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Abstract


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JOYCE’S CITY: HISTORY, POLITICS, AND LIFE IN “DUBLINERS,”

Jack Morgan’s elegant and enlightening study of *Dubliners* is the most recent in what appears to be a historicist turn in the study of James Joyce’s early book of short stories. Looking back on the two decades that immediately preceded and followed the turn of the twenty-first century, one is struck by the extent to which the study of *Dubliners* was dominated by ethical and narratological readings. R. B. Kershner’s *Joyce, Bakhtin and Popular Literature* stressed both the performative nature of Joyce’s stories and the extent to which his characters were caught within conflicting sets of discourses and ideologies.¹ In 1993, Garry M. Leonard’s *Reading “Dubliners” Again* proposed a psychanalytic perspective which focused on stylistic shifts in the stories.² The subtitle of Tanja Vesala-Varttala’s 1999 study of *Dubliners*, *Ethical Probing of Reading, Narrative and Textuality* speaks for itself.³ Finally, Margot Norris’s *Suspicious Readings* locates those strategies of conflict and occlusion in Joyce’s stories that oblige the narrator, and even the reader, to play an interpretive role which frequently includes an ethical dimension.⁴ In contrast to an earlier generation of formalist readings, what all of these works have in common is the interpretation of an interplay between narrative form and the ethical implications of Joyce’s fiction. Such interpretations have their roots in a long tradition; we learn lessons and make judgments about stories based on what we are told or not told about what fictional persons do or do not do. What changes through the passing of time are the ethical frameworks of the lessons we draw and the judgments we make.

In contrast to this preoccupation with ethical interpretations, what I am calling the turn toward historicism takes the view that the deepest understanding of Joyce’s first published work of fiction is to be found in the dense network of its allusions to the cultural and historical contexts of Ireland at the beginning of the twentieth century. In keeping with this view, Frank Shovlin’s *Journey Westward: Joyce, “Dubliners” and the Literary Revival* takes up such apparently marginal subjects as the role of whiskey distilleries in the Irish economy or the survival of Jacobitism into Joyce’s day.⁵ Morgan works the same way, proposing what the anthropologist Clifford Geertz would call a “thick description” of a seemingly minor incident or ritual in order to show how its meanings resonate throughout the world Joyce evokes.⁶ This kind of work has the virtue of bringing new and relevant historical knowledge to bear on Joyce’s work.
Two different readings of Joyce’s story “Clay” offer a striking contrast between the ethical and historicist interpretations outlined above. Norris argues that Maria, the middle-aged, unmarried woman at the center of the story, is a victim of the class and gender ideologies that stigmatize her as an “old maid” (140), even if the narrator fails to acknowledge this designation. When, in the Hallow Eve divination game toward the end of the story, the blindfolded Maria chooses the saucer with “a soft wet substance” (D 105), Norris finds that a trick has been played on her, one which unjustly reaffirms her lowly status as an object of ridicule.

In reading the same episode, Morgan is more interested in the nature of the Hallow Eve game as a vestige of pagan Irish folklore. He finds the real issue to be the attempt to reappropriate and sanitize the ritual in the name of bourgeois Catholic values. At the time when the story takes place, the augury game included saucers containing a ring, a prayer book, water, or clay—respectively symbolic of expected marriage, a religious vocation, fertility, and death. Morgan points out that the prayer book must be a late addition to the ancient Celtic practice (94). When Mrs. Donnelly scolds the next-door girls for having imported garden dirt for the death option, her attitude reflects the efforts of the Church “to denature pagan beliefs by mixing them with Christian pieties” (94). Like the modern Halloween, the Irish Hallow Eve is no longer to be haunted by synecdoches of death such as the earth where we are buried. When Maria is finally given the prayer book in place of the clay, the Church’s co-optation of traditional Irish culture is marked in even such indirect ways.

Morgan’s historical research similarly provides the deep background for the incident in “The Dead” where Kate Morkan complains of the recent papal edict banning women, including her sister Julia, from the choirs of the Church. Pope Pius X’s motu proprio, issued only weeks before the dinner recounted in Joyce’s story, “proclaimed Gregorian chant to be the music of the Mass” while also defining choral performance as part of the liturgy, in which women could not participate (136). Morgan skillfully puts this measure into a series of overlapping contexts: the newly counter-Reformation tendencies of the Church at the end of the nineteenth century, the conversion of prominent Anglican intellectuals to the Catholic Church, and the taste for the beauty of boys and boys’ voices made manifest in the fin-de-siècle aestheticism of figures like Walter Pater and Oscar Wilde. Morgan suggests that a “crypto-sexual dimension” of choir reform is implied when Aunt Kate ignores the putatively doctrinal or aesthetic grounds of the ruling (140), instead casting it as a rejection of women in favor of the “little whipper-snappers of boys” who have suddenly been put above them (D 194).

The affair is given a specifically Dublin context through the figure
of Edward Martyn, a co-founder of the Irish Literary Theatre with Lady Gregory and W. B. Yeats in 1899. Shortly after this, Martyn began an editorial campaign in The Leader to rid the Catholic churches of Dublin of female singers on aesthetic grounds among others. He is quoted as saying that “only boys had that ‘short-lived,’ ‘evanescent’ beauty in their voices” (141). In 1903, such convictions led Martyn to establish the all-boy Palestrina Choir at St. Mary’s Pro-Cathedral in Dublin. In connection with Martyn’s appreciation of boys’ voices, Morgan points out the “misogyny and the rapturous sense of boys are evident in his writings,” while adding, “for Martyn, and many with similarly ambivalent sensibilities, the plainchant liturgical paradigm mediated a contradictory tension, providing the beautiful boy within a spiritual pageant—in a context at once religiously austere and subtly eroticized” (149).

“Queer Choirs” is Morgan’s title for the chapter devoted to these matters. Whatever the degree of irony in the title, he is at pains to defend the Church’s welcoming of homosexual converts as well as the interest of these converts in finding meaning and spiritual fulfillment within the Church. In a closing remark that moves the subject beyond the polemics of sexual politics, Morgan adds that issues of the singing voice were taken as seriously by Joyce as by Martyn, and that it is the remembered voice of the seventeen-year-old Michael Furey, “such a gentle boy” in Gretta’s memory (D 222), that calls so plaintively from the realm of the dead.

Morgan’s research into the role of the Church in everyday Irish life has the virtue of enlarging the frame of reference in which stories like “Clay” and “The Dead” are customarily read. In an English literary tradition dominated by Protestant writers, the Catholic Church was something of a Gothic horror show, ranging from the ghastly forms of penance practiced in Ann Radcliffe’s The Mysteries of Udolpho to the monastic murders of Matthew Lewis’s The Monk. Morgan shows how Joyce’s own Catholic Gothicism disturbs the history of the genre by displacing it from its roots in a Protestant, British tradition.

A recurring feature of the Gothic is that of bodily decay accompanied by mental degeneration. Such is the figure of Father Flynn in “The Sisters,” with his trembling hand and discolored teeth, laughing softly to himself in the confession box—“a beautiful corpse” in the end (D 15). Morgan notes how, in contrast to earlier forms of the Gothic, Joyce evokes the horror of the corpse or the paralyzed body “without benefit of transcendent or metaphysical assumptions” (41). Nonetheless, as the boy in the story contemplates the word “paralysis,” “it takes on demonic agency, something working its sinister agenda upon the priest (41, D 9).

The Gothic note struck at the very beginning of Joyce’s work recurs throughout his later fiction, from the terrible retreat sermons of A
Portrait to Stephen’s macabre visions of his dead mother in Ulysses. If in “The Sisters,” Gothic motifs suggest some unspeakable transgression, however, they do not always retain that malevolent power in later works. Morgan points out that “The Dead” is a comparatively genteel ghost story, where the remembered dead are more romantic and valiant than frightening. “The Sisters,” by contrast, is “nocturnal and disturbingly death-informed throughout” (42). Morgan’s larger point is that in Joyce’s hands, the Gothic becomes more than a matter of dramatic machinery and décor. Rather, it is a matter of the psychic disturbance brought on by the haunting presence of death itself, which threatens the dissolution of mind and body. Morgan cites Emily Dickinson: “The Brain, within its Groove/Runs evenly—and true—/ But let a Splinter swerve” (39). The allusion is to a stroke or to mental derangement, either of which might apply to Father Flynn; Dickinson’s image, like Joyce’s story, is more frightening because it is more real than the lurid sensationalism of the Gothic so amusingly satirized in Jane Austen’s Northanger Abbey.

Joyce’s City also includes original studies on the fair motif in “Araby,” on “Two Gallants” as an example of the Irish tradition of the mock-indecent joke, on the psychological parallels between the principal characters of “A Little Cloud” and “A Painful Case,” and on the sources of “The Dead” in the stories of Washington Irving.

To the already substantial critical tradition of Dubliners, Morgan contributes a welcome addition, made all the more so for being written with a clarity and refinement of style increasingly rare in academic literary criticism.

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NOTES

3 Tanja Vesala-Varttala, Sympathy and Joyce’s “Dubliners”: Ethical Probing of Reading, Narrative, and Textuality (Tampere, Finland: Tampere Univ. Press, 1999).

8 Morgan quotes from Adrian Frazier’s “Queering the Irish Renaissance: The Masculinities of Moore, Martyn, and Yeats,” Gender and Sexuality in Modern Ireland, ed. Anthony Bradley and Maryann Gialanella Valiulus (Amherst: Univ. of Massachusetts Press, 1997), p. 27.


