionate homosociality; indeed, it is an absence of homosociality all-together. In the ultimate circumvention, Stephen poses a consubstantial father, one who is simultaneously father and son: the creator and the created.

Hamlet, I am thy fathers spirit

*bidding him list. To a son he speaks, the son of his soul, the prince, young Hamlet and to the son of his body, Hamnet Shakespeare, who has died in Stratford that his namesake may live for ever. Is it possible that that player Shakespeare, a ghost by absence, and in the vesture of buried Denmark, a ghost by death, speaking his own words to his own son's name (had Hamnet Shakespeare lived he would have been prince Hamlet's twin) is it possible, I want to know, or probable that he did not draw or foresee the logical conclusion of those premises : you are the dispossessed son : I am the murdered father*²³

While Stephen's theories on fatherhood in Hamlet have been subject to much greater critical attention (for instance Freudian and Theological readings), the resonance of absence is similar to the treatment of Brotherhood. For instance, Alan Dundes states that Stephen poses a consubstantial figure in order to "*den[y] the necessity for his father's intercourse with his mother for his own existence is an Oedipal ideal*".²⁴ Reframed by a reading of absence however, what emerges is not what is desired, but what is feared. The theory should inversely be read not as a desire for the mother, but a desire to remove the father.

Indeed, this is an escalation of Stephen's homosocial anxiety. In creating a consubstantial father, Stephen removes questions of sexuality (not merely homosexuality) all together. Removing the need for the mother, Stephen removes the reproductive need for sexual interaction. Once again, the desire to detangle the sexual from the homosocial (here father and son) is pervasive. Admittedly, discussion of the sexual does infiltrate his theory

²¹ *Hamlet*, 5.2.147

²² George L. Geckle, 'Stephen Dedalus as Lapwing: A Symbolic Center of "Ulysses"', *James Joyce Quarterly*, 6.2, p.105

²³ *Ulysses*, p. 181

²⁴ Alan Dundes, 'RE: JOYCE-NO IN AT THE WOMB', in *Modern Fiction Studies*, 8.2, p.137

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elsewhere. He accuses Edmund, Richard and Gertrude (Ann) of cuckolding and incest. Following our logic then, we must ask who this sexual deviancy does not implicate.

Elevating him to an untouchable consubstantial status, Stephen protects Shakespeare from all accusations of sexual deviancy (including accusations of homosexuality). Nevertheless, the conversation of Shakespeare's sexuality does inevitably arise.

Buck Mulligan rapped John Eglinton's desk sharply.

—* *Whom do you suspect ? he challenged.*

— *Say that he is the spurned lover in the sonnets. Once spurned twice spurned. But the court wanton spurned him for a lord, his dearmylove. Love that dare not speak its name.*

— *As an Englishman, you mean, John sturdy Eglinton put in, he loved a lord. Old wall where sudden lizards flash. At Charenton I watched them.*

— *It seems so, Stephen said, when he wants to do for him, and for all other and singular unneared wombs, the holy office an ostler does for the stallion.*²⁵

Mulligan's interrogation comes shortly after his assertion to Stephen that Bloom is "Greeker than the Greeks" an overtly homosexual implication.²⁶ Stephen has anxiously pre-empted this conversation in Proteus (accusation of "Love that dare not speak its name") and in the realisation of this accusation, Joyce allows a striking question to emerge. If he is trying to avoid entanglement in sexual discourse, why does Stephen choose to extensively discuss a literary figure (Shakespeare) that is so open to the accusation of homosexuality.

It is because accusations of Shakespeare's homosexuality exist, that Stephen's discussion becomes a sounding board for exposing knowledge of homosexuality. Therefore, the discussion of Shakespeare provides an opportunity for Stephen to make his own supposed absence of homosexual knowledge conspicuous. Mulligan's Wildian reference evokes Wilde's use of Shakespeare in his Libel trial. Infamously the prosecutor (attempting to extract evidence for homosexuality in Wilde's writing) asked "And I suppose you wrote that also Mr Wilde?", Wilde replied "Ah no, Mr Carson, Shakespeare wrote that".²⁷ Where Wilde validifies himself by proximity to Shakespeare, Joyce (perhaps unsurprisingly given Wilde's guilty verdict) gives Stephen the opposite approach. Stephen gambles that he can convince the other men of his complete ignorance of Shakespeare's homosexuality. Lamos summarises it best when they state "double-edged sword of homosexual knowledge cuts both ways in *Ulysses*. [...] To know about homosexuality is to be its accomplice".²⁸ The only way to convince the other men of his ignorance of homosexual experience is to engage them enough in the conversation that his ignorance on the subject becomes conspicuous.

The initial accusation of homosexuality in the sonnets is posed with a counter. Mulligan asserts that the male addressee of the Sonnets is a "spurned lover" and John Eglinton counters that the male addressee is the platonic recipient of Shakespeare's adoration. By Stephen's anxious thinking, both theories (homosexual and homosocial) are dangerous. Instead therefore, Stephen subverts the discussion into the metaphor of "Ostler" and "Stallion". Within Stephen's metaphor any implication of sexual involvement becomes

²⁵ *Ulysses*, p.194

²⁶ *Ulysses*, p. 192

²⁷ Oscar Wilde, *Nothing... Except my Genius* (London: Penguin Publishing Group, 1997)

²⁸ *Signatures of the Invisible*, p. 338

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bestial, and the farcicalness of this suggests a (deliberate) misinterpretation of Mulligan's theory as absurd. He doesn't involve himself in the discourse for the proposal or the counter. In this moment, and in all other absences of homosocial discussion, he positions himself as an outsider to the very idea.

In conclusion therefore, Cranly represents Stephen's fear of a homosocial line he cannot see. He marks invisible line that borders into homosexuality. With a growing awareness of this line's ambiguity, even 'invisibility', Joyce presents Stephen as positioning himself further and further from the reach of any ambiguous homosocial space. Joyce emphasises the fact that, because of the invisibility of homosexual signifiers, we cannot accurately outline the nature of Cranly and Stephen's relationship. What is more pertinent than the nature of their relationship is Cranly's positioning in the midst of this ambiguous territory. This makes him a signifier for Stephen's anxiety about such distinctions. When Joyce depicts Stephen entering this ambiguous territory, the insertion of Cranly triggers Stephen to move away into the unambiguous territory of totally absent discussion. This is a key motivator to consider in his Shakespearian theory. Where critics are keen to position Stephen within his Shakespearian theory, this social motivator must first be considered. It is very challenging to identify Stephen within a discussion where Joyce presents him as avoiding so much. The first step we must take to comprehending Stephen (in these chapters at least) is by understanding these absences.

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