PARALYSIS AS “SPIRITUAL LIBERATION” IN JOYCE’S *DUBLINERS*

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In James Joyce criticism, and by implication Irish and modernist studies, the word *paralysis* has a very insular meaning. The word famously appears in the opening page of *Dubliners*, in “The Sisters,” which predated the collection’s 1914 publication by ten years, and in a letter to his publisher Grant Richards. The commonplace conception of the word is that it is a metaphor that emanates from the literal fact of the Reverend James Flynn’s physical condition the narrator recalls at the beginning of “The Sisters.” As a metaphor, paralysis has signified two immaterial, or spiritual, states: one individual or psychological and the other collective or social. The assumption is that as a collective and individual signifier, paralysis is the thing from which Ireland needs to be freed. Rather than relying on this received tradition of interpretation and assumptions about the term, I consider that paralysis is a two-sided term. I argue that paralysis is a problem and a solution and that sometimes what appears to be an escape from paralysis merely reinforces its negative manifestation. Paralysis cannot be avoided. Rather, it is something that should be engaged and used to redefine individual and social states.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: PARALYSIS AS “SPIRITUAL LIBERATION”

The basic interpretation of a crucial term in the study of James Joyce, namely paralysis, has notably gone unchallenged. Whether referring to paralysis as a physical, emotional, or cultural phenomenon, scholars assume the term only refers to something that must be overcome at an individual or cultural level. How this term is read has a significant effect on Joyce studies; however, the way a centerpiece of Joyce’s lexicon is read has implications for modernist and Irish studies as well. Of course, paralysis famously comes to the reader’s attention upon a first reading of Dubliners. As it appears in the story collection’s first narrative, “The Sisters,” the word strikes the reader as an example of Joyce’s deliberate attempt to confuse and puzzle his readers. He presents as something more than a term denoting the hopeless physical condition of the Reverend Flynn, the story’s deceased priest. Besides signifying Flynn’s sorry state at death’s door, Joyce also presents as the young narrator’s shibboleth. It is clear at the outset of reading Dubliners that is meant to encourage speculation in readers. Rather than representing a stable, allegorical, relationship between signifier and signified, the term is capable of representing multiple targets. Despite the term’s flexibility, most scholars have stabilized a particular reading of the term. This interpretive tradition, like the wilderness that organizes itself around Wallace Stevens’s “gray and bare” jar, illustrates the emptiness of paralysis itself. Given the recurring theme the stories share, for the most part being “abortive attempt[s] at freedom,” the content of the collection aptly confirms the accepted reading of paralysis (Kiberd 330). I do not intend to undo this interpretive framework, but I do think that something can be gained for Joyce studies, as well as Irish and modernist studies by considering paralysis as an empty jar or, more appropriately, an empty chalice. I introduce a double reading of paralysis that contributes to
theories of the aesthetics of modernism and the politics of Joyce’s iteration of cultural nationalism.

As a cultural nationalist, Joyce’s project is to expose a form of paralysis that urges the Irish subject to act within the boundaries of a worldview that is symptomatic of hegemony. His solution is to use art as another form of paralysis to disrupt a worldview that is merely instrumental for a dominant regime of production. As indicated above, the primary reference to paralysis is found in the first story in *Dubliners*, “The Sisters.” Though *Dubliners* was published in 1914, this story saw an audience early in Joyce’s career; a version of it was published in 1904 in George Russell’s *Irish Homestead*. As the term appears in “The Sisters,” paralysis is both a riddle and a clue. On one level, it is literally a descriptor for the Reverend Flynn’s physical condition after his third stroke. The young man, the story’s narrator, who is meticulously watching for his mentor’s death, says “paralysis” softly to himself. His focus is not so much the content the word signifies; rather, he is focused on how strange the word sounds. The word is noted for how similar it sounds to “gnomon” and “simony” (*Dubliners* 3). The boy approaches these words in the terms of form; they are aesthetic objects with undefined content. They signify something that seems profound to him. Of course, these words have actual meanings outside of their presentation in the text, yet, within the text, they work together to create a sign system unique to Joyce’s writing. Gnomon, referring to a missing corner in a parallelogram, and simony, referring to the selling of spiritual goods for material gain, shed light on how these words function in relation to each other and to the collection as a whole. All three terms come to the reader as empty jars, as barren chalices, as the objects of benign sacrilege. Gnomon refers to an absence in a form; simony is, in a sense, an attempt to use materiality to signify what is immaterial. The relationship between the material and immaterial expressed in simony is the
inverse of language, signs and symbols being inadequate to fully represent their material counterparts and vice versa. When it comes to language, it seems there is piece always missing that the sign fails to signify; content escapes form. These terms work to undermine any attempt to ground what paralysis means.

Joyce’s use of the word paralysis in a letter written to his publisher Grant Richards in 1906 often lends shape to how critics read the term in “The Sisters.” In this letter, composed on 5 May 1906, Joyce writes that he sets his stories in Dublin because he sees it as the “centre of paralysis” (*Letters* 83). In a letter written two years after “The Sisters” was first published, Joyce applies the term he has his story’s narrator say. At this point in Joyce’s writing, it becomes clear that the term applies to more than the Reverend Flynn’s physical condition. Joyce uses the word to diagnose an entire country, an entity that cannot suffer from a physical ailment. In this letter, it becomes clear that paralysis describes something immaterial. In the closing of a letter composed later that month, Joyce tells Richards that he sees his authorship of *Dubliners* as the “first step towards” Ireland’s “spiritual liberation” (*Letters* 88). Given the letter’s closing, it seems appropriate to say that on a social scale, paralysis is a spiritual condition. Critics have naturally applied this meaning to the term as it appears in *Dubliners*.

In his letters to Richards, Joyce’s recurring fixation on morality gently turns the blinds significantly illuminating his use of the word paralysis. In the 5 June 1906 letter to Richards, within the same sentence that he mentions paralysis, Joyce refers to *Dubliners* as a “chapter of the moral history” of Ireland (*Letters* 82). In other parts of the letter, he indicates an intense focus on morality and codes of conduct. When objecting to the English printer’s censorship of stories in *Dubliners*, such as “Two Gallants,” Joyce refers to the “code of honour” that the two gallants “live by”; he differentiates this code of behavior from the ideas of gallantry that the
English publisher learned from the “elder Dumas” and “romantic plays” (*Letters* 81). He suggests the printer read Guglielmo Ferrero’s examination of the link between Puritanism, sexual aberration, and military destructiveness as a corrective to a misguided notion separating military codes of honor and the kind of commercialized sexual deviance Joyce represents in “Two Gallants” (*Letters* 82). It is clear that in these correspondences, the contingency of morality was on Joyce’s mind. His analysis of the English printer implies that Joyce was thinking about how institutions and the narratives that they generate form moral outlooks. It is with *Dubliners* that he wanted to begin exposing the contingency of the institutions and the moral systems that they use to initiate and reinforce social patterns. In Joyce’s lexicon, these institutions initiate and reinforce paralysis.

Joyce’s brand of cultural nationalism is effected by the means of an emancipatory, modernist aesthetic. Joyce’s writing has the purpose of destabilizing interpretive regimes that invest empty signifiers with oppressive meaning. In the poem “Anecdote of the Jar,” Wallace Stevens outlines a similarly oppressive use of an innately empty signifier. The narrator of the poem tells the reader that he “placed a jar in Tennessee.” He sets this jar “upon a hill”; in this position, the “wilderness rose up to it” and “sprawled around” it. The narrator notes how as this takes place, the wilderness is “no longer wild.” In the end of the poem, Stevens writes, “It took dominion everywhere.” His narrator then notes that this jar is “gray and bare” (Stevens 76). The jar itself is “bare”; yet it organizes the fecund wilderness that surrounds it; its “dominion” makes this radically generative activity “no longer wild.” The emptiness and meaninglessness of the jar makes the plurality found in the wilderness meaningful, yet the jar’s ability to organize this mass of life is entirely contingent. Stevens does not define the agency of the unnamed narrator who sets the jar “upon a hill” as bearing any domineering, oppressive tendencies. It is also unclear if
Stevens is attributing any agency to the jar itself. It seems more likely that the jar is an aid to the wilderness’s own desire to organize itself, to invest itself with meaning.

Like Stevens’s wilderness, Joyce’s Ireland has organized itself around empty signifiers, but the agents who placed the bare jar on Ireland’s hill are readily culpable. A model for Joyce’s distortion of paralysis exists in another one of Stevens’s “Anecdote” poems: “Earthly Anecdote.” In this poem, Stevens anticipates the apparent stability of his jar’s contingent authority, by giving the reader a picture of a self-aware mode of authority that is appropriately stable while, pragmatically, being open to change and revision. The poem refers to places where “the bucks went clattering”; in these places a “firecat bristled in the way.” Stevens writes that wherever the bucks were “clattering,” a firecat brings them in line, makes them turn “In a swift, circular line / To the right” and “To the left” (Stevens 3). It seems, in this poem, that the role that the jar plays in “Anecdote of the Jar” is comparable to the firecat in “Earthly Anecdote,” the difference being that the firecat is a dynamic agent reigning in the anarchic energies of the bucks. The pattern in which the firecat organizes the bucks is adaptable; it is a decentered authority as opposed to the centrality of the jar. In letters to Nora Barnacle, Joyce articulates a “system” he sees as contingent and driving human action that constantly legitimates it, and he defines the role he sees himself assuming as an author writing against this system. Joyce works to make the wilderness aware of its self-organization around an empty jar, and, like the firecat, he also makes moves to contain the chaos the system’s dissolution unravels. But this new authority is pragmatic and adaptable to new situations.
The System and its Disruption

Considering paralysis as something concretized in the forms of institutions and the moral behavior that they sanction and encourage, it would follow that Joyce’s plan for his fiction to liberate Ireland spiritually is a plan to undermine institutions and render visible the contingency of the values they naturalize. In his early letters to Nora Barnacle, Joyce indicts institutions and the behaviors that they generate. These letters, written the same year that he first published “The Sisters” and two years before his letters to Richards, reveal a man with a chip on his shoulder and some idealistic goals for his work as an artist. These letters are also deeply personal and betray Joyce’s delicacy as a witness to and victim of paralysis in his family. In these letters, he condenses the problems he sees in Ireland’s institutions and the morality that they foster into subsuming terms—“the system” and the “social order” (Letters 25). He further defines the “social order” he opposes as “home, the recognized virtues, classes of life, and religious doctrines” (Letters 25). As the result of the influence these paralytic institutions have on him, Joyce sees his relationship with his mother, Mary, as corrupted by his “cynical frankness” (Letters 25-26). He also sees the same problematic influence as polluting the relationship between his father and mother, citing John Joyce’s “ill-treatment” of Mary (Letters 25-6).

Perhaps avoiding his own victimhood under the system’s paralytic influence, Joyce laments how it worked to make his mother a “victim,” going as far as to say that the system “slowly killed” her (Letters 25).

The problems to which Joyce points regarding his relationship with the Catholic Church reveal how he was thinking in general about the relationship between institutions and morality. His observation shows how he thinks about the relationship between nature and contingency. He writes Nora that when he was part of the church he “found it impossible to remain in it on
account of the impulses of [his] nature” (*Letters* 25). While within its structure, he writes that he “made secret war upon it,” declining to “accept the positions it offered [him]” (*Letters* 25). But his inability to reconcile his nature with the morality and values promoted by the church translated into an inability to participate in mainstream, social life. He writes that he “made [himself] a beggar,” retaining his “pride” (*Letters* 25-26). He refers to the code of ethics promoted by the church as a “social order” that he only participates in as a “vagabond” (*Letters* 26). In essence, Joyce “others” himself in relation to the system he implicates. This “system,” this “social order” eventually becomes a form of life that Joyce sees as still available to inhabit. To illuminate this for Nora, he quotes a short piece of writing he jotted down while in Paris: “They pass in twos and threes amid the life of the boulevard, walking like people who have leisure in a place lit up for them” (*Letters* 26). He sees a world that people inhabit without critical reflection, their choices shaped by institutions that provide scripts for performing identity within the social order. This performance helps internalize an uncritical immersion in a system that makes participants feel as if the streets are “lit up for them.” At this point, Joyce refers to what seems like a category of existence under the influence of a moral code as the very vague term “life.” In several instances at this point he references how “life” offered itself to him. He pointedly states that he “rejected it”; he rejected mainstream existence (*Letters* 26). This rejection of the mainstream is a kind of self “othering” that Joyce sees as key to developing a critical distance from the system.

Joyce’s meditation on his relationship to the system affects his approach to private existence as well. He is conscious of how institutions shape expectations for sexual behavior and deviance. The allusion to an intimate moment shared between Joyce and Nora mentioned in the end of this letter also provides a unique and peculiar view into the way in which Joyce
appropriates terminology internalized within the system of Catholicism for unorthodox ends. Joyce, recognizing the moral code that Nora is aware of, attempts to ameliorate the guilt he thinks he sees in her body language. In his attempt to make her feel less immoral, he refers to their moment of intimacy in religious terms:

…I have noticed a certain shyness in your manner as if the recollection of that night troubled you. I however consider it a kind of sacrament and the recollection of it fills me with amazed joy. […] it was a sacrament which left in me a final sense of sorrow and degradation—sorrow because I saw in you an extraordinary melancholy tenderness which had chosen that sacrament as a compromise, and degradation because I understood that in your eyes I was inferior to a convention of our present society. (Letters 26)

This passage reveals Joyce as anxiously balancing conventional morality, acknowledging the impression it has made on Nora, and as christening the “impulses” her actions betray.¹

After specifically naming Catholicism as a *paralytic* influence, he infers more general notions of external influences that are part of a formulation of the human condition, a general sense of human beings operating uncritically in a larger scheme. This move indicates that Catholicism for Joyce is a face of some greater unseen influence, an influence against which he defines himself and from which he hopes to liberate Ireland. He directly says of Catholicism: “Now I make open war upon it by what I write and say and do” (Letters 26). I read this statement as a more general opposition to paralysis, whatever form it takes. Still, in the Irish political context in the early-twentieth century, Catholicism is a primary fountainhead of influence, one of

¹ In this sense, Joyce can be understood as Socratic, attempting to probe past the conventional, the *nomos*, and to find ethics within nature (Bloom 110).
the “two masters” Stephen Dedalus implicates (*Ulysses* 24).\(^2\) Regarding his “open war” on the system, he sees his writing as a particularly effective weapon in his cause. His writing arms his readers with a dangerous self-awareness. He is convinced that Ireland’s ability to overcome paralysis lies in the perspective he can provide. To apprehend a deeper view of external reality, Joyce is convinced that the Irish subject needs to apprehend an accurate view of his or herself. He writes to Richards that he “seriously believe[s] that [Richards] will retard the course of civilisation in Ireland by preventing the Irish people from having one good look at themselves in [Joyce’s] nicely polished looking-glass” (*Letters* 90). The mirror estranges the viewer’s subjectivity, alienating his or herself from a moral code and social ordering that has before seemed natural. The difficulty this event poses opens the possibility for the reader to develop a new subjectivity that is less functional in a colonial context. The perspective that this reflection offers disrupts the colonial subject’s performances that merely reinforce paralytic patterns. I read this moment of reflection that Joyce hopes to inspire as a kind of “shock,” along the lines of Walter Benjamin’s use of the term as an aesthetic agent that disrupts the routine of consciousness, necessitating that the spectator reorient his or herself to reality.\(^3\) Joyce’s use of an aesthetic reflection is meant to cause a “moral shock” (*Work of Art* 238). The aesthetic strategy is meant to have an ethical effect. This reflection, this shock, works as a kind of paralysis that interrupts patterns that have been sustained by a lack of critical insight: a paralysis that interrupts paralysis.

\(^2\) After the Englishman living with Stephen Dedalus, Haines, says to Stephen, “You are your own master,” Stephen replies: “I am the servant of two masters…an English and an Italian,” of course referencing the British Empire and Roman Catholicism.

\(^3\) In “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” Walter Benjamin compares the “shock” effect of Dada and film. He writes that both Dada has a “moral shock effect” that interrupts the “associations” a contemplative spectator of art can entertain. The work of art presents a series of images that do not linger long enough to be contemplated (*Illuminations* 238).
*Dubliners* is an example of Joyce’s more encompassing aesthetic project. The effect he wishes to inspire—the reflection his story collection is meant initiate in Irish readers—has much in common with the author’s wider focus on art in general. Similarly, the perspective on what he considers to be inferior art sheds light on how he sees art as complicit in maintaining the conditions he would like *Dubliners* to reveal to readers. Joyce, in his 1903 Paris journal, inveighs against “improper” art that inspires desire and loathing. He defines desire as “the feeling which urges us to go to something,” an aesthetic quality equally vulgar as loathing, “the feeling which urges us to go from something” (*Critical* 102). Given that he eventually writes Richards, saying he sees *Dubliners* as a step in the direction of spiritual liberation in Ireland, it seems counterintuitive to discount art that inspires some kind of action. It would seem to make sense to elevate art that inspires an audience “to go to” or “to go from” something, especially in the context of an Ireland that lay stagnant in a paralytic state. It would seem Joyce should champion art that inspires movement, movement, seemingly, being the opposite of paralysis. Yet, given what Joyce portrays in *Dubliners*, it makes perfect sense that he would look down on art that inspires desire or loathing. An artist who depicts desire or loathing reveals a desire to see material reality as negligible in relationship to the apprehension of a dream. To be motivated to “go to” something is to neglect one’s immediate surroundings, to miss the opportunity to read the present. Joyce goes further suggesting that art is improper when it is “not sufficient in itself” but “urges us to seek something beyond itself” (*Critical* 103). In this statement, it seems clear that Joyce is disparaging art that claims to represent something real, that is form pointing to content. Proper art is form, and the form is content. At this point, in Joyce’s criticism of improper art, it is helpful to think of Wallace Stevens’s empty jar. Joyce is pointing out the fallacy and harm that comes from maintaining the pretension that the jar bears content, that the work of art points to
something more real than itself. Joyce gives concrete examples of how this misguided use of aesthetics enters the practice of art. He has no patience for art that “urges” an audience “to go to something.” He further explains that this kind of art represents the “unusual and remediable in human fortunes”; the causes of these depicted events are “only too manifest.” He faults this art for trying to move the audience to “prevent human suffering” or to simply gawk at a set of circumstances that goes against an audience’s expectations (*Critical 102*). The empty jar in this scenario is the art that attempts to invest the observer in a scenario outside of the work of art, to attend to a cause that is easily remediable or just an unfortunate event.

In Joyce’s fiction, there are intentional references to improper art, and in other instances, he seems to practice it. It is my contention that Joyce will use the trappings of improper art in order to represent aspects of a story that correspond with what I am pointing out as perspectives and behaviors that reinforce a paralytic pattern. Of course, these theories appear in Stephen Dedalus’s exposition on aesthetics in the fifth chapter of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. In this famous section of Joyce’s first novel, Stephen rules out the ability for a bizarre, fatal accident, such as the piercing of a young girl’s heart by a “fine needle of the shivered glass,” to be the subject of proper art (*Portrait 183*). Stephen disparages the vulgar medium of the newspaper for referring to the event in aesthetic terms, as “tragic” (*Portrait 183*). This would be an example of the “unusual” but not necessarily “remediable.” It would be tempting to say that Joyce himself resorts to depicting the “unusual” in stories in *Dubliners*, such as “A Painful Case,” which features a reference to the sudden death of a woman who is hit by a train. The story also represents a fate that may have been “remediable” if James Duffy had positively responded to Emily Sinico’s gesture towards romantic intimacy. But Joyce deploys the formal qualities of improper art to represent characters who are themselves motivated by desire and loathing. James
and Emily almost make a connection based on loathing. Emily loathes her present marriage and is trying to “go” from it. James desires a public life that does not exist, something he doesn’t even find in the socialist meetings he attends and the books of misanthropic German philosophy he reads. James and Emily, among other characters in *Dubliners*, are responding to their situations from a perspective of trying to escape or to apprehend something. These characters are caught in a cycle of desire and loathing. Joyce uses the formal qualities of improper art to show how these narratives he is trying to expose shape real life. He will represent improper art, but it is mediated through a lens that brings the paralyzing medium to the reader’s attention. James Duffy experiences his almost-lover’s death through the vulgar mediation of the newspaper that deploys the language of tragedy to aestheticize what is possibly an instance of the unusual, an accident. The way this moment is represented in the text makes the reader aware of the formal qualities characteristic of journalism as a medium. The effect is jarring to a reader accustomed to Joyce’s subtle narrative prose. The shock effect of this moment renders the role journalism plays in perpetuating the paralytic state. The problem Joyce finds with this art is that it creates a hierarchy, privileging the real situation outside of the art, rendering the art negligible. Joyce is critiquing the drive to privilege content over form, using art to validate exteriority or subjectivity. Proper art is supposed to collapse the border between representation and reality; it “unites” the audience with a situation’s “secret cause” and with “the human sufferer” (*Critical* 102). Proper art “does not urge” the audience to “seek anything beyond itself” (*Critical* 103). Improper art does not encourage the kind of inward turn, the reflection, he writes to Richards he aspires to inspire in his readers. It absorbs the viewer into a world of false associations.

In this sense, Joyce’s reading of Aristotle’s aesthetic theory correlates with his likelihood of having read the philosopher’s *Nicomachean Ethics*. A review Joyce wrote of a compilation of
Aristotle’s writing on education (which included the first three and the tenth books of *Ethics*) appeared in a 1903 edition of Dublin’s *Daily Express* (*Critical* 80). In the third book of *Ethics*, Aristotle outlines a notion of desire that expresses a relationship between a desiring subject and unrealistic goals (*Ethics* 1111b12). The view that *Dubliners* offers exposes the role that unrealistic goals play in maintaining the system. By acting on unrealistic desires, the subject acts in accordance with and affirms a regime of production. What has to happen is a reimagining of material reality. As Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri argue, there is no existence outside of empire; similarly, there is not an overcoming of paralysis. Hardt and Negri write that there are “real alternatives and…potentials for liberation that exist within Empire”; they go on to insist that it is productive to abandon “the search for an outside” (*Empire* 46). Paralysis works in this way, as a neutral, inescapable force that can work for or against a subject. Joyce represents characters that the system he is working to expose manipulates. Like the emotions Joyce elevates from Aristotle’s *Poetics*, the hopelessness of the stories in *Dubliners* works to inspire “terror” and “pity.” According to Joyce’s definition, terror “arrests” the audience “before whatever is grave in human fortunes” (*Critical* 102). He desires to weave a yarn that arrests the reader, an effect that initiates a different side to the paralysis from which Ireland needs to be freed. Like an inoculation, a form of intentional aesthetic paralysis can startle the observer’s subjectivity, opening an opportunity for rearticulating how the observer relates to and orders reality.

This nexus of categories that I derive from Joyce’s letters, criticism, and fiction are comparable to notions that figure into the ethics and aesthetics of alterity framed by twentieth-century, continental philosophers, such as Martin Buber and Emmanuel Levinas, themes that consumed the late work of Jacques Derrida. Of particular importance to my two-sided interpretation of paralysis is Levinas’s distinction between *totality* and *infinity* and the distinction
Martin Buber makes between “two basic words” that account for the human subject’s relationship to the other, the two word pairs being I-You and I-It (*I and Thou* 53). In the sense that paralysis is the repetition of self-defeating actions that perpetuate a subordinate, colonized culture, it is akin to Levinas’s notion of totality. Totality is exemplified in the linear, historic, and abstract ordering of the phenomenological world, consistent with notions of progress and narrative. Infinity is a breach of totality, a realization, however brief, that there is existence outside of the human capability to categorize, “*a surplus always exterior to the totality*” (*Totality* 22). As Levinas uses the term, infinity is the “‘beyond’ of history,” a “*signification without a context*” (*Totality* 34). Levinas posits that there are two ways of theorizing the other. There is the other that is an extension of the self or an object reduced to a desiring subject’s utility. Levinas calls this an “*alterity*,” which is “reabsorbed into” the desiring subject’s “identity” (*Totality* 33).

In *Dubliners*, the notion of paralysis that has long been the working term in Joyce studies is maintained by the Irish subject’s lack of critical distance from his or her subjective extension of the self that is instrumental to an exploitive regime of production. It is my argument that an awareness of the other that transcends a subjective concept of alterity is necessary to become self-aware and awake to the operations of the system that Joyce implicates. In Buber’s terms, an “I-It” relation to the other takes place within the confines of Levinas’s totality while the “I-You” encounter bypasses the confines of totality. The I-You encounter disrupts the habits reinforced by the I-It experience. In Joyce’s *Dubliners*, the goal of the text is to inspire an encounter with the other that can only happen in the I-You dynamic. Joyce’s project of spiritual liberation is a plan to reorganize the I-It relationship between subject and object through an aesthetic paralysis that exposes the observer to the other as “You” rather than “It.”
The breaching of totality or the address of the subject to the absolutely other, the aspect of the self that escapes categorization, is a disruption of a subjectivity that is instrumental to empire. This disruption provides an opportunity for self-reflection that, in turn, is a possibility for imagining a new system, a more just totality. The awareness awakened by the aesthetic experience of paralysis allows the observer to see injustice in an abiding totality. The observer reaches what Derrida would call an “impasse” and becomes aware of a limit to a conception of truth. Derrida assigns the word *aporia* to a notion of reaching an impasse between a limited notion of truth and what lies beyond it (*Aporias* 1). The paralysis present in *Dubliners* is both the depiction of a character reaching an impasse and the attempt to involve the reader in discovering a similar point that is not easily crossed. Paralysis is a meditation on the borders Derrida theorizes, the limitation of concepts Joyce sees as framing the poor choices his characters make. Linger ing in this space of limitation is productive for the development of new ways of imagining conceptual frameworks and new moral codes.

In my conception, paralysis is functional for the encounter with alterity that is a centerpiece of the “new ethics,” a movement in literary theory developed by philosophers such as Judith Butler and Martha Nussbaum. In my reading of paralysis, I reconsider and redeploy the term as akin to the poststructuralist designation “estrangement” or Martha Nussbaum’s conception of “love” (Hale 902). Like these terms in circulation among new ethicists, my use of paralysis denotes an encounter with alterity, the encounter testing the limits of a person’s conceptual ordering of the world, particularly, his or her moral code. Specifically applied to Joyce, Jean-Michel Rabaté refers to a similar, deconstructive encounter in *Ulysses* as an instance of the “obscene” (*Erotic to the Obscene* 132). Rabaté describes the obscene as a kind of alterity that is radically different from the subject it encounters while the erotic corresponds to a
systematized subject constituted by the commonplace discourse that defines rhetoric \((Erotic to the Obscene 132)\). In *Dubliners*, paralysis works to bring about a similar revelation of the obscene, an encounter that goes beyond normalized registers. Paralysis as “estrangement,” “love,” or as “obscenity” effects an awareness of the limits of conventional morality and makes it necessary to rethink social expectations and the individual behavior these expectations necessitate. Joyce envisions a spiritual liberation that results from self-awareness. Rabaté, again, enlightens my reading, referencing Jean Paulhan’s observation about Joyce’s literary enterprise: …Paulhan warns that linguistic expression is never pure, since it is always contaminated by rhetoric. According to [André] Gide, Joyce is like Paulhan in that he tears up “cloaks and appearances,” unveiling the rhetorical function of language. Paulhan himself refers to Joyce and Marcel Proust as similarly Bergsonian authors, intent on destroying the conventional self, formed by habit and mechanical intelligence […]. \((Erotic to the Obscene 130)\)

Paulhan’s point is that Joyce is interested in exposing the limits of conventional discourse for the purpose of constituting a new human subject.

My argument that paralysis has two functions, that it is both a force to overcome and a means by which to overcome itself, is in dialogue with the concerns of Joyce scholar Vicki Mahaffey. In *Dubliners*, Joyce can be understood as deliberately setting in motion *aporiae* that unsettle and invite readers to “reexamine their assumptions” (Mahaffey and Shashaty 6). Though the characters in *Dubliners* are often unaware of the limitations their lives often demonstrate, Joyce’s representation of their overlapping and repetitive existences, unlike a didactic text, does not pretend to offer the reader clear moral instructions. Rather, they invite reflection and instigate a robust, democratic dialogue. Mahaffey and Jill Shashaty nicely put this reader involvement in
terms influenced by Paulo Freire’s notion of a pedagogy that is not didactic but “is designed to inspire dialogue” (Collaborative Dubliners 4). Mahaffey and Shashaty enlighten readers with the idea that the stories in Dubliners are instructive, but not dogmatic or catechistic. They relate this goal of Joyce’s in Dubliners to the Socratic aporia, “an apparently insoluble dilemma—to motivate students to reexamine their assumptions” (Collaborative Dubliners 6). At the characterological level, it is not necessary for the aporia to occur. Joyce is interested in using the representation of his characters to instigate an encounter that spurs reflection in the reader. When he writes about how proper art “arrests” audience members, he also claims that it “unites” them with a “secret cause” (Critical 102). The “secret cause” Joyce’s ideal art reveals is not a clear-cut answer to the problem depicted by the artist. As Vicki Mahaffey keenly observes, the stories in Dubliners have the possibility to “call into question the unconscious accounting that creates and perpetuates expectations, expectations that limit the possibility and desirability of change” (Mahaffey 21). And this “desirability of change” is a potential way an observer interacts with the aporia revealed by the aesthetic object, highlighting the moral significance of the two forms of epiphany and paralysis.
CHAPTER 2

“THE SISTERS”: THE CHALICE AS TOTALITY CONTAINING INFINITY

In “The Sisters,” I argue that Joyce introduces the reader to the two sides of paralysis in the form of two chalices. In my reading, one chalice represents performances that maintain the system. It is whole and logocentric, giving the idea of a seamless continuity that cannot be broken. It is part of the work the community undertakes to preserve the pretense of the priest’s authority, the notion of paralysis that has long existed in Joyce criticism, as well as Irish and modernist studies. In actuality, this paralysis is synonymous with a contingent order that presents itself as intractable. The priest bears this chalice in death. The second chalice is the one the priest breaks while alive. It is the disruption innate within systems that try to assert totality.

The scenes representing Flynn and the whole chalice are significantly also the scenes in which the character is dead. The Reverend Flynn’s lifeless body is “retaining a chalice,” suggesting that his body still represents a stable authority. At the conclusion of the story, the narrator describes the physical and aesthetic state of his former mentor. Flynn is “lying still in his coffin” with an “idle chalice on his breast” (Dubliners 11). In one account, the narrator underlines the ceremonial appearance the priest has as he is readied for interment. The narrator describes Flynn as “solemn and copious, vested as for the altar” (Dubliners 8). He is dressed up with nowhere to go, so to speak. The community chooses to present Flynn’s body as a symbol of stable authority, as a body capable of conducting a sacrament, yet, as the narrator says of the chalice Flynn’s lifeless body retains, this aesthetic experience is idle. In its idleness, the presentation appears to bear content. It is an aesthetic production that, like the “improper art” Joyce critiques in his aesthetic theory, points the observer to a life of unchallenged authority, of the mode of paralysis that Joyce scholars have made famous.
The objects that surround the image of the unified, logocentric chalice suggest a tension between the appearance of virility complemented by fertility and impotence sharing misery with infertility. Joyce’s choices of details surrounding these two scenes suggest the appearance of form bearing content and the revelation of emptiness. He describes the priest’s face as “copious,” suggesting an image of potency, yet the chalice he bears is “idle,” painting a picture of impotence (*Dubliners* 8, 11). Joyce’s narrator makes note of the “flowers” in the room, bringing to mind the image of fecundity, but he also focuses on the priest’s “black cavernous nostrils…circled by a scanty white fur,” suggesting old age and barrenness (*Dubliners* 8). Like a medieval painting that depicts benign life while also depicting the ever-present threat of mortality and death, Joyce represents symbols of life tempered by an underlying decay. He represents content that bears the possibility of empty forms.

This idle chalice that survives the closing of the story serves as an excellent illustration of the anxiety that produces the cultural paralysis that Joyce’s prose is working to expose. It is an anxiety that works to preserve the appearance of delegitimized authority. As Joyce shows in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, the role Catholic priests played in undermining Charles Stewart Parnell’s authority in the wake of the publicized, long-term affair that eventually served as evidence in a divorce case divided populist sentiments about the church’s ability to represent the interests of working-class Catholics. This fracture in the Catholic political unity that had been secured by Daniel O’Connell in the first four decades of the nineteenth century stirred questions about the legitimacy of priests who had taken on a political role. In *Portrait*, Simon Dedalus famously laments Ireland as an “unfortunate priestridden race” (*Portrait* 46). Recalling Joyce’s letter to Grant Richards calling *Dubliners* a “chapter of the moral history” of Ireland, Simon expresses hope that this state of affairs will only last “till the end of the chapter” (*Portrait* 46).
Yet, the notion of an illegitimate authority works to preserve the expectation for legitimacy. This chalice serves to remind readers of a fallacy at work in assuming that form has a separate content, that, as improper art insists, there is something to go to or flee from, something outside of the text.

While the preserved chalice is capable of representing the problems that arise when trying to impose an artificial boundary separating form and content, in my reading, the chalice the Reverend Flynn famously drops and breaks works to expose the problems with trying to prop up a notion of content to which form only points. The broken chalice works to dissolve this distinction, to present an aesthetic that does not have the conceit that it is working to point to a reality outside of the work of art. This chalice, like the one his disposed mortal coil bears, “contained nothing”; yet, the pun present in this descriptor is yonic, as opposed to the image of impotence suggested by the “idle” chalice (*Dubliners* 11). Though the whole chalice is surrounded by yonic symbols—the flowers in the room, Flynn’s lifeless, cavernous nostrils—the broken chalice’s content is “nothing.” Unlike the yonic symbols surrounding the whole chalice, symbols that align with a binary opposition between two states for the feminine, fruitfulness and barrenness, the yonic symbol contained in the broken chalice evokes the radical otherness of the feminine that does not fit prescribed roles functional to maintaining a patriarchal order.

**Too Scrupulous Always**

The whole chalice that the Reverend Flynn retains in death mirrors the routine and the cycles that he kept in life. That this chalice is connected to a masculine image of impotence indicates the logocentric nature of formalities that operate with the pretense of bearing content. A picture Joyce often uses to demonstrate the system is the depiction of time as framed by cycles
and repetition. As Susan Bazargan points out, the characters in *Dubliners* exist in what Mikhail Bakhtin calls “folkloric” time, a notion of time marked by “multiple patterns of repetition.” She notes that both the first and final stories in the collection prominently feature rituals: in “The Sisters,” a funeral, and in “The Dead,” the Feast of Epiphany (Bazargan 53). The Reverend Flynn’s sister Eliza says of her brother that he was “too scrupulous always” (*Dubliners* 10). In her judgment, the “duties of the priesthood was too much for him” (*Dubliners* 10). As in death, Flynn worked to preserve the pretense of authority, to contain the unpredictable, the reality that lies outside of conceptions of truth.

As a mentor, Flynn works to obscure any knowledge that lies outside of the system he perpetuates and in which he participates. When the young man recalls his time under Flynn’s tutelage, he portrays the Reverend as maintaining the appearance of having knowledge. His tutelage inculcates in the young man a fascination with repetition and the seeming profundity of ritual. He teaches the young man “how to pronounce Latin properly”; he presents to the boy the “meaning” of the “different ceremonies of the mass” and the “different vestments worn by the priest” (*Dubliners* 6). The priest presents his pious pupil with the allure of surfaces, surfaces that point to “meaning.” This hierarchy of the relationship between form and content is associated with the romantic tradition, and, interestingly enough, the priest also tells the boy about the archetypal, romantic hero, Napoleon Bonaparte (*Dubliners* 6). When Flynn gave the impression of instructing the boy, asking his pupil “difficult questions,” it is not so much the answers that make an impression on the boy. The boy is impressed by the seeming difficulty of these questions. They make him think that he is in proximity to content: “His questions showed me how complex and mysterious were certain institutions of the church which I always regarded as the simplest acts” (*Dubliners* 6). These “duties of the priest” in regards to “the eucharist and
towards the secrecy of the confessional seemed so grave” (Dubliners 7, emphasis added). The key word in the passage is “seemed,” indicating that the priest has initiated the boy into a way of seeing things that is not necessarily congruent with actual reality. Referring back to Joyce’s aesthetic criticism, he associates the word “grave” with something different from the mesmerizing and disorienting display the priest projects to the boy. Proper art does not show what “seems” grave; rather, it “arrests [the audience] before whatever is grave in human fortunes and unites [them] with its secret cause” (Critical 102). This is not to say that there is no validity to what Flynn says or what the boy sees in the spectacle, but he is looking in the wrong place. The inflation of content as something existing apart from the form of an aesthetic object invests the form with an incredible burden. As it proves in the case of the Reverend Flynn, “The duties of the priesthood was too much for him” (Dubliners 10).

This “too scrupulous” ethos is something the young man in the story has absorbed. Taking on a priestly role, the boy keeps a vigil that he attends to “night after night,” waiting for his pedagogue’s death (Dubliners 3). He notes the habitually “lighted square of window” that is continually “lighted in the same way” (Dubliners 3). In this process, he awaits a change in the pattern. The young man waits for the light of “two candles” to appear in the window, two objects that “must be set at the head of a corpse” (Dubliners 3). If there is anything the boy has learned from Flynn, it is that impressive surfaces suggest mysterious content, and this mysterious content validates the aesthetic form. The boy is practicing this lesson at the story’s beginning when he is scanning the surfaces of the words paralysis, simony, and gnomon, all words that in some way are connected to the boy’s time as Flynn’s tutee. The boy repeats paralysis, assumedly, because it is a word he has heard in reference to Flynn’s condition; the words simony and gnomon are likely words Flynn himself made seem impressive to the boy. The story’s narrator interacts with
these words in relation to their similar aesthetic qualities, their similar surfaces. Simony and gnomon affect the boy as impressive words signifying the difficult calling with which Flynn lives. The boy’s interaction with these words perpetuates paralysis as examples of his being fascinated with the formal qualities of concepts Flynn teasingly brought to his attention.

That Chalice He Broke

The priest’s “too scrupulous” habits demonstrate an attempt to contain the spiritual. In turn, this is a logocentric attempt to contain the feminine. The chalice that Flynn breaks “contained nothing.” Yet it breaks and exposes the boy to aspects of reality that his education has shielded from him. Even when the boy is trying to focus on repetition and ritual at the beginning of the story, the word paralysis, as repeated by him, works against his ability to preserve the world Flynn introduces to him. As he repeats the word, he admires its formal qualities and perhaps hopes it points externally to some kind of redeeming content, just as the meaning Flynn showed him as attached to the different ceremonies and the different vestments of religious ritual. Yet the word itself becomes indistinguishable from content. As he repeats the word, it begins to sound to him “like the name of some maleficent and sinful being”; the word first maintains the distinction between form and content, the “name” of something. Then the name becomes what it represents. The narrator ambiguously uses a gender-neutral pronoun: “It filled me with fear and yet I longed to be nearer to it and to look upon its deadly work” (Dubliners 3). The word transitions from representation to ontology. It becomes the “being” that draws and repels the boy. This transition bypasses form with the pretension of pointing to content and into an aesthetic conception of form as content.
This answers the boy’s anxiety that Flynn’s words may or may not be idle. He is concerned that Flynn’s words prove to be “true” (Dubliners 3). If Flynn’s words about his coming death are true, then the doubts the boy has about the lessons he learned from Flynn articulating and revealing the mysteries of the Catholic Church remain settled and naturalized. The boy’s attempt to salvage his piety obscures his awareness of alterity. When he is attempting to pray while viewing Flynn’s body, the boy narrates that he is unable to “gather” his “thoughts” because of his aunt’s “mutterings” (Dubliners 8). His process of trying to reconstruct the world signified by Euclid and the catechism is frustrated by the infraction of alterity.
CHAPTER 3

“ARABY”: THE IMAGE THAT TRIED TO CONTAIN NOTHING

In one of the most canonized stories in *Dubliners*, “Araby,” I argue that the text conveys Joyce’s project to disrupt the system defined by cycles and repetition. Through the lens of courtly romance and a narrative of budding sexuality, the author depicts the limitations of image as an agent of totality, providing a framework for a kind of subjectivity that absorbs and simplifies more complex realities. As Jean-Michel Rabaté has pointed out, Jean Paulhan compares Joyce’s project to that of Proust who he argues is trying to render the limitations of rhetorical contexts visible and thereby exposing the contingency of the subject that corresponds to that context. In the story, the young protagonist creates a private, fantasy world that is nonetheless derivative of systems of rhetorical discourse, rendering his subjectivity instrumental to the mechanisms of empire. The fantasy world that the boy constructs—imagining Mangan’s sister’s physical form—corresponds with the habits Joyce is trying to break in his public. He represents a young man whose interaction with the world is framed by commercial interests and the visual culture conglomerating around photography. This point of view prevents him from encountering alterity. This alienated way of relating to alterity is perhaps best understood in terms of an ontology shaped by an early form of portraiture photography. The young man begins the story concerned with protecting a romantic idea he has cast in his mind, the “image,” that resembles a form of photography that at the time the story takes place was fading. Like the two chalices that the Reverend Flynn bore, there are two interactions the boy has with Mangan’s sister: one visual and objectifying, the other dialogic and confounding. The visual experience corresponds to the whole, logocentric chalice borne by the deceased priest while the linguistic encounter has the subversive potential to undermine the pretension of the visual image’s
wholeness. By the end of the story, this linguistic encounter shatters the chalice he has made in his mind.

The kind of photography that the boy’s aestheticizing process evokes is that of portraiture photography, an art form that formally had more in common with portrait painting than with photography that, more efficiently, captures a candid moment. The choice of language Joyce uses to represent the boy’s aestheticization process resembles that of Leopold Bloom’s preservation of Gerty MacDowell’s image in his mind. The narrator of the “Nausicæa” chapter of Ulysses uses the metaphor of portrait photography to render the kind of impression Bloom’s encounter with Gerty inspires. The “image of that voluptuous loveliness” is “limned” by the “inspired pencil of Lafayette” (Ulysses 547). James Stack Lauder was a second-generation photographer who founded the Lafayette studio in 1880. He practiced under the name “Lafayette” to capitalize off of the avant-garde photography associated with fin de siècle France. Lafayette, like other late-Victorian and Edwardian portrait photographers, frequently captured images of aristocratic families, society beauties, actresses, and children, but he also had the prestige of being Queen Victoria’s photographer in Dublin, a patronage that continued with Edward VII and George V (Brief History).

This particular photographic way of relating to reality freezes and abstracts phenomena in the world outside of the observer. The time that the boy spends crafting this alienating, interior simulacrum of the actual world he experiences helps to freeze his relationship to the world. Kathryn Conrad and Mark Osteen make the argument that throughout Dubliners there is something significant about the moments characters inside domestic spaces look at the outside world from a window at twilight. This process involves an imaginary projection of the observer onto the object observed; these instances “generate static portraits—discursive paintings
denoting paralysis—that the characters overlay on events past and future” (Conrad 78). The term “discursive paintings” comes from Eloise Knowlton’s distinction between “discursive and figurative photographs” (Conrad 71). Discursive photographs are static, arranged, resembling “symbolic paintings arranged to signify something specific” (Conrad 71). A discursive image is functional in an established regime of production. It works as part of the rhetorical system Joyce is working to reveal. These images serve to maintain a particular ordering of things framed by a kind of rhetorical system. The radical alterity that this mode of discourse represents is obscured and replaced by an objectified perception. The object in this relationship only encounters the subject by means of fulfilling certain expectations about what the other should be. In Levinas’s terms, the boy constructs a version of Mangan’s sister that can abide safely as an extension of his private theater and that corresponds to a self that is constructed by rhetoric.

The Image and the Other

The way the boy conceives of Mangan’s sister in the first half of the story—his transformation of her body into a static and discursive photograph—corresponds to an instrumental ontology that operates within the confines of the manipulative potential of rhetoric. His imagination transmutes this image into a religious metaphor; her image becomes that of a chalice he sees as charging him with the responsibility of its care (Dubliners 22). As an image, Mangan’s sister is not external to the boy’s subjective, romantic distortion of the world outside. The young man’s initial experience of his beloved is as a distant object that merely reinforces his participation in the limitations of rhetoric. Before she initiates a conversation with him, the text is littered with objective locutions referring to Mangan’s sister: “we watched her from our shadow,” “her figure defined by the light,” “her dress swung as she moved her body,” “the soft
rope of *her* hair,” “*her* brown figure always in my eye,” “*her* image,” to give a few examples (*Dubliners* 21, emphasis added). This objective designation makes up the majority of references to Mangan’s sister due to the narrator’s tendency to use minimal first-person dialogue.

It may seem coincidental or circumstantial, but I would like to consider the significance of the brief shift the story takes in the direction of first-person dialogue. After the narrator relates how he has habitually observed Mangan’s sister and how this mental fixation shapes his imaginative as well as his social roles, he tells how Mangan’s sister finally addressed him. Remaining in third-person, he establishes that she asks him if he is going to Araby, and then she expresses disappointment that she cannot go. Shifting into first person, the boy asks, “And why can’t you?” (*Dubliners* 22). This question is once again mediated by a third-person, objective account of the conversation in progress. Then the narrator again switches to first-person, but this time, it becomes a dialogue; she says: “It is well for you,” and he replies: “If I go…I will bring you something” (*Dubliners* 23). Obviously, in order to shift from narrated events to direct dialogue habitually involves a transition from the third to the second person. It would seem that there is little meaning to this formal choice beyond convenience. The narrative passages that precede the boy’s direct response to Mangan’s sister’s query about Araby coincide with a particular way human beings relate to the other, the same being true of the first-person expressions found in direct dialogue. After this scene, Mangan’s sister all but disappears from the text. She surfaces twice in the time mediating his encounter with her and his journey to Araby. In this time, the narrator mentions how “her image came between [him] and the page” he was striving to read (*Dubliners* 23). This indicates a recurring event that disrupts his ability to conduct his life as a student. She is finally mentioned when the narrator is giving an account of how he would peer in the direction of the “dark house where she lived”; in these instances he
would substitute her apparent absence from his empirical view with “the brownclad figure cast by [his] imagination” (*Dubliners* 24). Though the narrator gives an account of his habitual idealization of Mangan’s sister as continuing to take place after the boy’s conversation with her, it is important to point out that in the text itself, the frequency of the third-person, Buber’s I-It, designations drastically diminish after the very brief but significant second-person, I-You, encounter between the boy and Mangan’s sister.

It is not the visual aspect of Mangan’s sister that the young man truly encounters when he finally shares a conversation with her. What is unique about this meeting is the entrance of spoken discourse. When the young man is still immersed in his fantasy derived from the visual phenomenon of her body seen in the distance, he apparently thinks about how he has not spoken to her except for a few “casual words” (*Dubliners* 21). Besides her image as a body, he is fixated on her name (*Dubliners* 21, 22). The reader approaches her name as an absence. The narrator asks his reader to consider the formal quality of the act of naming, to appreciate the name itself as a symbol for a body and a consciousness, an exterior and an interior. The first instance of her name appears to reference the name as spoken; it is referred to as a “summons to all [his] foolish blood” (*Dubliners* 21). The next and final instance of her name appears shortly after the first reference. Her name, again, appears in spoken form; it springs to his lips “at moments in strange prayers and praises,” utterances he does not understand (*Dubliners* 22).[^4] In his apparent attempt to communicate with the divine, he finds himself participating in discourse that he does not understand. Similarly, when Mangan’s sister speaks to him in such a way that the boy differentiates the conversation from the previous “casual words,” he is described as “so

[^4]: Interestingly enough, the other mention of a name is the name “Araby,” which appears when the boy is at the bazaar that “displayed the magical name” (*Dubliners* 25).
confused” that he is lost as to how to answer her (Dubliners 22). Unlike the image that the boy apprehends and serves as a centerpiece to an interior life under his control, language unsettles the young man’s private world he sees as under siege from elements “hostile to romance” (Dubliners 21). In a sense, the fantasy image that the boy casts is perfectly transparent to him and subjected to his whims. In other words, the image is not the other.

It is only through language that Mangan’s sister encounters the boy, and the boy is confused. This encounter ultimately dismantles the image he cast of her. This image, in dialogue with “The Sisters,” takes the form of a chalice. The narrator recounts how he “bore [his] chalice safely through a throng of foes” (Dubliners 22). The misunderstanding that he experiences speaking prayers that entwine with her name and, more importantly, in the conversation he has with her are instances where the young man encounters alterity. That this encounter takes place mediated by language would come as no surprise to the thought of Levinas who maintains that it is in discourse that a person encounters “something absolutely foreign” (Totality 73). Like the chalice the Reverend Flynn breaks—the vessel that “contained nothing”—the young man in “Araby” tries to contain and minimize the radical difference the feminine presents to him. As a chalice, Mangan’s sister takes on her full assigned role as a symbol reinforcing the boy’s discursive and rhetorical framing of the world. She becomes something handled in a ceremony by the knowing executor of the ritual.
CHAPTER 4

“EVELINE”: A GLIMPSE OF INFINITY

In order to begin thinking about what “Eveline” really has to show Joyce’s reader, it is necessary to acknowledge what Fredric Jameson has termed the “metacommentary” standing between the text Joyce wrote and the contemporary reader. Literary texts arrive “always-already-read,” meaning various traditions have weaved a dense network of previous interpretations, reading habits, and categories (Jameson 9, 10). It is my argument that the metacommentary of “Eveline” exemplifies the kind of “improper art” Joyce articulates in his Paris notebook. Given that Joyce, in his reading of Aristotle’s Poetics, shows little patience for a kind of art that depicts situations that only reveal a surface-level analysis of a situation, I argue that most critics through the years have created a text Joyce would have problems with. Turning to the deeper tradition of Irish myth as recovered by the contemporary Irish-American poet Paul Muldoon, I will reveal a reading of the final scene as an example of a brief breach of totality; I will show it to be an arresting glimpse of infinity.

For decades scholars have debated the significance of the choices set before Eveline. The interpretive tradition contemporary readers have inherited has largely asked of the text this question: “Did Eveline make the right choice?” These articles and books have emphasized one potential danger to Eveline’s material well-being: the possible violence she will face at the hands of her father or the imaginable caddish nature of Frank who may leave her alone, sexually shamed, and awaiting residency at a Magdalene laundry (Dubliners 28). The interpretation most readily apparent to readers versed in Joyce’s theme of paralysis is that Eveline misses a chance at true love; she allows the burdens of her connection to a homeland to keep her from realizing her desire. The details Joyce allows his readers to access indicate that Eveline inhabits a life in
Ireland she finds to be disappointing: a negligible position as a shopgirl, a coworker who
conspicuously corrects Eveline’s work conduct, the loss of the brother who looked after her, the
survival of a brother who is not interested in his sister’s struggles with a father who has
threatened violence towards her “for her dead mother’s sake” (*Penguin Dubliners* 38). Given a
home life that Eveline is only able to elevate as not “wholly undesirable,” it would seem that the
natural reading of the story would guide the reader to the conclusion that Eveline is merely
another victim of a notion of paralysis that is realized as an inability to act on desire.

Of course, readings that go in the counterintuitive direction, arguing that Eveline, in fact,
made the right choice, are just as culpable in maintaining an emphasis that merely reads the story
looking for surface answers. An article that notably goes against this ready interpretation is Hugh
Kenner’s “Molly’s Masterstroke” (1972). In this essay, Kenner argues that Frank uses fictional
tropes to appeal to Eveline’s sense of fancy; in Kenner’s assessment, Frank is likely an
“experienced seducer” (Kenner 21). Eveline’s choice to stay in Ireland, in this assessment, leads
to her lamenting a lost opportunity that the reader is able to speculate was not such a great
prospect. The problem with this reading is that the reader does not know what to expect from
Frank.

Going by the details in the text, it seems safer to suggest that Eveline made a bad
decision. To take this position does not require that the reader believe that Eveline would have
had true love with Frank. It seems likely that going with Frank would have merely traded certain
danger for potential danger or disappointment. The reader does know that Eveline has been
threatened by a father who has acted violently towards her brothers and her deceased mother.
Garry Martin Leonard’s reading of “Eveline” emphasizes the eminent physical threat Eveline’s
father poses, positing that the story takes place during “a lull that almost certainly precedes the
occasion of [Eveline’s] being beaten for the first time by her father” (Leonard 96). Suzette Henke shares Leonard’s concerns that the real danger lies in the potential violence from Eveline’s father. Though the father’s history of violence against his wife and sons lends considerable weight to his threats against Eveline, it is arguable that actual physical violence against Eveline could be as chimeric as the “home” Frank promises is “waiting for her” across the “seas of the world” (*Dubliners* 29). Seemingly confirming the mistake Eveline makes, Sidney Feshbach investigates the employment history Frank discloses to Eveline, arguing that that the positions Frank mentions previously working are actual jobs (*Fallen on his Feet* 224-5). In either case, there is a case to be made for either choice. It seems that any debate along these lines misses the point of the story. The point is not so much to invite the reader to reflect on what choice Eveline should have made; rather, the story invites the reader to consider why Eveline has such bad choices set before her.

Eveline’s contemplation of her past drives her to define what home is to her. Her notion of home in the present limits her options for action. Home for Eveline has been defined by actions that maintain the home economy. Her various housekeeping actions, like Wallace Stevens’s wilderness, sprawl around an empty space she defines as “Home!” (*Dubliners* 27). The first aspect that composes Eveline’s notion of home and her notion about herself is that of recurring actions and the time it takes to do such actions. Eveline, through free indirect expressions, refers to the all the “familiar objects which she had dusted” (*Dubliners* 27). She also thinks about the “invariable squabble for money” she would have with her father (*Dubliners* 28). The actions that run through her mind are invested with temporal significance. When she thinks about the objects she dusted, she thinks about how she had dusted them “for so many years”; she carried out these duties “once a week” (*Dubliners* 27). Attaching objects to actions and time, the
text conveys that Eveline looks “around the room reviewing all its familiar objects”—suggesting that actions and time need a purpose to drive towards when helping to define a sense of place. As the wilderness in Stevens’s poem, these disparate actions are “no longer wild”; they take on meaning as repeated actions that organize themselves around the “gray and bare” jar.

The Secret Cause

The role repetition plays in defining one’s sense of place and of potentialities is explored in an apparently factual but suspect anecdote Gabriel Conroy shares in “The Dead.” This story serves as a kind of parable to Joyce’s reader illustrating paralysis as an unexamined habit. Holding an audience of family and friends in his hand, Gabriel divulges the tale of a horse named Johnny who belonged to Patrick Morkan, Gabriel’s grandfather. The horse was diligently worked in the service of his owner’s glue or starch mill. A cyclical course defined the horse’s actions on the job. The horse’s prescribed routine, going “round and round,” provides a perfect picture of the well-worn paths Eveline has trod since her mother’s death. The horse gets caught circling a hegemonic symbol of forceful domination: the statue of William of Orange. As Morkan’s horse’s work defines his choices in the public sphere, causing him to circle an object representing Imperial power, Eveline turns to “objects” that are “familiar” as another means of defining place and self (Dubliners 27). The idea of being “divided” from these objects that she knows through work and time unsettles her ontological orientation. She thinks about how “she had never dreamed of being divided” from the objects she knows so well (Dubliners 27).

A specific object that helps maintain a particular relation between Eveline and her family is a religious text mounted to the wall. On the wall is a “coloured print of the promises made to Blessed Margaret Mary Alacoque” (Dubliners 27). This physical object among other things
helps define Eveline’s sense of place, but at a textual level, this object also contributes to a notion of how the home is defined. Before she was made a saint in 1920, Pope Pius IX had declared the seventeenth century nun Margaret Mary Alacoque “blessed” in 1864. This nun founded the devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. In a divine visitation, she had been given twelve promises to those faithful to Christ including the “graces necessary for their state of life,” “peace in their families,” “an assured refuge,” “abundant blessings on all their undertakings,” “tepid souls” becoming “fervent,” “fervent souls” rising to “great perfection,” and blessings on “homes where the image” of Christ’s heart is “exposed and honored” (Norton Dubliners 219). Eveline’s perspective wanders from observing what was once a field where she had played, the room that she is presently in, the objects that surround her, the picture of the priest in Australia, and the “promises made to Blessed Margaret Mary Alacoque” (Dubliners 26-27). None of these things offer consolation; the “refuge” her devotion to home labor offers is insubstantial. Yet, she is also able to argue with herself that “she had shelter and food” and “those whom she had known all her life about her” (Dubliners 28). But of course, the secret cause the text reveals seems to once again point the reader to the sentiment that though the system is designed in such a way as to assure Eveline’s social choice, if she had been truly liberated, she would have gone with Frank. This would seem to suggest that this shift in focus once again grounds the story’s reader to comprehend a moral universe that does not necessarily work in the favor of Eveline.

Eveline’s ability to imagine life with Frank is also confined in a limited moral universe. When Eveline weighs “each side of the question” regarding whether she should leave her home or not, she imagines a future that speaks less to her particular relationship with Frank. She imagines a “new home,” a home that is signified by the possessive pronoun “her” (Dubliners 28). This “new home” exists in a “distant unknown country” where things “would not be like
that” (*Dubliners* 28). What is assumed to be a romance with Frank is not her motivating drive towards this undefined place. She makes a space in her mind for the possibility of being married, but this notion of marriage is less to do with romance and more to do with the realization of a dignified existence: “People would treat her with respect then. She would not be treated as her mother had been” (*Dubliners* 28). She does emphatically refer to being “married,” and her elevating of this possible event is treated as a novelty to what she can expect in life; she thinks to herself: “Then she would be married—she Eveline” (*Dubliners* 28). This designation has more to do with her taking on the identity of a married woman, the social and political role that she would assume, but her naiveté prevents her from seeing this mobilization as a real possibility. It remains in the realm of fancy.

When she recalls Frank’s courtship of her, she muses on how at first she was just excited “to have a fellow,” but eventually this general excitement became casually particular: “she had begun to like him” (*Dubliners* 29). When Eveline resolves to leave, her decision is ultimately based on a vague hope in finding a different kind of life; the particulars of romance are not her primary concern: “Frank would save her. He would give her life, perhaps love too. But she wanted to live. Why should she be unhappy? She had a right to happiness. Frank would take her in his arms, fold her in his arms. He would save her” (*Dubliners* 31). The vagueness with which Eveline imagines an alternative situation to that of her current position in Irish society suggests that the character’s desire is not yet fully codified in the social and economic systems governing moral agency in Ireland. Though this desire does not apparently lead to a change in Eveline’s life, her imagination of a different situation, in Antonio Gramsci’s estimation, is a part of the “history of the subaltern,” a history where every “trace of autonomous initiative is…of inestimable value” (*Prison Notebooks* 21). In contrast with Eveline’s unarticulated,
deterritorialized desire, Polly Mooney in “The Boarding House,” like Eveline, a young woman of nineteen, expresses desires that are territorialized and codified. The story’s narrator refers to Polly’s “wise innocence,” a disposition that allows the young woman to have a sophisticated reading of her mother’s strategic “tolerance” of Polly’s apparent affair with a lodger, Bob Doran (Penguin Dubliners 64). When Polly’s mother is conferencing with Bob, Polly, expressing territorialized desire, waits “patiently, almost cheerfully, without alarm, her memories gradually giving place to hopes and visions of her future” (Penguin Dubliners 68). At this point, the narrative shares qualities with Eveline’s own deliberative process, her musing on the “new home” she would have with Frank. But Eveline’s dreams of the future are less tied to the particularities of her involvement with Frank. Frank is merely a reference point, an object that helps her to think beyond her present and historical economic and social situation. It is possible to even suggest that her developing feelings for Frank are symptomatic, a means of specifying a more profound search, what Jameson would refer to as her developing awareness of her participation in a “collective struggle to wrest a realm of Freedom from a realm of Necessity” (Jameson 19). Polly’s musing, on the other hand, is contained within the structures of the economic and social present she inhabits. Potential marriage to Bob Doran allows her to entertain “hopes and visions” that are “so intricate that she no longer saw the white pillows on which her gaze was fixed” (Penguin Dubliners 68); her notion of expectation is fixed and allows her to practically assume a role made available to her in her economic and social situation.

Eveline’s desire, however, is not entirely functional in the order established by the colonial regime of production. The moment where she is about to leave with Frank manifests a point of departure from the system. The boat blows a “long mournful whistle into the mist” (Dubliners 31, emphasis added). Paul Muldoon delves deep into layers of literary tradition that
inform generations of Irish writing. One such gem his work reveals is that of the féth fiáda, a “magic mist or veil” that obscures faeries or “gentle folk” (To Ireland, I 7). This “mist” will help the faeries evade unexpected company in the form of animals; Muldoon highlights that “deer” are a common form these creatures take to avoid human contact (To Ireland, I 7). In this final passage from “Eveline,” Joyce chooses to use the word “mist” and the word “animal,” bringing to mind this magic mist Muldoon brings to readers’ attention. This mist or veil in Irish myth indicates the existence of a “parallel universe,” always another possibility, “an escape clause, a kind of psychological trapdoor, to a people from under whose feet the rug is constantly being pulled” (To Ireland, I 7). Eveline has spent the entire story thinking about how many rugs have been pulled from under her, revealing just how absent any foundation in her life is. Her childhood friends have moved away, the empty lot where she and her friends used to play has been sold and developed by a “man from Belfast,” indicating a shift from a Catholic to a Protestant neighborhood. All that is left of her family is an unstable patriarch and a brother who decorates churches.

Her pull away from Frank is once again another slippage, suggesting “some deep-seated sense of liminality that was, and is, central to the Irish psyche” (To Ireland, I 8). It’s almost as if Eveline, by making the movement of leaving Ireland, arrives at some more profound revelation about contingency. Seamus Heaney’s poem “The Peninsula” concludes on a similar note. After representing the speaker’s drive “all round the peninsula,” he can now “uncode all landscapes” by knowing this maxim: “things founded clean on their own shapes, / Water and ground in their extremity” (Heaney 51). Eveline becomes aware of the contingency of so-called foundations undergirding her life. In all likelihood, the rest of her story is not so good. She has a flash of insight that is ultimately overwhelming—“All the seas of the world tumbled about her heart.”
She imagines being surrounded by chaotic waters, and “Amid the seas,” she sends a “cry of anguish” (*Dubliners* 31). After this moment, she once again shapes her sense of reality; she gives Frank a penetrating look that indicates an extreme, unfeeling resolve (*Dubliners* 32).

Though I will not make the claim that Eveline leaves the station heading to what the reader would imagine to be a better life, I would like to close this chapter meditating on the significance of her moment of paralysis. Stephen Dedalus famously refers to history as “a nightmare from which [he is] trying to awake” (*Ulysses* 43). He makes this statement after teaching a lesson to his students about the fall of Pyrrhus in Hellenistic Greece; he muses on the perspective his students have of history, how simplified it was being subject to mythologizing in the present. He worries that, as presented in history, events seem to obscure what was at one point a choice among “infinite possibilities” that action in one direction “ousted” (*Ulysses* 30). Yet, he leaves open the possibility that what “came to pass” was the only thing possible. He then cryptically refers to a “weaver of the wind,” a line that could be brought into dialogue with Wallace Stevens’s notion of the firecat arranging the “clattering” bucks, “To the right, to the left” (*Stevens* 3). Though Eveline briefly heeds the dynamic motion of an adaptable, pragmatic way of ordering reality, she is likely to once again construct “Home!” organized by disparate, repeated actions. Still, the discerning reader of *Dubliners* sees the limits of the system that her actions, whether staying home or fleeing with Frank reinforce.
CHAPTER 5
“A LITTLE CLOUD”: ALWAYS A CERTAIN SOMETHING

In “A Little Cloud,” the “cloud” as form points the rain as content, but the metaphoric title of the story displaces the meaning behind the cloud. The cloud becomes a signifier of “something.” What Chandler and Gallaher want is ill defined. Chandler wants the trappings of a literary life, but he does not actively read or write. Gallaher is a physical manifestation of emptiness. He is all form and no content. The narrator, articulating Chandler’s admiring thoughts, says, “There was always a certain…something in Ignatius Gallaher” (Dubliners 59, emphasis added). In Joyce’s aesthetic reflections on Aristotle’s Poetics, he inveighs against art that stirs up desire or loathing, desire urging an audience to go to something and loathing making the audience want to flee something (Critical 102).

Little Chandler spends time entertaining his ideal version of his friend Gallaher. Chandler imagines Gallaher will show himself as one who has “got on,” a positive condition that implicitly states Chandler has not (Dubliners 57). This imagined form of Gallaher gives off a “traveled air” as he wears his “well-cut tweed suit” while holding forth in a “fearless accent” (Dubliners 57). He will reveal himself to be everything Chandler is not. In the course of fantasizing about his approaching meeting with Gallaher, he also experiences his surroundings in such a way that they become readily packaged moments perfect to be the subjects of his unwritten poems. His surroundings remain as part of an ideological structure that shapes his subjectivity as someone functional to the mechanisms of empire. These moments culminate in a particular “poetic moment,” an example of one of Joyce’s attempts to represent “improper art,” or representations that reinforce paralysis.
Chandler, when confronted with a glimpse of the reality Joyce as a writer is trying to present to his audience, is only able to see it in terms of a romantic distortion. His habitual observation of his city outside of his window at work is an example of how he generalizes the particular, noticing the “untidy nurses and decrepit old men” lying about on public benches (*Dubliners* 57). He sees these nameless, realistic figures showered with “kindly golden dust” from the sun. This sentimentalizing of the sun’s qualities has the effect of reducing the people in Chandler’s aesthetic experience to “moving figures” among whom the unreal sun’s rays flicker (*Dubliners* 57). This inveterate practice is punctuated by the release of “children who [run] screaming along the gravel paths” (*Dubliners* 57). These passing moments, he aestheticizes, transmuting them into a notion of “life” that is defined as a “gentle melancholy” (*Dubliners* 57).

Like the boy in “The Sisters,” Chandler has learned to love surfaces. Chandler’s engagement with literature indicates how he interacts with identity and culture as a commodity, understood in light of the value brought to light in an imperial context. He avoids taking in the sensations emanated by Henrietta Street, walking “swiftly” past a “horde of grimy children” populating the street (*Dubliners* 58). The wind, having “grown sharp,” takes on a real quality that disrupts his aestheticizing of his surroundings (*Dubliners* 58). He gives these surroundings “no thought” (*Dubliners* 58). He remembers the books of poetry delicately placed, rarely touched, on his shelves at home (*Dubliners* 58-9). Though he does not read the individual books, they take on a meaning he reads. They are an unexhausted potential. He sees the possibility of producing a book as a means of escaping the paralysis he sees himself as caught in. He wonders if getting a book published will make him wealthy enough to “live bravely like Gallaher” (*Dubliners* 68). When he “cautiously” opens a volume of Byron lying on the table before him, he extracts the value of a cultural commodity, excluding any other possibilities the text might have outside of
this narrow circle. In the text he is delighted at “How melancholy it was!” (Dubliners 68). Just as he habitually converts the real lives of those that walk about outside of his office window into an aesthetic object that conforms to his concept of melancholy, he, similarly, derives a commodity value from Byron’s poetic form and language choices, the “rhythm of the verse.” This commodified melancholy becomes synonymous with his “soul”; Chandler wondering if he is able to “write like that, express the melancholy of his soul in verse” (Dubliners 68). When Chandler crosses the Grattan Bridge, he sees “poor stunted houses”; these physical objects take on a different, anthropomorphized form in his imagination. These dilapidated structures become “a band of tramps huddled together” (Dubliners 59). He extends this metaphor to ridiculous proportions, going into detail about the houses as tramps and “their old coats covered with dust and soot” and their “stupefied” reaction to the “panorama of sunset,” anticipating “the first chill of night to bid them arise, shake themselves and begone” (Dubliners 59). He entertains the possibility that this absurd and unwieldy riffing on a simple sight of old houses can become a published poem and that Gallaher is the man to get it in print. He expresses uncertainty about the originality of this “poetic moment,” but it “touched him” and gives birth to an “infant hope” (Dubliners 59-60). In this sense, Chandler’s aspirations are functional to a colonial regime of production.

His aim is to reduce the complexity of his experience to signify different marketable “moods and impressions” that hit “the Celtic note” (Dubliners 60). His imagination of a marketplace of tradable moods infiltrates his own individual subjectivity. He tries to “weigh his soul to see if it [is] a poet’s soul”; he tests his soul to see if it fits the categories of a marketable interiority universalized in the commodity marketplace (Dubliners 60). He imagines his poetic voice only as it is received by the London press (Dubliners 60). It becomes clear that this is how
Chandler is accustomed to experiencing reality. On his way to Corliss’s to meet Gallaher, the narrator makes it clear to his reader that Chandler is aware of the “value” of the café’s “name” (*Dubliners* 58). Chandler then assesses the experience in commodified terms, the narrator noting how Chandler “knew that people went there after the theatre to eat oysters and drink liqueurs” (*Dubliners* 58). It becomes clear that the knowledge of a place such as Corliss’s is traded in an exchange of swapped stories about an inaccessible culture in Dublin: Chandler “had heard that the waiters there spoke French and German” (*Dubliners* 58). The idea of waiters speaking a foreign language takes on the status of a commodity. As the Reverend Flynn’s Latin lessons impressed his pupil, the mere notion of waiters speaking a foreign language suggests to Chandler something important.

Chandler’s engagement with aesthetic experiences outside of his office window and admiring his unapproachable bookshelf ostentatiously suggest the classic example of how paralysis has been read in Joyce criticism. When the feeling of “gentle melancholy” comes upon him while looking at the “moving figures” outside of his window, he is embalmed in the feeling of “how useless it was to struggle against fortune” (*Dubliners* 57). And when he looks at his books that he would like to read to himself and to his wife, a “shyness had always held him back” (*Dubliners* 58). When he heads to meet Gallaher, he begins to experience what Joyce describes in his aesthetic theory as loathing, a feeling in art that urges the audience from something. Chandler moves at a faster pace, and for once, “in his life he [feels] himself superior to the people he [passes]” (59).
Gallaher’s Provincial Cosmopolitanism

Ignatius Gallaher, rather than commodifying his subjectivity, as Chandler does, commodifies his experiences, his awareness of his actions as transgressive in the context of his provincial home city—“dear dirty Dublin” (*Dubliners* 61). He imagines that, differing from Chandler’s small-mindedness, he is, rather, an expansive, cosmopolitan man, aware of an authentic world his childhood friend is safely sheltered from. But, just as Chandler trades in rumors about Cosmopolitan havens in his locality, the wait staff rumored to speak “French and German,” Gallaher is even more deluded. He mixes apparent first-hand experience of the “spicy bits” in places like Paris and the vices most exemplified by Berlin with stories his friends have told him (*Dubliners* 63-4). His first-hand stories are enhanced by text-book accounts of orgies taking place in secret at “religious houses on the continent,” sensationalist stories that were standard fare among anti-Catholic and anti-clerical circles in the nineteenth century (*Dubliners* 64). In his own way, Gallaher trades in hearsay, and he uses his actual experiences to validate what are only rumors.

Gallaher romanticizes Dublin, using it as a false sense of stability, securing his identity in the midst of a life so hectic and fragmented in London and on the Continent. He reifies Dublin, framing the city in a paralytic state of timeless inertia. It exists apart from the flux and contingency he finds in a busy, ephemeral place like London and the life of a journalist. Little Chandler himself exists in a safe, timeless space. Gallaher assuredly says Chandler “[hasn’t] changed an atom,” that he is, in fact, the “very same person” (*Dubliners* 62).

The anchoring example is Chandler’s exegesis of a photograph of his wife. He, recalling recent squabbles with her over domestic affairs, attributes a meaning to her face as represented in the photograph. The meaning he believes he has decoded is further inscribed by his recent
encounter with his old chum Gallaher whose fancy-free approach to an eventual marriage to a rich Jewess of his choosing generates a fantasy image of an unknown, sensual other in the Jewess’s dark eyes, a vision Chandler uses to frame how he reads his wife’s photographed face.

Little Chandler, looking at a photograph of his wife, reacts to the aporia opened by an instance of otherness (the “composure of the eyes”) by aestheticizing it. He resolves the contradiction, absorbing it into a fantasy of sensuality signified by the “dark Oriental eyes” of the “rich Jewesses” he imagines populate Gallaher’s sphere. Instead of allowing the aporia opened by the photograph to instigate a desire for moral agency at an individual and social level, he settles back into the role of a colonized subject whose desires are shaped by his masters, whether they be friends like Gallaher, nationalist ideology, or the hierarchical imperative moral system in Roman Catholicism. Though the camera is able to “capture fleeting and secret images whose shock effect paralyzes the associative mechanisms in the beholder,” Chandler does not, at this point, allow the photograph to unsettle his status quo (Photography 294).

Gallaher has based his life on desire, aimlessly bouncing around bastions of high culture—London, Paris, Berlin—casually referring to a mix of experience and hearsay regarding these places’ moral depravity. He has left Dublin to find something having been thought of as having something about him. Little Chandler desires “something” other than his current life; he wants to inhabit the form of a poet’s life as he imagines it. He sees this existence in London. At the same time, he is loathing the gritty reality that he sees on Henrietta Street (Dubliners 58).
CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION: A SYMBOL THAT CONTAINS NOTHING IN “THE DEAD”

Gabriel Conroy’s idea of success is a communication exchange that fits his concept of the other. He does not want to have his world “discomposed”; rather, he tries to work to “dispel” the “gloom” that he feels when his concept of the world is breached (Dubliners 154-5). When Gabriel is speaking with Lily, he is “discomposed by the girl’s bitter and sudden retort” (Dubliners 155). He is taken aback by her ability to disrupt his attempt to limit their conversation to the confines of rhetoric and totality. He asks her about education and then about her plans to marry. In reply, she indicates that the men she is around are all style with no substance, all form without content: “The men that is now is only all palaver and what they can get out of you” (Dubliners 154). This unexpected “retort” had “cast a gloom over him”; he tries to “dispel” it by “arranging his cuffs and the bows of his tie” (Dubliners 155). He interprets this moment of communication as a failure, and it informs his expectations of trying to communicate with the partygoers in his eventual speech. He questions whether he should use a quote from Robert Browning in fear that he “would fail with them just as he had failed” with Lily (Dubliners 155).

Though his mother is deceased, her photograph confronts him with yet another form of alterity that disrupts his orientation. Ultimately, this moment of confrontation with his mother as the other disrupts his situation with Gretta; he remembers how his mother dismissed Gretta as “country cute” (Dubliners 162). Aunt Kate had referred to Gabriel’s mother as the “brains carrier” in the family (Dubliners 162). This descriptor for his mother implies that she was the family’s content. In her absence, the family is all form with absent content. Kate and Julia had been “proud of their serious and matronly sister” (Dubliners 162). Though she is deceased, Gabriel’s mother is present as a photograph. The scene representing her photograph details
multiple layers of mediation. Representing one layer of mediation, his mother has a book open; adding another layer, she is pointing out something on the page to Gabriel’s brother Constantine. The photograph itself is mediated by facing a “pierglass” (Dubliners 162). Gabriel remembers her as the one to whom to give “thanks” for his “degree in the royal university” (Dubliners 162). In a sense, Gabriel has possibly inherited a condescending view of young womanhood or the undereducated from his mother; his tendency to talk down to his audience is his desire to make the unknown fit his preconceived categories.

When Gabriel is assigned to dance with Miss Ivors, he becomes aware that she knows he has been writing book reviews in the “West Briton” Daily Express. His defense for doing so reveals his affinity for the feelings Little Chandler has about books as fetishized objects—“He loved to feel the covers and turn over the pages of newly printed books” (Dubliners 163). He writes reviews for the Express out of love for books as a commodity, not so much out of love of literature or art. As he recognizes, he cannot excuse his writing for the Express based on an ideology that “literature was above politics.” He also wants to avoid making this claim because he knows he does not believe it; he knows that Miss Ivors, being his equal in education, will not buy such a shallow sentiment (Dubliners 163). His knowledge that Miss Ivors is he equal makes him uncomfortable when her behavior towards him is unexpectedly cross. Like his conversation with the, assumedly, less-educated Lily, this exchange haunts Gabriel. What is worse, he feels she did her best to make their cross exchange public: “But she had no right to call him a west Briton before people, even in joke. She had tried to make him ridiculous before people…” (Dubliners 165, emphasis added). In an attempt to alienate her in his perspective, he refers to her in his thoughts as an “enthusiast” (Dubliners 165). By classifying her as such, he makes an effort to distance himself from behavior he did not expect. His attempt to target Miss Ivors in his
speech, referring to “the new very serious and hypereducated generation” implicates himself just as it does Miss Ivors. He is also attempting to establish too clean of a dichotomy between the more homely preceding generation defined by its “hospitality,” “humour,” and “humanity,” condescendingly dismissing as quaint the generation to which he appears to give honor (Dubliners 167). This places Gabriel in the position of someone such as Gallaher in “A Little Cloud.”

Gabriel, like the boy in “Araby,” lingers in “a dark part of the hall” of the Misses Morkan’s dwelling; “gazing up the staircase,” he sees Gretta, his wife. Before he realizes that it is her, he sees a “woman…in the shadow.” He is unable to see her face. As he stands still, “in the gloom of the hall,” he thinks about the aesthetic effect his vision of his wife as an unknown, mysterious woman has on him; he thinks: “There was a grace and mystery in her attitude as if she were a symbol of something” (Dubliners 182). The narrator presents a self-aware process of the aestheticization of the other, of attempting to turn nothing into something. Gretta is a symbol of “something” as opposed to the chalice the Reverend Flynn carries that “contained nothing.” This depiction of aestheticization allows the reader to see its allure. The moment is inarguably haunting and beautiful from a reader’s perspective, but it is also urging the reader towards a critical awareness of the violence Gabriel is casually effecting in subordinating the feminine other to instrumental ends. In Gabriel’s perspective, the feminine form is only accepted as it serves to represent something, as it is translated into logocentric terms.


