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Dubliners: Early Subversions

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“Oui, la bêtise consiste a vouloir conclure”.
Gustave Flaubert

The author of this paper reconsiders the realist and symbolist strategies in *Dubliners*, proposing that Joyce subverted them both, to the point of making them problematic. Joyce's subversiveness in this book is particularly difficult to catch because it does not “show”. In this respect, *Dubliners* could paradoxically be considered Joyce's most difficult text to approach critically. Joyce's narrative strategies undercut both our overconfident certainties about the possible recuperation of meaning and our often pretentious moral judgements and literal interpretations. Joyce seemed to be in agreement with Flaubert who said: “Oui, la bêtise consiste a vouloir conclure”.

One of the problems presented by the existing critical approaches to James Joyce's *Dubliners* is overinterpretation or too literal interpretation. True, this often results from the most laudable of reasons: to accord Joyce a nearly exalted status, to pore over each and every sentence he has ever written with nearly religious fervour. On the whole, however, there has been too much “irritable reaching” after verifiable facts and incontrovertible conclusions, both among the critics who consider *Dubliners* preeminently as a realist work, and those that give precedence to its symbolist complexities.

This is especially true of the five major critical collections on *Dubliners* in English, which all appeared in 1968 and 1969, the *anni mirabiles* for that collection!¹ In spite of

1. These collections are: Baker, James R. and Staley, Thomas F. (eds): *James Joyce's Dubliners. A Critical Handbook*. Belmont, Cal 1969; Garrett, Peter K. (ed): *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Dubliners. A Collection of Critical Essays*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J. 1968; Hart, Clive (ed): *James Joyce's Dubliners*, London 1969; Scholes, Robert and Litz, Walton A. (eds): *James Joyce, Dubliners, Text, Criticism and Notes*. New York 1969. To this group belongs also Beck, Warren: *Joyce's Dubliners. Substance, Vision and Art*. Durham N. C. 1969.

a constant trickle of more recent work, some of which is the product of the new schools, I believe that there is still quite a lot of room for those critics who are ready to stay in the mainstream, but wish to undertake some kind of revision.² I, for one, feel the need to place *Dubliners* within a framework which would be both more formalist and less referential than some others. Critics have relied too much on the reputation of *Dubliners* as the simplest, most accessible of Joyce's works, forgetting that this work is also revolutionary in a particularly underhand way. This maddening feature can also be shown *a posteriori*: by pointing out the sheer contradictory diversity of individual critical interpretations and solutions which in the case of some characters, situations and stories becomes literally mind-boggling.³ I cannot in fact think of any modern novel, let alone a collection of stories, which has been accorded such numerous, elaborate and contradictory interpretations. In this sense *Dubliners* is quite unique, and this uniqueness has not been sufficiently acknowledged. In this paper I should like to propose that some of this reaching for fixed references and nailing down of imponderables has resulted from the fact that although the Joyce of *Dubliners* was a realist, and a symbolist as well, even at that very early stage of his career he was already a genius in subversion. More than any other of Joyce's books, *Dubliners* appears to be the kind of text it is not, thereby simultaneously inviting and undermining interpretation and recuperation of meaning. This invitation is a trap; led on by the deceptive transparency of the stories, the critics rush to conclusions (often wondrously conflicting ones) about facts, instead of acknowledging the infinitely tenuous and various uncertainties of the fiction.

Among the critics stressing Joyce's realism, there are, for example, particularly great divergences in the moral and psychological presentations of character. Thus Maria, or Eveline and Gabriel are submitted to a gamut of moral judgements running from complete sympathy to downright disgust. Some critics empathize with them and like them, others consider them sadly deficient and somehow responsible for their deficiencies. (Eveline was unable to love, Gabriel's love was despicable. Maria is blamed for having her little illusions, etc. etc.) These examples may in themselves be sufficient indications that psychological/moral interpretation can have only a very limited use in Joyce criticism, and that characters, although certainly represented by Joyce as human figures, also demand to be seen as Genettian *figures*.

Even more confusing have been many critical renderings of both facts (actions) and motivations. In the childhood stories for example, "The Sisters" in particular, many sharp divergencies in the interpretation of the factual or motivational aspects of the stories can certainly be blamed on too literal, "realistic", readings. On the other hand, it is no wonder these literal readings were so frequent: after all, it is very natural to fall victim to the (apparent) transparency of these stories. As a rule, particularly at first

2. Among the more recent work, I wish to single out the section on *Dubliners* in Karen Lawrence's book *The Odyssey of Style in Ulysses*, and Ulrich Schneider's *James Joyce: Dubliners* (in German). Published in 1982, the latter is an excellent "re-vision" of the book and reevaluation of the existing criticism, which absolutely deserves to be translated into English.

3. Cf the following paragraph from Florence L. Walzl. "Clay". An Explication", Garrett 1968, p. 107: "Conflicting elements in Maria, the heroine of James Joyce's 'Clay' in *Dubliners*, have led to contradictory interpretations of the character: as saint (...); as thematically disunified combination of laundress, witch and Virgin Mary figure (Marvin Magalaner and Richard M. Kain...); and as unconsciously selfish troublemaker (...). Cf also the conflicting interpretations of "The Dead" in Hugh Kenner 1962 and Warren Beck 1969.

glance, nothing sounds simpler than a sentence in *Dubliners*, nothing seems closer to that accurate mimeticism which is associated with realism, or with that particular brand of objective documentation of the sordid, which is often called naturalism. In *Dubliners*, there seem to be few (or no) discernible warnings to the reader, (so obvious in *Ulysses*, for example), and they can therefore be more easily overlooked or ignored. Moreover, Joyce himself said he wanted to offer a looking glass to his fellow-citizens, to depict them with "scrupulous meanness", etc, etc, so why should the critics not have taken him at his word?

Among the symbolic critics, some went so far as to affirm that "from first to last, Joyce was primarily a symbolic writer";⁴ others see symbolism only as a very significant aspect of his work.

Prevailing among the symbolic readings of *Dubliners* are those concentrating on Christian allusions; the Homeric and Irish references have also received much critical attention. Images and symbols certainly play a very important role in the structuring of Joyce's stories, and they contribute to the unity of the collection. However, here, too, there is much exaggeration, exclusiveness and arbitrariness.⁵ Both among the realists/naturalists and the symbolists there have been elaborations and divergencies which are truly stunning. Perhaps a careful look at what has been considered to be realistic and symbolist in *Dubliners* will reveal to us that Joyce has used both strategies with a twist - a twist which has misled many readers, and calls for a reappraisal and redefinition of these strategies.

Many critics have assumed, if not always unequivocally posited, a fusion of the naturalistic and symbolist techniques in *Dubliners*.⁶ I should like to propose, however, that these tendencies are too diametrically opposed ever to enable fusion. Rather, when combined, they unsettle and enrich our notions of both, forcing us to leave the ruts of conventional delimitations and jolting us into awareness, instead of lulling us into acceptance of traditional definitions. Thus in *Dubliners* both notions, realism/naturalism and symbolism, are relativized and transformed, entering into a living pull-and-shove relationship which, I think, excludes fusion, but achieves meaningful interactions. It is the purpose of this paper to study and illustrate the ways in which these two strategies are relativized and transformed through mutual interaction in *Dubliners*. I hope to show that this interaction leads to mutual enhancement, but even more often, and more effectively, it achieves its ends through mutual subversion, a precarious yet exciting relationship of competing strategies.

In attempting to characterize the kind of realism we find in *Dubliners*, and the types of subversion that it generates out of itself as it were, I wish the reader to bear in mind that the collection was originally to conclude with "Grace". "The Dead" was added to the collection later and, as it appears from Joyce's letters, it also seems to have been

4. Magalaner and Kain quoted in Ulrich Schneider 1982, p. 18.

5. I have selected quite at random Brewster Ghiselin's often anthologized symbolist reading in "The Unity of *Dubliners*" (Garrett 1968; Baker/Staley 1969) in which the stories are grouped according to the characters' movements eastward, quite literally within Dublin itself, and then these movements are compared to the "easting" in Catholic practice and belief: building churches facing east, or high altars against the east walls, the belief that Christ returning for the Last Judgement would come from the east, etc.

6. Cf. J. Atherton quoted in Schneider 1982, p. 20.

written in a different spirit. In spite of the thematic unity of the stories in *Dubliners* as they stand today, including “The Dead”,⁷ the last story is the product of somewhat altered narrative strategies, an argument I shall pursue later in the course of this paper.

From “The Sisters” to “Grace”, *Dubliners* is the work of an artist who was creating opacity out of the very fact of objectivity pushed to the very limit. As Karen Lawrence pointed out, “Paradoxically, the lack of authorial intrusion seems at times to be an announcement of a narrative feat with his hands tied behind his back”.⁸ The short and objective sentences of *Dubliners*, devoid as a rule of the notion of author as person offering overt or covert guidance, are a far cry from the texts produced by nineteenth century practitioners of realist or naturalist fiction. In the English tradition it was probably in Henry James that the readers first began to miss the author: the meddling Thackeray, the moralizing George Eliot, the copiously interfering Dreiser. However, although he did not give us many of his opinions, James offered us such exhaustive figural presentations of experienced and reflected life, that his invisible hand was still functioning as a kind of guide. Even when the meddling was silenced, most modern realists found ways of encoding their guidance to the reader. In *Dubliners* these codes seem to be much sparser and, moreover, they are more mysterious and confusing. As the notion of author as person (still very strong in realism) has shrunk, so has the presence and colouring of his voice. The general tone of the text seems ironical, but we can never be quite sure. As early as *Dubliners*, Joyce already seems to be asking us not to listen for a voice, but rather to read a text. This is not what the realists asked of us, or at least this is not what traditional readers thought the realists were asking of them. *Dubliners*, however, seems to have been abandoned both by a focused authorial narrative perspective and the voice which, even when the perspective is withdrawn, seems to linger behind in some other realist and modernist fictions. The author is present in the selection and arrangement of the text, but conspicuously absent by refusing us a focused perspective and voice, or at least a perspective and voice unsubverted by indeterminacy. The few notable exceptions are there only to prove the rule. *Dubliners* also seems to flout the story and plot structuring which still prevails in realism. This tendency was also shared by a number of art-conscious contemporaries such as Anderson, Stein and Hemingway, and may thus be considered a modernist trait. Further, there is something in the very triviality of so many events and situations in *Dubliners* which seems to subvert realism’s starting premise: reliance on the commonplace and everyday which, however, initially at least, purported to show the typical and the representative. The realist convention was built up on a wide sweep and great wealth of material detail, aimed at revealing a variety of social, geographic and political circumstances. These circumstances are important for *Dubliners*, but they are submerged under and have to be inferred from tiny trivial incidents. An important further subversive process is simply to withhold information: we do not know, for example, what took place in Eveline’s mind in the period between her twilight vigil and her final momentous refusal to leave. We are never told what Mahony sees, because the narrator never looks! And “The Sisters”, of course, is a text notoriously studded with blanks.

7. The thematic unity of the collection is ingeniously elaborated in Hugh Kenner’s *Dublin’s Joyce*, pp. 53–68.

8. Lawrence 1981, p. 17.

Finally, there is something not primarily realist, but rather modernist, in a tendency which I detect in *Dubliners*, and which Joyce himself has applied to his early essay “A Portrait”, calling it “the curve of an emotion”.⁹ In numerous instances in *Dubliners* I feel that the (often trivial) details are not offered in order to document and describe a city and country, but to render the curve of the author’s emotion about that city and that country. Thus even when describing and documenting like a realist, he is also “troping moods”¹⁰ like a modernist and accordingly subverting some basic assumptions of realism.

I wish to point out here that none of these characteristics (except the last) applies to “The Dead”. “The Dead” is in every way a representative text, written and documented with much detail and great empathy and generosity. It is also four times the length of the longest story in the collection, and the fullness of Gabriel’s portrayal is different not only in quantity, but in quality as well. Owing to all these reasons, “The Dead” stands in a category by itself,¹¹ eschewing some of the innovative subversions of the rest of the *Dubliners* stories, and achieving a realist and modernist fullness all its own.

Joyce has frequently been compared to Flaubert, particularly as a modern realist-cum-symbolist. The writing of both authors produces a subversive quality based on a particular and particularly comparable sibling indeterminacy. In his excellent study *Flaubert. The Uses of Uncertainty* Jonathan Culler points out that for Flaubert realism was a mode of “self-protection”. “I never pose as a man of experience” said Flaubert, “that would be too foolish; but I observe a great deal and never conclude – an infallible way of avoiding error”.¹² This meant, however, writing “against the novel as an institution”, the Balzacian novel for example, which presupposed the existence of a “nice fit between world and language – the visual always material for knowledge, a flesh that can be made word through his mediation”.¹³

I propose that this “nice fit” between world and language was unsettled by Joyce as early as *Dubliners*. This unsettling strategy also created another momentous effect: it unsettled Joyce’s narrative authority. Sometimes this unsettling results simply from the narrator’s absence, his refusal to mediate. Even more interesting, however, is the uncertainty of a situation rendered by juxtaposing different modes of mediation, or

9. “But for such as these a portrait is not an identificative paper but rather the curve of an emotion”. Scholes/Kain 1965, p. 60.

10. In *Modern Critical Views. Ernest Hemingway*, Harold Bloom singles out the conclusion of the story “Old Man at the Bridge” for “permanently troping the mood of a particular moment in history”. (p. 4)

11. Vincent P. Pecora 1986 questions the reach and scope of Gabriel’s “generosity”. His arguments are generally quite convincing. I simply wish to point out that these arguments must then be accepted for Joyce’s *oeuvre* as a whole. Gabriel’s generosity certainly has limits, but so has that of Bloom or Molly. This is as far as Joyce was ready (able) to go and as far as he apparently saw “humanity” able of going. I for one have no quarrel with these limits, particularly if one is ready to admit that the portrayal of emotions is not one of Joyce’s primary concerns.

12. Quoted in Culler 1974, p. 53. Culler pertinently discusses Flaubert’s dilemma – posed in an early letter – of what form to adopt “to express one’s opinion without appearing an idiot later on?” The solution, Culler tells us, was “to eschew the pleasure of giving an opinion an author or bearer... to insinuate one’s view into a description which will be read as ‘objective’”.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 93.

tacitly exchanging one for another, without sufficiently warning the reader – strategies which can also be traced back to Flaubert.

Culler argues that in *Madame Bovary* we are often not dealing with a limited point of view in James's sense, where sense-making still takes place, even while relegated to the reflector. Rather, we often find a medley of focalizations (for example in the descriptions of the country fair), voices and perspectives which are neutral, often conflicting, and not so rarely parodic or redundant. We have, of course, much more of this in *Ulysses*, that "deliberately anti-revelatory" novel presenting possibilities of meaning rather than a final revelation.¹⁴ I wish to stress, however, that the often apparent transparency of *Dubliners* is also antirevelatory in many different and innovative ways. Its strategies also often prevent us from finding out who speaks and determining the "point of view", from personalizing and therefore psychologizing, "naturalizing" the text. Joyce has been praised by countless critics for his use of free indirect discourse. However, only a few of them have pointed out that, along with drawing us into the character's perspective and voice, Joyce in fact often invalidates the notion of point of view by preventing the easy recuperation of the personalized sources of the discourse, obscuring the interpretability of character motivation, and more generally posing obstacles to psychological and moral character analysis, which still constitutes the bulk of the criticism elicited by *Dubliners*.

The subversion of free indirect discourse, which in my opinion is one of the outstanding strategies in *Ulysses*, can already be diagnosed in some of these early stories. Let us look at "Eveline" first, which may certainly be considered the exemplary FID text in Joyce's opus, because in all but its last page, the focalization and voice of the story are rather closely fitted to Eveline's mind and vocabulary. However, the ending of the story is encoded in different registers. Firstly, Joyce concludes the narrative after a hiatus which remains unfilled: we are never told how or why Eveline changed her mind. Secondly, in the conclusion, free indirect discourse is replaced by poetically expressive authorial recreation ("a bell clanged upon her heart... All the seas of the world tumbled about her heart... Amid the seas she sent a cry of anguish".) Finally, her mind is shut off from us completely, in the concluding "objective" vision of her "white face ... passive like a helpless animal". However, this final objective register is not truer than the figural renderings, and it can also be seen as undecidable. Eveline acts passively, "like an animal". At the same time the poetic expressiveness of the preceding sentences creates a strong sense of empathy with Eveline, one of the strongest effects of this kind in the entire collection, which otherwise does not abound in emotional language.

Uncertainty even pervades the free indirect discourse used in one of the earliest and least sophisticated stories, "After the Race". At the same time this story bears some strong authorial statements, remnants of narrative strategies mainly discarded by Joyce even at this very early stage. For example, he shows his authorial point of view by referring directly to the "channels of poverty and inaction" and to the "gratefully oppressed" Irish people. Half-way through the story the point of view shifts to Jimmy. Much of the FID is phrased most classically, in questions and exclamations. However, we never learn enough about Jimmy (as we do about Stephen in *The Portrait of the Artist*)

14. Lawrence 1981, p. 7.

and are therefore constantly in doubt when assigning thoughts and observations, as well as their vocabulary. We can never be sure how much of the awareness of Dublin “wearing the mask of a capital” and of the beauty of its “pale globes of light” hung above it, or of the harbour lying “like a darkened mirror at their feet” is shared by Jimmy. Yet the extent of this sharing is rather crucial for our interpretation of the protagonist, if we are going to “interpret” him at all. It seems to me that even in this rather imperfectly elaborated story, the ambiguity of the narrative instance and voice has reached a point at which we see character losing importance and stability, becoming undecidable. This undecidability can in fact be seen here as a structural element of the story: the characters are stunted and unstable, and they are not to be motivated and naturalized as individuals, but seen as part of that “curve of an emotion” mentioned in “A Portrait”.

The undecidability of free indirect discourse is particularly prominent in “A Little Cloud”, a later and very carefully crafted story, in which Joyce certainly knew more exactly what he was doing, and perhaps therefore obfuscated more thoroughly most of its vital points. In this story the reader is obviously allowed to share many of Little Chandler’s delusions and some of his insights, in classical FID fashion. However, the authorial and figural point of view and voice are merged confusingly in several instances. Chandler sees the children of the poor as vermin and mice, giving them “no thought”, yet just a little further he pities “the poor stunted houses” in which they live. He is shown remembering “richly dressed ladies” in a series of impressions recognizable as free indirect discourse, followed by the description of their alighting from cabs “like alarmed Atalantas”, a phrase which must be ascribed to the authorial vocabulary.

The parodic rendering of clichés is standard strategy of Joyce’s free indirect discourse. Little Chandler feels: “It was useless, useless! He was a prisoner for life.” (p. 104). And Duffy: “No one wanted him; he was outcast from life’s feast.” (p. 146). Or Lenahan: “He had walked the streets long enough with friends and with girls. He knew what these friends were worth: he knew the girls too. Experience had embittered his heart against the world,” (p. 70)

Sometimes the parody of clichés in FID situations also undermines verisimilitude, as in this passage from “A Little Cloud”: “There was always a certain ... something in Ignatius Gallagher that impressed you in spite of yourself. Even when he was out at elbows and his wits’ end for money he kept up a bold face.” (p. 88) The three dots and the “you” are certainly marks of free indirect discourse. Yet aren’t the three clichés in a row just a little too much for a realistic effect, aren’t they subversive of the realist code of interpretability? Comparably, Joyce’s inquiry in a letter to Stanislaus whether priests can be buried in their habits did not add to the realism of “The Sisters” as long as the story was bullet-ridden by gaps. Burial rites – or the height of the gate at 7 Eccles Street may be facts from Dublin life, but they do not make Joyce’s writing more realistic. Realism depends most of all on a code of interpretability which Joyce’s texts often deny the reader in spite of their factual accuracy.

As Culler has pointed out in respect of Flaubert, we find here an unwillingness on Joyce’s part to create characters who will act as reliable sense-making reflectors. The author seems to “resist the reader’s attempts to make them repositories of meaning or

objects around which meaning can crystallize."¹⁵ This prevents us from making firm characterizations, and blurs the final overall roundness and coherence expected from characters in realist fiction in spite of frequently brilliant individual descriptions, dialogues etc. Henry James still wanted to give depth to his characters. In Joyce, as in Flaubert, the author seems to feel there is generally no depth to people that can in any significant way influence the march of life or the progress of books.

Another significant form of subversion in *Dubliners* is thematic indeterminacy. Speaking of Flaubert, Culler stresses very helpfully that the French writer was still far from the subversive strategies used later by writers such as Beckett or Butor. Flaubert's novels still have characters, and they have themes. However, a difference exists:

When one attempts to explore these themes in greater detail one encounters a curious indeterminacy: as if Flaubert had set out to frustrate, by the construction of the novels, the working out of those themes which are explicitly posed and carried by the general movement of the plot. Attention is deflected from the problems which the novels raise and we find ourselves drawn into a puzzling inconclusiveness as soon as we try to take them seriously as thematic statements.¹⁶

Looking at the stories in *Dubliners* one finds comparable thematic treatment. Two important exceptions must be singled out at once. One is "A Painful Case", a story where the theme – the rejection of life and love – is not only clearly outlined but also firmly related to character motivation. We are not surprised by the ending of the story – it seems to have been encoded in the protagonist. (In this story, as Ulrich Schneider perceptively notes, the subversion lies elsewhere: in the newspaper report which although seemingly very precise and "objective", relating the testimonies of family and witnesses, in fact tells us so little both of the reasons and manner of Mrs Sinico's death.)¹⁷ The themes of "The Dead" are much more complex, and accordingly also more richly outlined and related to character. At the end of the story we get such a full insight into Gabriel's thoughts and feelings that recuperation of meaning is possible in spite of ambiguities such as the journey westward or the snow symbolism. Most of the other stories, however, are thematically sketchy and unrevealing, and their theme is subverted by various strategies, particularly by their closures.

Specially interesting in that respect are "Grace" and "The Sisters". In both stories the thematic indeterminacy is of course also related to the question of narrative authority outlined in our discussion of point of view. I will try to present the relationship of these two "uncertainty principles" as I see it.

"Grace" begins ironically and most dramatically. It is perhaps the most shocking description in the whole book.

Two gentlemen who were in the lavatory at the time tried to lift him up: but he was quite helpless. He lay curled up at the foot of the stairs down which he had fallen. They succeeded in turning him over. His hat had rolled a few yards away and his clothes were smeared with the filth and ooze of the

15. Culler 1974, p. 130.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 136. Culler also points out that "the Flaubertian mode... offers neither perspectives of infinite elaboration... nor assurances of a reality beyond language, but only an emptiness... Flaubert's characters are poor reflectors in that they do not compose the world for us, do not organize it in ways that reveal new possibilities of feeling and perception. When they do attempt to order it, they do so in ways which are undercut by the obviousness of the cultural models they are using or by the failure of their images of the world when they try to live in accordance with them" (pp. 128 & 129). I believe that "Grace" for example is a story which greatly profits by such a reading.

17. Schneider 1981, p. 78.

floor on which he had lain, face downwards. His eyes were closed and he breathed with a grunting noise. A thin stream of blood trickled from the corner of his mouth. (p. 190)

From all we know "the gentleman" may have had a stroke and may be dying. His face is suffused by a "grey pallor". When he speaks, he does so with a very thick voice. However, we soon learn that the gentleman had tripped on the stairs because he was drunk, and speaks thickly because he has bitten his tongue. What began ominously, turns into cold and trivial farce, with a huge policeman who is not very nimble with his pencil, a young "medical man" in a bicycle suit and finally a colleague, Mr Powers, who takes him home in a cab. In the middle part of the story, which takes up four fifths of its entire length, the "gentleman", Mr Kernan, a taster of tea, receives his friends at home. We get only a few general glimpses of him: he lies in bed and speaks very little, which makes the reader lose interest in him, realizing that after all the theme is not centred on him and on the possible causes of his alcoholism, as the opening section of the story intimated.

The entire middle section of the story is written in the form of a very rambling and diffuse dialogue, and it is not easy at first to discern its underlying theme. His friends have decided to trick Kernan into going to a retreat with them, but the subject is treated with great lack of seriousness, and many questions remain dangling. (Do any of them believe that it will help them? Are they going there only because of Kernan?, etc, etc).

We also wonder whether the theme is taking on a religious colouring. In the final segment of the story we find out that religion if anything is indeed the subject of the story, particularly religion as practised in public. We also know from Stanislaus's comments that the story was presumably divided into three parts in imitation of the *Divine Comedy*. From the hell in front of the lavatory, to the comfortable purgatory with porter and whisky at Kernan's bedside, the story moves to the "paradise" of the vulgar and commercialized church retreat. This structural parallel also supports my theory of subversion: this story is not connected to the *Divina Commedia* in any significant way. The "Commedia" is here just a literary index, a grid.

Moreover, in spite of the satirical tone of much of the story, the characters in all their triviality are not truly caricatured and remain very human in all their ordinariness. The middle section is all filled by their talk. Discontinuous and incredibly uninformed and banal as it is, this talk in the last analysis is perhaps what the story is principally "about": the talking, much of it in clichés (the Jesuits are referred to as "the boys" who have most influence) seems to be at the centre of the writer's attention. The dialogue is nearly meaningless in its rambling discontinuity. Joyce wanted it to be like this; we know from his letters that at the beginning of his stay in Rome he went to the library expressly to check the details of the Vatican Council discussed in the story, and could have given us a very lucid exposition. Joyce seems to wish to show us here that language gets "invaded" by clichés as a matter of course, and that this invasion includes the writer and the reader as well. Perhaps this dialogue already expresses Joyce's awareness, reflected so amply in *Ulysses*, that randomness and banality are a legitimate and human aspect of language and literature.

Where does this leave us in respect of the story's theme? In the last section the Jesuit preacher is talking to an audience conspicuously and ironically studded with pawnbrokers and moneylenders. He takes a very practical attitude to religion, however,

eschewing all its mystery and power to bestow divine “grace”. The sermon itself – or the portion we are offered by Joyce, who cuts it off abruptly in the strangest, most inconclusive of closures – has been seen by critics as an epiphany, shocking us into awareness by its meretricious banality.

Could we, then, venture to suggest that the theme of the story might perhaps be the very lack of what is mentioned in the title, but is conspicuously absent from the text: divine grace? However, trying to validate this proposition, we encounter further difficulties. Firstly, the characters in the story, although rather disreputable and petty, are not shown to be particularly despicable or deprived – particularly in need of grace, that is. In spite of their banality, they are given a stubborn resilience and concreteness which seems a saving grace in an ordinary human sense. It is as if Joyce’s youthful anger against those who “betrayed” him was being washed away and the scene was slowly being set for a character like Bloom, so conspicuously free of that attribute. Thus the story can be seen both as a presentation of lowly but in no way deprived humanity and a demonstration of religion being sold in the Irish marketplace. However, these presentations follow no firm thematic development. Thematically the story begins at one point and ends up at another rather arbitrarily (in other words, A does not lead to B; B just insinuates itself while A – Kernan’s drunkenness – is casually dropped along the way). The narrative mode of the story refuses to be engaged in figural psychological and moral analysis, finally leaving us stranded in the middle of a sermon, entertaining possibilities which we cannot easily relate to either the characters in the story or Joyce himself. Joyce was not a religious writer, and grace for him did not have the meaning it had for Eliot or Paul Claudel. Like a true realist, Joyce has created in “Grace” a number of sketchily drawn but convincing characters, along with three perfect cameos of the Dublin scene: the pub, a lower middle class home and a religious ceremony. However, the elaboration of point of view and theme, as I have tried to show, remains ambiguous and inconclusive – the result of a special (antirealist?) strategy. The transparency of this story functions only on one level. On the level of narrative mode and theme, the gaps and waverings create a specific kind of opacity woven out of the very stuff of transparency, “an unwavering look at facts, at the way people live and speak”, as Joyce said himself, without however doing it entirely within the realistic narrative convention.

Even more than “Grace”, “The Sisters” is the supreme example of narrative and thematic subversion. Told in the first person, the story takes us automatically into the mind of the protagonist, limiting our horizon of knowledge to his own. Here, however, we encounter at least two sets of obstacles in trying to make sense of the story on a realistic factual and psychological basis. The first set are the things related to the priest’s former life that the boy himself does not know, or only catches glimpses of through the veiled and stunted talk of the elders. The second set of obstacles derives from the author’s perversely arbitrary presentation of what the boy might be expected to know, but doesn’t tell us: for example, his feelings for the priest, or the reason why he continued to visit him in the first place in spite of the obvious repulsiveness of the old man. So much of the boy’s psychology is missing, that the recuperation of facts and emotions, usually available in realistic texts, cannot bear fruit in this instance and can only amount to distorting guesswork.

This story is very close to the narrative situation of *What Maisie Knew*, but it is only by comparing the relative clarity of Maisie's view with the density of the Joycean narrator that we can become aware of the distance Joyce has travelled from one of his admired authors, in this respect at least. In this story Joyce is obviously not interested in psychology, at least not in psychology as we most often find it in realistic fiction, bent on exploring cognitive processes, emotional growth or transformation, motivating actions etc, thus also actively contributing to the development and movement of the theme.

"The Sisters" is particularly misleading because again its text seems to stick only to facts and nothing but facts, and to give accurate description of physical details: the booties in the shop window, the old woman's worn heels (another of the distasteful images this story abounds in), and yet the facts stubbornly refuse to make sense and to fall into a pattern recognizable within the realistic convention. I will try to show a little later that the story offers an equally wobbly basis for symbolic elaboration (paradoxically, it is too stubbornly and literally factual for that). Within the scope of this paper I see two possibilities of presenting "The Sisters": one will insist on its being the very embodiment of the "uncertainty principle" on several essential points: firstly because experience itself is unfathomable (the boy is confused, he doesn't know what his feelings are, particularly in respect to the shocking fact of death, including the sense of liberation it brings), secondly because memory itself is unreliable, wayward and incomplete (the boy seems to remember some things but cannot remember others), thirdly, and this now takes us onto the linguistic level, because the story is composed by the writer who does with it what he pleases (if he can get away with it), and fourthly, that the powers of language itself are limited in their attempt to represent the experience of the world. On another level of investigation we can entertain the less extreme possibility of seeing this story as a departure from basic conventions of realism and an attempt to use language as "experiential" activity, reproducing a "curve of emotion". In spite of the boy's confusion and its concomitant gaps, or perhaps just because of them, the reader apprehends a general feeling of unease, blockage, perhaps cunning withdrawal, invading the boy without him necessarily even being aware of it.

Having qualified what the story is about as the unease of childhood, also an Irish childhood, faced with the facts of its immediate physical surrounding (Dublin) and the more general facts of life (sickness, old age and death), we have freed ourselves from the drudgery of fact-finding and detailed literal motivation. We can look at the individual segments of the story as indicators of confusions, moods and emotions without determining down to every detail what our particular child knew, did or thought. And I must emphatically stress that no going back to the text for "re-interpretation" can be fruitful here if undertaken in the spirit of "literalism".¹⁸

It goes without saying, that in spite of the many examples of realist subversion in *Dubliners* which have been pointed out, Joyce also gave us a host of superb realistic descriptions in his stories. For example, the picture of Corley in "Two Gallants", with

18. In his *Joyce's Uncertainty Principle*, Philip Herring proposes to deal with a theme that is also central for this paper. He makes useful and interesting observations which are pertinent for my approach, in the introduction in particular. In dealing with the individual stories, however, there is much close reading of the traditional kind. In opposition to his title, Herring seems to rely too strongly on interpretation and the belief in the recuperation of meaning.

his large, globular and oily head which "sweated in all weathers" and was set upon his body "like a bulb which had grown out of another", is a triumph of realism. Such felicitous accuracy of the more "transparent" kind has hardly been surpassed in modern English literature, and represents an achievement in no way obscured or diminished by Joyce's concomitant experiments in subversion.¹⁹

In his book on *Ulysses* Stuart Gilbert offers a description of this novel which can also be applied to *Dubliners*:

...its true significance does not lie in problems of conduct or character... After reading *Ulysses* we do not ask ourselves: "Should Stephen Daedalus have done this? Ought Mr Bloom to have said that? Should Mrs Bloom have refrained?"... The meaning of *Ulysses*, for it has meaning and is not a mere photographic "slice of life" - far from it - is not to be sought in any analysis of the acts of the protagonist or the mental make-up of the characters; it is, rather, implicit in the technique of the various episodes (read stories, SB), in nuances of language, in the thousand and one correspondences and allusions with which the book is studded. Thus *Ulysses* is neither pessimist nor optimist in outlook, neither moral nor immoral in the ordinary sense of these words; its affinity is, rather, with an Einstein formula, a Greek temple...²⁰

This is a warning against literal realistic reading, but it can be applied to symbolist readings which, paradoxically, can also become too "literal". Gilbert sees the function of Joyce's symbolism as Solomon's seal representing the unity of all creation, as well as of all the elements composing a book. This may well have been the gist of Joyce's philosophical views. His fiction, however, seems to present many obstacles to a sense of unity, particularly in matters of narration, as the reading process stumbles against fragmentation, discontinuity, irony, parody and other forms of subversion, including the functioning of symbols. Mallarmé still seemed to believe that a symbol has "dimensions enough to repossess all the ideas which, as the occasion of the poem, it engendered",²¹ although his poetic was ironic, lacking full belief in the communicability of words. Joyce seems to have gone one step further in denying his symbols the power of significant repossession.

In *Ulysses* for example Stephen associates the Martello Tower with the Delphic oracle, the world's omphalos; Joyce connects 7 Eccles Street to the island of Ogygia, where Calypso dwelt; Molly is seen as Calypso as well as Penelope, and Ogygia is connected to the omphalos theme because it was called by Homer "the navel of the sea". Such combinatorics requires a new notion of symbolism which also has a flat and abstract side, depending on Joyce's reading, on his factual and literary knowledge, on information. (Joyce once said that all knowledge is symbolic, Gilbert tells us.) In addition to possible poetic translucence, as posited by Coleridge, Joyce's omphalos symbol is

19. The question: "How much of a realist was Joyce?" is a fascinating and tricky one, particularly considering some of his own pronouncements on the subject. There is for example Joyce's remark concerning realism made to A. Power: "In realism you are down to facts on which the world is based: that sudden reality which smashes romanticism into a pulp..." (quoted by Herring 1987, p. 117). I am convinced that in this and other remarks on the same subject Joyce was referring to a general materialistic philosophical outlook which guided him in his life and thought rather than to his writing strategies. The dominant narrative strategies of *Ulysses* are certainly not realistic and, if dominant in *Dubliners*, I hope to have shown in this paper how precarious this dominance is.

20. Gilbert 1955 (1930), p. 8. See also note 19 above.

21. Clive Scott in *Modernism* 1976, p. 210.

based on various references culled mainly from books. In addition, it is a kind of (postmodernist?) quotation, something superimposed or preimposed on the pattern of the novel, the result of willed artificiality. The same symbol is also stretched by Joyce to include subversion into ludicrous irony (e.g. the line to Edenville via navel telephone, as well as the parody of Mrs Purefoy lying with a chalice on her swollen belly.) Joyce's symbols must, therefore, also be taken as indexes: the porter bottle in "Proteus" called "island of dreadful thirst" mainly as a verbal reference to the "island of dreadful hunger", repossessing no significant meaning, used as word play.

The parodic and discrepant aspect of the *Ulysses* symbolism is already clearly prefigured in *Dubliners*. This can, for example, be demonstrated on the religious symbolism of the stories, which cannot be denied, but requires an undecidable perspective, possibly reducing the significance of symbolic "repossession", but certainly underscoring its existence as a literary device.

Let us consider for a moment some religious symbols in "Clay" and "Two Gallants". Maria has been associated with the Virgin Mary, and so has the servant girl in "Two Gallants" (the critics have thought it relevant to point out that she is wearing Mary's colours, a blue skirt and white blouse.) The symbolic reference may be seen as ironic: both Maria and the servant girl are most unsuitable symbols of the Mother of God. One is old and sterile, the other is far from being a virgin. Thus, we can think here in terms of contrasts: instead of saintliness, corruption; instead of youth, dessicated old age. However, even this ironic contrast is not to be taken too seriously, for nowhere in *Dubliners* has Joyce showed us his firm belief in the validity of Christian symbolism, nor is there any indication in his books or his life that he set any special value on virginal women. We therefore have no grounds to assume that Joyce expects us to fully recuperate here the idea of Christianity either as an ideal, or a moral norm of behaviour. He is using it as an index, cutting short any significant transcendence. With Mary as a possible, but strictly limited metaphorical extension, these two figures remain in the last analysis stubbornly themselves. As Joyce directed us to do in "Sirens", some of the symbols we encounter in *Dubliners* also are to be taken rather literally!

The reader should be particularly aware in *Dubliners* of certain symbols which may be seen as a lures or traps, for example the (Irish) colour green. Some critics have pointed out that the pervert in "Encounter" has been given green eyes, which may indicate that he is a symbol of Ireland. Perhaps this possibility should be excluded in the first place. However, characters' eyes *are* green more than once in this collection, and this may be so on purpose. The crucial distinction here is not between treating green eyes as symbolic or not. The crucial distinction is that between traditional, "in depth" symbolism and Joyce's horizontal allegoresis. The important thing is to see this kind of symbolic transfer as never fully realized and therefore regard it as a rather arbitrary marker, to be compared to something like a brand label, car sticker or conference tag. Joyce's use of such symbolism must also be seen as a kind of game. The author seems to be saying: "OK readers, green is the colour of Ireland, let's play around with this!" One might therefore be tempted to conclude that symbols are functioning at least in part as anti-symbols.

We can often seriously entertain an image or situation as a symbol in *Dubliners* provided we do not take their symbolic meaning too seriously. One of the many

innovations introduced by Joyce, and one that has not been sufficiently underlined by critics is the changed, new impact and function of symbolism in his texts. Along with more traditional uses, Joyce's symbols are often emptied of much of their potential force, truncated, stunted, and cut off from any chance of radiating too much or too far.

Two examples of different types of symbols can be quoted from "Two Gallants", for example. One is traditional and does not need further elucidation: the harp. The harp is a unifying, cohering element, bringing in a reference to a sadly debased, yet through its music (which Joyce knew and loved), potentially beautiful Ireland. The function of the harp is primarily thematic. The function of the other image, the gold coin, is primarily structural. It reveals to us what the story is about on the literal level of the plot: with the full connivance of Lenehan (who must therefore never be compared to Joyce as some have done), Corley is planning to "touch" the girl in more than one sense, and succeeds in the attempt. Shocking in itself, the revelation is even more shocking because the poor girl has given him a *gold* coin, a fact which is quite out of proportion with everything the story has so firmly established as its setting and social background. The symbolic function of the gold coin is much more difficult to determine than that of the harp. It may be seen as alluding to a general inversion (perversion) of values. Ironically enough, this meaning would be conveyed much more clearly if this were a *silver* coin. But – it is not! We are thus left with the gold, a fact which is so unexpected that it forces us to readjust our (naturalistically) formed assumptions, and see the whole story in a new, more arbitrary light. Gold, however, does have a long symbolic history, and some of this is probably woven into the final impact of the story, although it is difficult to say precisely what. Abstract, disembodied symbolism we may call it, but symbolism nevertheless. As the revealing of the gold coin also represents the closure of "Two Gallants", one can consider it as one of the most shocking, enigmatic, unsettling and subversive narrative strategic moves in *Dubliners*.

One approach to "Araby" proposes that the dead priest's rusty bicycle pump, which the boy finds in the grass, could be considered symbolic of the serpent in the Garden of Eden: "The rusty bicycle pump, peeping out from under an adjacent bush like the Serpent in the Garden, suggests that like it, love and religion which could once inflate (raise and elate) are inoperative, and relates directly to its late owner, the dead priest".²²

Ludicrous as this seems, the pump may indeed perhaps be seen as a reference to the Serpent; the central apple tree in the yard is a rather obvious reference, and once there is a tree, and Mangan's sister can play Eve, we should also have a serpent, why not? But, if we entertain this possibility, we must *never* nail down a precise elaboration of allegorical correspondences (I am resisting the temptation of embroidering the possible metaphorical extensions of "raising" and "inflating" as connected to this phallic implement!)

Further, it can be interesting and rewarding to explore the possibility of seeing (as critics have done), Mangan's sister as the Temptress, the clink of coins at the bazaar as the sinful work of the changers at the Temple, and the boy's experience of the train and the resounding bazaar space as a kind of "season in hell". However, one must

22. Ben L. Collins: "'Araby' and the 'Extended Simile'" in Garrett 1968.

simultaneously also be aware of the discrepancies in scale produced by the juxtaposition of elevated biblical and Dantean symbolic references with the basically innocent desire of the very young protagonist to buy a present for a girl at the fair. The function of these “symbols” is not to point at any possible “evil” the boy has done, but on the contrary, it should be seen as an ironical and amusing interplay of incompatible levels of vision. The biblical analogies may here also have the function of obliquely embodying the boy’s great sensitivity, by paralleling his childish tendency to magnify a trivial occasion, and thus increasing our sympathy for his innocence, which is in no way diminished by the awakening of his hormones. In fact this is a basic requirement for an understanding of this text. “Araby” is, namely different from most of the other stories in *Dubliners* in so far as it is consistently pervaded by a delicate empathetic humour unmatched in the entire collection. Any literal application of the heavy biblical analogies blots it out like a daisy crushed under a clumsy bootsole. To sum up: the use of these symbols does not imply that the boy is a sinner in any serious biblical sense. The symbols are the vehicle through which Joyce is probably ironically and with an unusually delicate touch indicating that – as women are men’s perdition – in due time the boy will also let them “ruin” him. The same also applies to the closure of the story. I cannot see the boy in any way as a creature driven and derided by “vanity”. This is how *he* sees himself but not how *we* should see him. This boy will perhaps become an artist (these are stories of my childhood, said Joyce), he possesses strong emotions, as well as a child’s and artist’s tendency to magnify whatever happens to him. Typically Christian – and Irish – is his way and style of thinking (including its pernicious dwelling on moral guilt) inculcated into an entire nation by religious education. Thus the closure of this story is as subversive as its symbolism: the final realization of the boy reflects a convincingly agonizing reaction, but it must also be seen by the reader as gently ironical of the exaggerated, blown-up nightmares of childhood. The greatness of this story lies in its holding together in suspension so many different thematic and structural elements: the psychology of childhood and the “brown” drabness of Dublin, overlaid by thematic and symbolic structures which however must never be allowed to achieve a complete and solemn transformation of bicycle pump into biblical serpent. After all, Joyce did not believe in sin. Fire and brimstone were not his elements. In “Araby” his elements are clanging tramcars and dingy hallways, the first stirring of “blood” in a lonely boy, the trivialities of speech and the sophistication of literary art held in a beautifully mutually enhancing and subversive relation.

In Joyce’s use of symbols we must allow for a new arbitrariness, a formal assigning of symbolic properties which likens symbols to puzzles and riddles never to be taken completely outside the limits of game playing. Some of the allegorical gold seems to rub off at times, death and corruption lurk in the shadows, but the possible depths of symbolic transcendences are always impeded or arrested on the flat surface of the text. These symbols partake of the properties of references and citations, of mathematical signs, of the patterns of parody. The transfer towards traditional symbolic meanings and even more towards those – and this must be stressed – that are too often taken to be their ironically inverted and debased counterparts, are usually incomplete, and stamped by the opaqueness of Joyce’s a thousand and one literary arrangements and rearrangements.