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GARRY LEONARD

Dubliners

Like a great play, *Dubliners* exists as written, and yet also awaits performance. We read the stories, determined to ferret out what they mean, only to end up wondering about ourselves. Paradoxically, the protean quality of these stories – the way they seem to have something to say about everything – makes them appear, to the first time reader, to be about nothing at all. They begin in the middle of something and stop unexpectedly with what may or may not be a new beginning. Or to describe this a different way, the stories read as if someone has made a two-hour film by putting the camera on a tripod and letting it run, and then brought the result directly to the screen, with no editing. Upon first reading, there seem to be no obvious clues to the strategy behind Joyce's selection of a bewildering array of obscure street names, stray thoughts, lost corkscrews, gold coins, lost plumcakes, confiscated adventure books, and forgotten novels of a dead priest. Never before, it seems, has a writer used so much detail to explain so little.

At the same time, there is an undeniable drive in the stories, an urgency many readers feel, but cannot account for: what does Father Flynn wish to confess in 'The Sisters'? What has happened to make Lily behave so strangely in 'The Dead'? The stories appear to be taking the reader toward a moral dilemma, or a climax, or a revelation, or at least a conclusion, and then they stop, but without appearing to have ended. I can sympathize with this frustration. When I first read 'The Sisters', I was not troubled by its abrupt ending because I thought there was something wrong with my edition, and that the 'end' of the story had somehow failed to be printed in my text: 'So then, of course, when they saw that, that made them think that there was something gone wrong with him....' (*D* 10). And then the story is over! It not only ends in the middle of something, it doesn't even conclude with a full sentence. I was also puzzled that a writer I had been told was a master of the English language had to use the word 'that' three times in this strangely uncommunicative sentence.

Although I had figured out for myself that there was something wrong with Father Flynn, I was waiting for the story to tell me what. To merely have it repeated that something was amiss, without having it specified – 'of course' there was 'something wrong' – was frustrating in the extreme. How is it these people manage to talk and talk without actually saying anything? And yet they were saying 'something' because I couldn't seem to let the story alone. Maybe Father Flynn sinned when he taught the boy how to say the Catholic Mass. Maybe the sisters could have saved his life, but refused (why else draw attention to them so much by calling the story 'The Sisters'?). Maybe there was something wrong with the narrator, who, after all, has nightmares of the dead priest trying to confess to him, and in general, has become so self-conscious in the wake of Father Flynn's death he declines to eat any crackers for fear of embarrassment: 'I would make too much noise eating them' (*D* 7). I read over the story again and again, but, still, it seemed more gaps than substance. Every clue upon closer inspection turns out to be another riddle. The boy's dream for instance: 'I felt that I had been very far away, in some land where the customs were strange – in Persia, I thought.... but I could not remember the end of the dream' (*D* 6). What does it mean to not remember the end of a dream, and yet to remember there was an end, but one which you have forgotten? How could Joyce expect this dream to be any use at all in discerning the point of his story?

And what of the three words the boy loves and fears: *gnomon*, *simony*, *paralysis*? A 'gnomon' is actually a term for a riddle, or the bar on a sundial that casts a shadow indicating the time, or a geometric figure of a parallelogram with a corner missing (which is where he originally saw the word – in his mathematics book). The multiple definitions of this word seem to offer a clue of some sort, at least to me if not to the boy. Adding to this, 'simony' is the selling of something of spiritual value for material gain, though the boy may not know that, either. But this connects to something that *is* disturbing the boy: how much of what he does not know is nonetheless affecting him? The adults seem anxious about Father Flynn, although they are not able to give their reason, and don't even finish their sentences. Old Cotter says 'My idea is: let a young lad run about and play with young lads of his own age and not be... Am I right, Jack?' (*D* 4). And yet on a daily basis he has been sent to bring the priest his snuff, and has stayed hours longer to be told about the bewildering intricacies of church law. And what about the geometric figure? Is the narrator the missing corner, feeling, as he does, alone and apart from his family. His uncle claims to always tell him to 'box his corner' (*D* 4) and, indeed, he is sitting in the corner, literally, when he refuses Eliza's offer to have some crackers.

Slowly, on my third or fourth reading, I began to sense, reluctantly, and with some alarm, my affinity with the boy who narrates the story. He doesn't understand what's going on, and neither do I. He struggles to form a coherent narrative out of apparently unrelated details, and so do I. Joyce refuses to be an omniscient narrator because the twentieth century is anything but an Age of Faith. It is a time of deep incertitude, with an accompanying deep suspicion of all meta-narratives (that is, theories which purport to explain everything). No wonder the boy notices, when viewing the dead Father Flynn in his coffin, the 'idle chalice on his breast'; this is the same chalice, perhaps, Eliza refers to when she tells the story of what seemed to begin Father Flynn's decline: '– It was that chalice he broke.... That was the beginning of it. Of course, they say it was all right, that it contained nothing, I mean' (*D* 9).

Or is Eliza right in a way she does not intend? Father Flynn's loss of faith, the discovery that his chalice 'contained nothing' – is this crisis in faith something he passed on to the boy without ever identifying it as such?: 'Sometimes he had amused himself by putting difficult questions to me' (*D* 6). In one of Joyce's earliest publications, before the writing of *Dubliners*, he expressed his pleasure in the works of the great Norwegian dramatist Henrik Ibsen by praising Ibsen's genius for presenting the life of a character in a way that does not preach about the meaning of his life, but invites the reader to observe closely and speculate: 'By degrees the whole scroll of his life is unrolled before us, and we have the pleasure not of hearing it read out to us, but of reading it for ourselves, piecing the various parts, and going closer to see wherever the writing on the parchment is fainter or less legible' (*OCPW* 32). This desire to 'go closer' and see not what is clear, but what is 'fainter or less legible' seems sound advice for approaching the many gaps in 'The Sisters' where sentences never get finished, voices tail off, silence retakes the room again and again.

Indeed, in the opening paragraph of the story, the narrator is a 'reader' of sorts, passing Father Flynn's window 'night after night' hoping to interpret for himself what has happened: 'If he was dead, I thought, I would see the reflection of candles on the darkened blind for I knew that two candles must be set at the head of a corpse' (*D* 3). But this anticipated clarity is immediately replaced by a vague dread about, but also a fascination with, the parts of his relationship with Flynn that are fainter and less legible: 'It filled me with fear, and yet *I longed to be nearer to it and to look* upon its deadly work' (*D* 3, italics mine). Here is the invitation and the warning of *Dubliners*: come closer, look for where it fades, where it is illegible, but know that what remains unsaid is often what we fear to say, or even think, and yet, at the same time, might wish to hear shouted aloud – the longing and the fear that accompanies genuine insight unadulterated by self-delusion or

wishful thinking: deadly work, indeed, but perhaps an antidote to the 'moral paralysis' Joyce identifies as one of the subjects of this work.

The writing project that became *Dubliners* began simply enough. George Russell, an older man of letters, wishing to bring the obviously precocious but as yet unpublished Joyce a little bit of spending money, proposed that his young friend write something for *The Irish Homestead*, an agricultural journal where Russell served as an editorial adviser. Could he write, Russell asked, 'something simple, rural?, livemaking?' which readers would not be shocked by (*JJ* 163). The short answer to this question would appear to be 'no'. The longer answer – going on at least since 1914 when the collection first appeared – is that Joyce does not seem to have been capable of writing anything simple. Indeed, one of the dynamics of what would become his style of composition consists of adding, altering, and amending what he initially wrote, seeking a greater and greater degree of subtlety and finesse. Sometimes the stories seem simple – what could be simpler, after all, than the clichéd, whimsical remarks of the adults in 'The Sisters'? But it is the very simplicity of Old Cotter's remarks that keep the boy awake later in the evening: 'I puzzled my head to extract meaning from his unfinished sentences' (*D* 4). Readers of Joyce know how the boy feels. We, too, have puzzled to extract meaning over his sentences – finished and unfinished – in these works.

I, for example, have taught *Dubliners* for many years, but every time I present it to first time readers I learn something new. For me, these stories remain, by turns, fascinating, puzzling, enigmatic, and deceptively simple. One minute I am in the grip of some new way of talking about the story, excited by how I am helping it come alive for the students, and then, later, I am dismayed at how I have bullied some aspects of the story into supporting my reading of it. So a 'guideline' to reading *Dubliners* needs to acknowledge the multi-faceted quality of the stories. The stories are interested in issues of identity and the self, but they are equally involved with issues of politics and what it feels like to be a part of Ireland as a nation with a particular history and a particular place within the British Empire. Then again, they also present subtle interrogations of gender construction and the relationship between desire and the external circumstances that help shape it. Family and religion – in Joyce's case Catholicism – might complete a preliminary list of the issues and tensions Joyce puts into play in these stories.

Of course, what a list cannot do justice to is precisely what is Joyce's greatest accomplishment: he develops a style that puts all these various factors into play virtually at the same time. When characters appear paralysed by indecision, or overwhelmed with unwelcome insight, or resolutely oblivious to the significance of various events in their lives, we are invited to see these moments as a complex convergence of all the issues I have named so far.

Joyce himself telegraphs a fascination with such moments of overdetermined convergence when he privileges the notion of an 'epiphany' as the primary aesthetic building block of his stories. His character Stephen Daedalus (presented in an unfinished manuscript, *Stephen Hero*, that became *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*) outlines the basic idea: 'By an epiphany he meant a sudden spiritual transformation, whether in the vulgarity of speech or of gesture or in a memorable phase of the mind itself' (*SH* 216/211). This is not so much a moment of insight as a point where hitherto disparate observations, thoughts, and desires rearrange themselves into an unsuspected pattern that shatters often long held ideas about one's self and one's surroundings.

In the famous conclusion of 'Araby', for example, the boy, on the simplest level, realizes, as the Bazaar is closing down around him, that he doesn't have enough money to buy a present for Mangan's sister. What makes such a moment a literary and stylistic masterstroke is Joyce's careful preparation for this moment, so that the reader can tease out for himself or herself the convergence of the political, the personal, the familial, the textual, and the religious. In the case of the political, the shop girl is English, implying the goods themselves are yet another way for England to profit from the chronically dissatisfied citizens of colonial Ireland. In terms of the personal, the boy realizes upon seeing the shop-girl flirt with two admirers that he has done nothing at all similar, and so he has fantasized a relationship with a girl who, in fact, thinks nothing about him at all. In terms of the family, the reason for his lateness is his uncle's late appearance – and the abrupt way he hung up his coat upon arriving home, his insistence on singing a song, and his wife's bad temper, all show the tangled web of animosity and alcohol the boy seeks to escape, if only for one night. In terms of the textual, while the boy may not be aware of the extent to which he has patterned his journey on the search for the Holy Grail in King Arthur, the reader is invited to see the parallels, and to note that the boy's savagely felt disillusionment is partly the result of his fairytale script smashing unexpectedly into the very reality it was meant to dissolve: he is no Sir Lancelot, nor was he meant to be. Finally, in terms of the religious, the Bazaar is presented as a sort of profit-driven and indifferent Church. As the boy's sense of despair mounts, the 'Church' is described as gradually dimming its lights.

In other words, the Joycean epiphany does not so much confirm a truth as disrupt what one has grown comfortable accepting as true. But hunting for the epiphany in each story is not a simple matter. Little Chandler, in the story 'A Little Cloud', returns home after his conversation with Gallaher, only to find he hates his furniture, his wife, his marriage, and even his infant son, for robbing him of the chance to be an acknowledged poet. But is this even true?

One could argue that the reason he has never written any poetry (despite writing favourable reviews of the unwritten poetry in his head) is that this allows him to continue fantasizing that he one day might. And yet the price he is paying for this treasured fantasy is the growing unhappiness in his marriage to a woman who is increasingly hostile toward him because she resents his resentment of her. Even Gallaher, whose forceful stories of unending success have set in motion Little Chandler's attack of disillusionment, is not what he appears. His stories of loose women, wild times, and unlimited choices ('I've only to say the word and to-morrow I can have the woman and the cash' (*D* 62)) are so over the top we are free to suspect he is back in Dublin trying to make himself feel more important than he actually is.

He has, after all, contacted Little Chandler for this purpose alone, and not out of any sense of continuing, or deepening, a friendship, despite Little Chandler's strenuous efforts to see it that way. Realizing this about Gallaher allows us to make more sense both of his refusal to visit Little Chandler's home, and his insulting dismissal of marital sex as something that 'must get a bit stale' (*D* 62). Significantly, he offers this putdown only after Little Chandler has begun trying to ease out of the role of fawning friend to become someone on more equal footing. So why is Little Chandler even having a drink with this man who does not bother to hide his disdain? If we glance at the opening of the story we see Little Chandler preoccupied with the upcoming rendezvous with Gallaher, reflecting, 'it was something to have a friend like that' (*D* 53). Like the narrator of 'Araby', or Maria in 'Clay', Little Chandler uses almost constant fantasy to insulate himself from the reality of his life as he is living it. This misreading of reality for the sake of shoring up a fragile self-esteem leaves him chronically exposed to abrupt disillusionment and frequent panic.

If I am allowed to judge by my students, almost all first time readers of Joyce will be intrigued by the complexity of my interpretation of one of these stories, but will ask, 'Do you really think Joyce meant all that?' In the case of Joyce, we can say 'very likely', because starting from the point shortly before he began writing *Dubliners*, through the ten-year period where he fought to see it published, Joyce wrote letters to his brother and his potential publisher arguing at length for the purpose of the collection, clearly seeing it as a project with its own serious agenda. When his publisher wanted deletions and changes to the manuscript, for fear of libel, Joyce elevated his rhetoric to the nearly Evangelical: 'I seriously believe that you will retard the course of civilization in Ireland by preventing the Irish people from having one good look in my nicely polished looking-glass' (*Letters I* 63–4). On a somewhat calmer note, he talks about intending 'to write a chapter of the moral history of my country' (*Letters II* 134).

The course of civilization, the moral history of my country – Joyce may have lacked a publishing record at this point in his career, but there was no shortage of ambition. Further evidence that Joyce regarded *Dubliners* as a multi-faceted project can be seen in the extensive revisions he made to the 1904 version of 'The Sisters' published in *The Irish Homestead* when in 1906 he prepared it for the published collection. Virtually everything I have quoted above was added. The original opening – 'Three nights in succession I had found myself in Great Britain-street at that hour, as if by Providence' (*D* 190) – is replaced by the much more striking 'There was no hope for him this time: it was the third stroke' (*D* 3). The vague reference to 'Providence' is dropped, as is any reference to an 'I', or a specific locale, or a time. As a result, what is distilled from the original sentence is the pure affect of the narrator, delivered to us with a narrative style contoured to fit the precise arc of the narrator's mood – what Joyce elsewhere would describe as 'the curve of an emotion'.[1]

At the very least, in his rewriting of 'The Sisters', Joyce continues to take his story a long way from Russell's quaint request that he write 'something simple'. But, actually, Russell and Joyce are not as far apart as they seem. Both Irishmen were keenly aware their country needed to 'have one good look' in a looking-glass – however differently it might be polished. The relationship with Imperial Britain was slowly devolving, and with it came an increasing urgency for Ireland to understand itself as Irish, whether that meant reviving the Gaelic language, or Gaelic sport, or collecting and publishing whatever could be found of Irish mythology. *The Irish Homestead* itself, the journal Russell drew Joyce's attention to, was intended to appeal to dairy farmers (an ad for an electric milking machine shares the page with Joyce's first version of 'The Sisters'), hence Russell's specific instructions to Joyce that the story be 'rural'. As Katherine Mullin has pointed out, most of the stories in *The Irish Homestead* extolled the virtue of the Irish countryside and its presumed ability to supply all the material and spiritual solace any man or woman of Ireland might require.[2]

But if this were so, why the fierce rate of emigration? The 'simple' stories in *The Irish Homestead* were in fact propaganda: a mass-produced fantasy insisting that the rural life in Ireland was the only source of true salvation and anyone who turned their back and left would regret it for the rest of their life – if they even lived that long in the hostile world beyond Ireland's shores. In many of the stories, characters about to emigrate suddenly realize, just in the nick of time, all their happiness is in Ireland, and only heartache and despair abroad. In this context, the story 'Eveline', Joyce's second contribution after 'The Sisters', as Mullin points out, 'masquerades as a simple anti-emigration propagandist fiction' but 'in fact interrogates the terms and

functions of the nationalist propaganda it supposedly embodies' (191). What this means is that Joyce's project in *Dubliners* was both local – that is to say, in conscious dialogue with the stories of a little agricultural journal, *and* national – interested in placing Dublin on the world map, writing a moral history of a people, and furthering the course of civilization in Ireland.

Eveline, in the end, cannot leave Ireland – so far, so good, this is, after all, the endpoint of all the anti-emigration stores. But to what, and to whom, is she returning? Nothing more or less than: an increasingly violent alcoholic father who has no one but her to beat, since her oft-beaten brothers have already fled, and a thankless exhausting job where even her salary is not her own. But then why is she unable to leave? Her mother, dying exhausted and half-mad at a young age, has extracted from her a promise she would not go. Likewise, her boyfriend 'Frank' would seem to more or less fit the profile of the stock seducer in the anti-emigration tales, although Joyce leaves that uninterrogated in order to atomize all the ways the reality of life in Dublin entraps and paralyses Eveline. As Mullin suggests, no doubt what Eveline longs for when 'amid the seas she sent a cry of anguish' is the sort of correctional vision of a pastoral, restorative Ireland patiently waiting to fold her into its embrace and heal her, but far from any reassuring vision she is frozen into a consciousness-obliterating panic: 'She set her white face to him, passive, like a helpless animal' (*D* 29).

If readers use *The Irish Homestead* as a looking-glass they see the wholesome simple face of someone who need only accept the idea of a pure and nurturing homeland to be happy. If they pick up the looking-glass of *Dubliners*, however, their own frightened faces stare back at them. But what makes 'Eveline' so apparently simple, and yet so wondrously complex, is the way Joyce works within the formula of the anti-emigration story and uses it to show that people stay where they are in Dublin not because they discover the wisdom of doing so, but because they are trapped – and one of the ways they are trapped is the ideology of a pure and lovely Ireland presented by the sort of stories that, as Russell puts it when inviting Joyce to write one, 'play to the common understanding for once in a way'. Now we can understand that Joyce's notion of the epiphany – the rearrangement of a fantasized reality into an actual one – may well be intended as a specific antidote to moments such as those in *The Irish Homestead* where all the difficult realities of life in Ireland are ignored and replaced by a pleasant image of an Irish lass waving from her cottage window at her man happily tilling the ground with his hoe, only pausing to acknowledge her adoring gaze.

Such a story is not a looking-glass at all, but a magic mirror converting a hard reality into a compensatory fantasy. No wonder Joyce reacted so strongly to his publisher's suggestion that it should not matter much to him

if he should be asked to alter this or that. His whole purpose was to polish the mirror of *Dubliners* until it could give nothing but an accurate reflection of what was there, to present life as it appeared to him, and not as how he had been told it was: 'It is not my fault that the odour of ashpits and old weeds and offal hangs around my stories' (*Letters I* 63–4). Joyce's almost complete refusal to alter anything in the text of *Dubliners* might seem obstinate unless it is read against what I have tried to outline here: his urgently felt desire to tell the truth as he saw it (and even how he smelled it!) and thus stand against the tide of sentimentalized Irish nationalism he blamed for distorting the reality everywhere before their eyes. Joyce's point can now be clear to us, if it wasn't to his publisher: he will not aid and abet the distorted mirror of *The Irish Homestead* and its like, deforming reality into unreal scenarios that lead people into despair over conditions of life about which they are, and remain, inarticulate because nowhere is their actual life accurately presented or interrogated in the fictions that they read. In fact, nothing seems to enrage Joyce quite as much as writings about his country that romanticize and sentimentalize reality into what it might be pleasant to imagine, rather than present and reflect what actually is: 'I am nauseated by their lying drivel about pure men and pure women and spiritual love forever: blatant lying in the face of truth' (*Letters II* 191–2).

So we know Joyce had an urgent and ambitious project in mind when he began *Dubliners*. But that alone could not account for the fascination the stories still hold today and will, I am sure, continue to hold, for readers tomorrow. We are a long way from Joyce's various parochial concerns, however deeply felt and influential they may have been at the time. Certainly Joyce went on to write even more ambitious works, but *Dubliners* is not merely the promising beginning of a great writer's career; it would remain a great work in its own right had Joyce never written anything else. Why do the stories continue to live and breathe in atmospheres far removed from what Joyce liked to refer to as 'dear, dirty, Dublin'? The answer, in a word, is 'style'. In order to present reality as he saw it, Joyce had to figure out a way to show how much of what we think of as is real is in fact the result of influences upon us we may not be aware of. He had to develop a method of telling stories that would show the belief systems of his various characters while at the same time delineating all the various sources for these beliefs, whether they be found in religion, popular culture, family, or political propaganda.

In the same way that alternative meanings vie for our attention in the stories, we see the characters within the stories privileging one version of 'reality' by ignoring or denying some of the significance of their surroundings. In the short story 'Clay,' a game is recounted where three saucers are placed

on a table and the blindfolded player lowers her hand into one of the three saucers. One holds water, the other a prayer-book, the third a ring. It is a sort of fortune-telling game where water might signify a sea voyage, the prayer-book entrance into a convent, and the ring a forthcoming marriage. But as Maria takes her turn, confusion overtakes her:

> She felt a soft wet substance with her fingers and was surprised that nobody spoke or took off her bandage. There was a pause for a few seconds; and then a great deal of scuffling and whispering. Somebody said something about the garden, and at last Mrs Donnelly said something very cross to one of the next-door girls and told her to throw it out at once: that was no play. Maria understood that it was wrong that time and so she had to do it over again: and this time she got the prayer-book. (*D* 80)

How does Joyce choose to narrate this event, and why?

We might notice first how there is no authoritative dimension to the narrative voice. Events are related in a matter-of-fact way with no hint of their wider significance. But the narrative is not simply impartial; rather, it is partial in relation to what Maria can and cannot see. We are not given the expressions on people's faces, we are not told what is in the saucer, or even what it looks like, and all this *because Maria is blindfolded* and the apparently impartial narrative accommodates itself to the peculiarities and limitations of her own point of view. This is one of Joyce's great stylistic achievements: an 'objective' narrative that, at the same time, appears unable to exceed the character's perspective. But there is an additional problem. Though Maria is blindfolded, she is not deaf, and yet all we learn of the conversation conducted right in front of her is 'somebody said something about the garden' and 'Mrs Donnelly said something very cross to one of the next-door girls' (*D* 80). And then, as if the sound has been turned up again, she suddenly hears, perfectly clearly, Mrs Donnelly saying 'throw it out at once' and 'that was no play'. We are then told only what Maria has allowed herself to realize: 'Maria understood that it was wrong that time and she had to do it over again.'

Maria, in other words, has only heard what allows her to understand as little as possible. Derek Attridge points out that her lack of response, her 'non-epiphany', dictates the actions of the other characters, who move quickly to minimize the trick; presumably one or more of the girls added a saucer of dirt to show their dislike for Maria.[3] The narrative does not comment on Maria's perspective because it participates in it. Maria cannot bear to understand the extent to which she is disliked, and so the narrative is powerless to record what she refuses to register. This is not parody, or satire or social commentary, but what I might call compassionate irony. Joyce

himself described his style as 'scrupulous meanness', and certainly we can see the careful attention to ordinary detail and unrelenting accuracy about Maria's constricted reaction, but by constricting the scope of the narration in exactly the same way Maria constricts her point of view, we are able to sympathize with Maria in this moment.

All of us, I would imagine, have felt moments of dissociation when suddenly confronted with a situation that contradicts our preferred view of ourselves. The trick played on Maria threatens to undermine the only remaining solace in her difficult life: that she is well-liked wherever she goes, and that she is 'a veritable peacemaker'. It threatens to destroy the first illusion, and Maria's thought to 'put in a good word for Alphy' with Joe, his brother, excites another moment of disharmony and nearly destroys the second: 'But Joe cried that God might strike him stone dead if ever he spoke a word to his brother again and Maria said she was sorry she had mentioned the matter . . . and there was nearly being a row . . .' (*D* 80). Because the narrative establishes no separate point of view from Maria's, it is the reader who finds himself or herself with enough distance to reflect on the wider significance of the passage. It is also the reader, and only the reader, who can set this incident against other incidents and see a pattern Maria herself cannot bear to see.

When an 'elderly gentleman' makes room for her on the bus, she sees him as 'a colonel-looking gentleman' (again, we are offered no competing description by the narrator) and we 'see' what happens between them through the prism of Maria's unacknowledged disappointment that she never got married, and now must spend whatever days are left to her working for her keep in a laundry for ex-prostitutes. But in this moment, with this particular gentleman, Maria is about to be courted and she knows her part perfectly: 'Maria . . . favoured him with demure nods and hems . . . she thanked him and bowed, and he bowed to her and raised his hat' (*D* 79). Suddenly we are back in the world favoured by *The Irish Homestead*, with the sort of 'pure men and pure women' and 'spiritual love forever' Joyce denounced as 'blatant lying in the face of truth', but truth can only seep in from the edges given Joyce's narrative style of compassionate irony, so the sole clue we get that the 'colonel-looking gentleman' might be a drunk looking for a bit to eat (he does make a point of asking what is in the bag) is Maria's declaration after she leaves the bus, 'how easy it was to know a gentleman even when he has a drop taken' (*D* 79).

This, coupled with her later discovery her plumcake is missing, completes the nowhere narrated story of Maria as a sad woman daily regretting her unmarried state: 'Maria, remembering how confused the gentleman with the greyish moustache had made her, coloured with shame and vexation and

disappointment' (*D* 79). Disappointment and vexation, perhaps, but why shame? This is the second time Maria has blushed. The first, more pleasant, occasion was the actual buying of the plumcake when the 'stylish young lady behind the counter, who was evidently a little annoyed by her, asked her was it wedding-cake she wanted to buy. That made Maria blush . . .' (*D* 78). Maria blushes and becomes 'confused' any time circumstances beyond the reality she has constructed for herself threaten to intrude. Her third and final blush occurs when asked to sing. She sings the first verse of the song twice, 'but no one tried to show her her mistake' (*D* 81). The second, unsung, verse of the song, 'lurking beyond the text', to use Attridge's phrase (*Joyce Effects*, 48), involves a man offering a marriage proposal to his beloved.

In the same way that Maria cannot 'hear' a discussion about the trick played on her, she cannot see the shenanigans of an inebriated old man, or sing her most devoutly disavowed fantasy: a man on bended knee proposing marriage. But more devastating still, Joyce makes it clear that every person in the room, without talking to anyone, works to preserve her delusions: 'no one tried to show her her mistake'. As with the hasty removal of the fourth saucer, everyone present conspires to keep Maria from 'having one good look in [a] nicely polished looking-glass'. And yet, at the same time, helping Maria preserve her delusions causes Joe to scramble to reach for another bottle and preserve his own: 'his eyes filled up so much with tears that he could not find what he was looking for and in the end he had to ask his wife to tell him where the corkscrew was' (*D* 81).

I do not have the space to bring this kind of attention to all the other stories of *Dubliners*, so I have chosen to offer this detailed analysis of a paragraph in 'Clay' as an investigative model, and assure the reader it will yield dividends for every story in the collection, whether the story involves James Duffy's self-satisfied sense of superiority in 'A Painful Case', or Corley's misguided sense of himself as knowing and cunning in 'Two Gallants', or Bob Doran's befuddled sense that it must somehow be he who has brought about the necessity of a marriage proposal to Polly in 'The Boarding House'. The final example in the collection is Gabriel, in 'The Dead', a more sophisticated Maria, who chases his own ideal self-image all night long at a Christmas party that, we are told, 'had gone off in splendid style as long as anyone could remember' (an *Irish Homestead* phrase if ever there was one!).

The final overlay in *Dubliners* I would like to present concerns its depiction of modernity and the commodity culture it has brought into being. Looking at the stories from this perspective also demands that we look at the history of modernity as a history, and not just as something that happened. We know about the history of the Industrial Revolution, which is also the history of machines and their effect on labour and society, but we know a great deal

less about the history of the things these machines produced, and their effect on modern configurations of subjectivity as demonstrated through specific constructions of identity, gender, desire, and pleasure. Even a glance in our bathroom cabinets – do we use Brut deodorant or Secret – makes the point that we use 'things' to designate our gender, our personality, our aspirations and our anxieties; the aggregate of all these things becomes our 'lifestyle' whereby our conception of ourselves becomes visible to others: in the twenty-first century, in an era that has been described as 'the age of spectacle', to be is to be seen.

As part of his project, Joyce declared: 'I do not think that any writer has yet presented Dublin to the world' (*Letters II* 122). To present Dublin is to present an emerging city, complete with newspapers, trams, electric lights, advertising, music halls, pubs, offices, and the kind of modern home life that attempts to serve as an oasis of calm in the jostling life of an urban centre.[4] The city itself can serve as a source of exhilaration or disappointment, compensation, or deprivation. Hynes's public rendition of a nostalgic poem in 'Ivy Day in the Committee Room' seems part of an older, oral tradition of consolation in the face of futility, but Joyce was aware that mass media might provide more popular forms. After all, the Araby Bazaar is described as a magical land of electrical lights where goods are brought indoors and made to look oracular, a prototype of the modern shopping mall. The description of the hypnotizing force of the Bazaar is deliberately opposed to an earlier description in the story of a more traditional street market where unexciting items are haphazardly displayed in the undifferentiated light of daytime. Whereas the street market jostles and disturbs the boy ('I imagined that I bore my chalice safely through a throng of foes' (*D* 20)), the Araby Bazaar, at least at first, unexpectedly activates a dream of potential fulfilment and contentment that overtakes his every waking thought ('I wished to annihilate the tedious intervening days' (*D* 21)). The subsequent deflation when he is unable to find the commodity that would complete him, and cause Mangan's sister to love him, is perhaps a feeling not so unknown to those of us today – nearly a hundred years later – who have set out on a shopping expedition full of delight about some unspecified joy ever more about to be ('– If I go, I said, I will bring you something' (*D* 21)), only to be unsettled by the price of our dream ('I lingered before her stall, though I knew my stay was useless . . .' (*D* 24)). The transition Joyce depicts in 'Araby' is the move from undifferentiated 'street' goods to commodities: articles made to appear magical, even salvational, through advertising, packaging, and presentation.

Joyce is fascinated with the trivia of life, and invests it with epic resonance, because he searches for reality within what I call 'the history of now': the unrecorded yet quintessential facts of everyday lived experience.

When Stephen Dedalus, in Joyce's novel *Ulysses*, dismisses Irish art as 'the cracked lookingglass of a servant' (*U* 1.146), he is hinting at the danger of staring back into an idealized past in order to obscure the pain of an oppressed present and an apparently intractable future. Such a view will bring on poignant laments such as Hynes's poem about Parnell, but they will forbid more practical remedies, whatever they might be. But what Joyce may not have understood is that, in his obsession to present the Dubliners he knew, and not the Irish heroes he was told to read about, he crafted a style of story telling that allowed the apparently trivial world of everyday living to become the stuff of comedy, pathos, and tragedy in a way every bit as resonant as the works of Shakespeare. It is this narrative technique, Joyce's 'style of scrupulous meanness', that presents the perspective of his characters as they themselves experience the world, self-delusions and all. In addition to this perspective, however, he places them in a world of detail, presented in a tone of indifference, that nonetheless suggests how their perspective came to take the shape it has.

To return to 'Eveline', for example, we know the shop-girl is torn between honouring the promise to her mother to keep the house together, and her own barely developed sense that she may have a right to be happy. As a backdrop to this, the house is described through her memory of her having dusted it, day in and day out, for years. The inventory of what she has dusted would seem to have no more motivation than the fact that, well, it's just what she dusted. But the promises to Margaret Mary Alacoque, hung so prominently on the wall, speak of the need for a woman to sacrifice herself for the good of the home and the family. More subtly, the photograph of a priest she does not know, a photograph routinely handed about by her father to his friends with the cryptic comment 'He is in Melbourne now' (*D* 25), speaks to how excluded she is from the events of her father's life, and how she has been taught to keep her place and show no curiosity, as though she were his servant and not his daughter (which, of course, is how he treats her). This, in turn, establishes as credible his remarkable indifference to her feelings as he takes from her a hard-earned salary and returns it to her in bits and pieces just before the weekend markets are due to close, with the unfair taunt: 'had she any intention of buying Sunday's dinner?' (*D* 26).

So Eveline may be merely cataloguing the things she has dusted as she wonders how much she will miss home, but we are invited to see what a psychological prison home has become and realize, as well, and at the same time, that Eveline's incomprehension of the pattern revealed by these objects silently demonstrates how subtly and imperceptibly she has been put in a situation where potential insight is systematically reconfigured into panic and paralysis. To offer a similar example in an entirely different register, 'A

Painful Case' opens with a lengthy paragraph recording, also with dispassionate intensity, the set-up of Duffy's room. The fact that Duffy's books are arranged according to size betrays the life-denying passion for order that will cause him, as he himself puts it, to 'sentence [Mrs. Sinico] to death' (*D* 89). The moral isometrics of his journal entries ('Love between man and man is impossible because there must not be sexual intercourse and friendship between man and woman is impossible because there must be sexual intercourse' (*D* 86)) suggest that a pun is intended, as he has also 'sentenced' himself into a lonely place where any meaningful relationship between himself and others is forbidden by his austere, self-condemning fantasy that he has saved himself from the paralysis of Dublin life by refusing to participate in it.

What I have outlined so far offers a way to notice how the stories communicate significance through what the characters know or wish to know, but also what they are unable to see, or are afraid to feel. But this may suggest that the stories are an elaborate crossword puzzle, one where we use the clues we are given to 'fill in' the information we lack. Indeed, the history of the critical reception of *Dubliners* up until the last decade or so has largely been a debate on how best to fill in gaps. Early commentators such as Magalaner and Tindall concentrated almost exclusively on symbolism: the ordinary objects had symbolic resonance – usually related to Catholicism – and if the symbolic pattern generated by chalices, or references to various saints, could be laid over the apparently realistic story, we would see the 'hidden meaning'.[5] Later commentators in the seventies, such as Ghiselin and Hart, became fascinated with the complex interrelationships between and among the stories.[6] In the past twenty years, and in the wake of post-structuralist theory, there has been a productive debate on whether or not 'filling in the gaps' should be the whole point; perhaps the fact of gaps, silences, elisions, displacements, and moments where meaning falters, should be examined in their own right, rather than eliminated by the (overly?) ingenious critic.

Richard Ellmann once remarked 'we are still learning to be Joyce's contemporaries', and the stories of *Dubliners*, so apparently strange and persistently cryptic, present a prototype of our contemporary world. In a similar vein, Attridge has remarked 'far more people read Joyce than are aware of it', by which he means to draw attention to how much modern communication and interpretation borrows from the model set out by Joyce nearly a century ago. Joyce makes the familiar strange, waiting for us to see that often in the modern world it is the trivial that is profound and that a traditional understanding of life as 'historical' is no longer the way we experience our life. Instead, the ordinary is elevated to the level of the epic. The chalice is

empty, but the commodity is sacred. The most profound epiphanies of all occur not in the stories we read in *Dubliners*, but in us as we read them. So perhaps, in the end, Joyce completed the assignment given to him by Russell all those years ago, and really has written something that can 'play to the common understanding for once in a way', although that 'way' could not, as it turned out, be 'something simple'.

NOTES

1 From Joyce's essay 'A Portrait of the Artist' (*PSW* 211).
2 Katherine Mullin, 'Don't Cry for Me, Argentina: "Eveline" and the Seductions of Emigration Propaganda', in Derek Attridge and Marjorie Howes, eds., *Semicolonial Joyce* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 172–201.
3 Derek Attridge, *Joyce Effects: On Literature, Theory, and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 49–50.
4 For a more in-depth analysis see: Garry Leonard, *Advertising and Commodity Culture in Joyce* (University Press of Florida, 1998).
5 William York Tindall, *A Reader's Guide to James Joyce* (New York: Noonday, 1959); Magalaner, Marvin, ed., *A James Joyce Miscellany* (New York: The James Joyce Society, 1957).
6 Brewster Ghiselin, 'The Unity of Dubliners' (1956), in Morris Beja, ed., *James Joyce's 'Dubliners' and 'A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man': A Casebook* (London: Macmillan, 1973), pp. 100–16; Clive Hart, ed., *James Joyce's 'Dubliners': Critical Essays* (London: Faber, 1969).

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