

TO NORA BARNACLE

MS. Cornell

29 August 1904

60 Shelbourne Road

My dear Nora I have just finished my midnight dinner for which I had no appetite. When I was half way through it I discovered I was eating it out of my fingers. I felt sick just as I did last night. I am much distressed. Excuse this dreadful pen and this awful paper.

I may have pained you tonight by what I said but surely it is well that you should know my mind on most things? My mind rejects the whole present social order and Christianity—home, the recognised virtues, classes of life, and religious doctrines. How could I like the idea of home? My home was simply a middle-class affair ruined by spendthrift habits which I have inherited. My mother was slowly killed, I think, by my father's ill-treatment, by years of trouble, and by my cynical frankness of conduct. When I looked on her face as she lay in her coffin—a face grey and wasted with cancer—I understood that I was looking on the face of a victim and I cursed the system which had made her a victim. We were seventeen in family. My brothers and sisters are nothing to me. One brother alone is capable of understanding me.

Six years ago I left the Catholic Church, hating it most fervently. I found it impossible for me to remain in it on account of the impulses of my nature. I made secret war upon it when I was a student and declined to accept the positions it offered me. By doing this I made myself a

beggar but I retained my pride. Now I make open war upon it by what I write and say and do. I cannot enter the social order except as a vagabond. I started to study medicine three times, law once, music once. A week ago I was arranging to go away as a travelling actor. I could put no energy into the plan because you kept pulling me by the elbow. The actual difficulties of my life are incredible but I despise them.

When you went in tonight I wandered along towards Grafton St where I stood for a long time leaning against a lamp-post, smoking. The street was full of a life which I have poured a stream of my youth upon. While I stood there I thought of a few sentences I wrote some years ago when I lived in Paris—these sentences which follow—“They pass in twos and threes amid the life of the boulevard, walking like people who have leisure in a place lit up for them. They are in the pastry cook’s, chattering, crushing little fabrics of pastry, or seated silently at tables by the café door, or descending from carriages with a busy stir of garments soft as the voice of the adulterer. They pass in an air of perfumes. Under the perfumes their bodies have a warm humid smell”—¹

While I was repeating this to myself I knew that that life was still waiting for me if I chose to enter it. It could not give me perhaps the intoxication it had once given but it was still there and now that I am wiser and more controllable it was safe. It would ask no questions, expect nothing from me but a few moments of my life, leaving the rest free, and would promise me pleasure in return. I thought of all this and without regret I rejected it. It was useless for me; it could not give me what I wanted.

You have misunderstood, I think, some passages in a letter I wrote you and I have noticed a certain shyness in your manner as if the recollection of that night troubled you. I however consider it a kind of sacrament and the recollection of it fills me with amazed joy. You will perhaps not understand at once why it is that I honour you so much on account of it as you do not know much of my mind. But at the same time it was a sacrament which left in me a final sense of sorrow and degradation—sorrow because I saw in you an extraordinary, melancholy tenderness which had chosen that sacrament as a compromise, and degradation because I understood that in your eyes I was inferior to a convention of our present society.

I spoke to you satirically tonight but I was speaking of the world not of you. I am an enemy of the ignobleness and slavishness of people but not of you. Can you not see the simplicity which is at the back of all my

¹ The passage comprises all except the last sentence of an epiphany (MS. Cornell) of Parisian *poules*. It is adapted in *Ulysses*, pp. 52–3 (42).

disguises? We all wear masks. Certain people who know that we are much together often insult me about you. I listen to them calmly, disdain to answer them but their least word tumbles my heart about like a bird in a storm.

It is not pleasant for me that I have to go to bed now remembering the last look of your eyes—a look of tired indifference—remembering the torture in your voice the other night. No human being has ever stood so close to my soul as you stand, it seems, and yet you can treat my words with painful rudeness (‘I know what is talking now’ you said). When I was younger I had a friend¹ to whom I gave myself freely—in a way more than I give to you and in a way less. He was Irish, that is to say, he was false to me.

I have not said a quarter of what I want to say but it is great labour writing with this cursed pen. I don’t know what you will think of this letter. Please write to me, won’t you? Believe me, my dear Nora, I honour you very much but I want more than your caresses. You have left me again in an anguish of doubt.

JAJ

TO NORA BARNACLE

MS. Private

[About 1 September 1904]

7 S. Peter’s Terrace, Cabra, Dublin

Sweetheart I am in such high good humour this morning that I insist on writing to you whether you like it or not. I have no further news for you except that I told my sister about you last night. It was very amusing. I am going out in half an hour to see Palmieri² who wants me to study music and I shall be passing your windows. I wonder will you be there. I also wonder if you are there will I be able to see you. Probably not.

What a lovely morning! That skull, I am glad to say, didn’t come to torment me last night. How I hate God and death! How I like Nora! Of course you are shocked at these words, pious creature that you are.

I got up early this morning to finish a story I was writing. When I had written a page I decided I would write a letter to you instead. Besides, I thought you disliked Monday and a letter from me might put you in better spirits. When I am happy I have an insane wish to tell it to everyone I meet but I would be much happier if you gave me one of those chirruping kisses you are fond of giving me. They remind me of canaries singing.

¹ J. F. Byrne.

² Benedetto Palmieri (1863–1918?) was the best voice teacher in Dublin. A Neapolitan by birth, he taught at the Dublin Academy of Music from 1900 to 1914. He offered to train Joyce for three years free of charge in return for a share of his concert earnings for ten years. Joyce declined.