

**GABEBASHING IN JOYCE COUNTRY:**

Some MsReadings of *The Dead*

by

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## GABEBASHING IN JOYCE COUNTRY

In 1986 Thomas Staley rebuked Warren Beck for his ‘blissful ignorance’ of previous scholarship in Beck’s book on **Dubliners** published in 1969.<sup>1</sup> This accusation was not quite accurate, as a look at Beck’s references will show, but Beck was the last to have the courage or good luck to be able to ignore much of what had been written on **Dubliners** up to his time, though it was not a huge quantity. Thirty years later that stream of publications has become a raging torrent, much of it very muddied indeed. I have not read all the criticism of **Dubliners**, but I have read a good deal of what has been written about ‘The Dead’, the story that has received the most comment, and much of this writing strikes me as stunningly wrongheaded, and getting more rather than less so in recent years.

Perhaps the most striking examples of this writing come from the only kind of new criticism that sets out to be truly critical of Joyce -- feminist criticism. Even a writer as accomplished and astute as Brenda Maddox can say something as unlikely as this without apparent fear of contradiction: ‘Feminist criticism has detected a strong undercurrent that Joyce seems to have built into his text, confident of its discovery by a future generation which valued women more highly.’<sup>2</sup> The mixed metaphor gives some indication of the confusion of thought here. The unlikeliness of that thought should have been apparent, and has been to those feminists who accuse him with almost equal unlikeliness of profound misogyny. Approaching fiction with a pre-determined attitude of either sort

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<sup>1</sup> In Staley’s overview of published criticism of **Dubliners** in R.J.Finneran’s **Anglo-Irish Literature: A Review of Research** (NY, 1986)

<sup>2</sup> Introduction to the Bantam edition of **Dubliners** (NY, 1989).

leads to some very misguided criticism of ‘The Dead’; innocent of wit, warmth or magnanimity, much of this criticism insists on making the text serve the ends of the already committed reader, no matter how roughly that text has to be treated in the process. If the text needs to be expanded, contracted, stretched, twisted, impacted or exploded to yield a particular meaning, there are and should be few restraining bonds. What counts is the thesis, the pious lesson. Indeed, the secularly moralistic, righteous ardor of some critics is quite striking, and is uncommonly noticeable in criticisms of ‘The Dead’. And most especially in attacks upon the character of Gabriel Conroy.

Bashing Gabriel is a particularly popular critical pastime among feminists, male and female. Some of the denunciations are almost comical in their puritanical vehemence, demanding from the fictional character a quality of heroic virtue attained by few, even academics. The poor man **is** imperfect, and so, although he is not a serious candidate for canonization, the devil's advocates hurl at him such a volume and concentration of vitriol that anyone within critical distance risks a burn. If Gabriel makes small talk with a servant girl he has known for years, he is a seducer out of a gothic novel, richly deserving the bitter taunt she throws in his direction. If he tips her, he is not giving her a Christmas present, but buying her somehow, silencing her or compensating her for his own sins or those of other men. According to at least one, he is raping her ! If Gabriel does not notice his wife dancing, he is neglectful; if he does, he has her under surveillance, subjecting her to the patriarchal male gaze, policing her to show his power. If he watches her with admiration as she stands silently and partly in shadow on a stair, he has turned her into an object. If, like most other normal men, on occasion he has a surge of sexual desire for his wife, he has committed some crime called mate rape against the woman who has vowed to be his life's sexual partner, or if that accusation is so clearly preposterous, **near** mate rape. In fact, this rather harmless fictional character becomes the embodiment of every male sin; he does not have a single redeeming vice.

Such criticism is in striking contrast to the two pages devoted to ‘The Dead’ in 1928 by Rebecca West, an early, forceful and gifted feminist. Her brief commentary on ‘The

Dead' in **The Strange Necessity**<sup>3</sup> perhaps overstated Gabriel's weaknesses too, but while she caught the imperfections, she missed the criminality now attributed to him; his faults did not include 'date rape' or 'mate rape', nor was his present to Lily a simoniacal or silencing bribe but, more sensibly, 'the right Christmas box.' She read the end as signifying something both more chilling and more noble than it is, perhaps. Her assessment, a little quirky, sometimes tart, contrasts with some modern arraignments whose hallmark is a lack of objectivity or the pretense of it, a dizzying overstatement, a moral righteousness that confuses criticism with prosecution.

'The Dead' is probably not a tract for the times nor an exemplum to be used by secular preachers denouncing the wickedness of male lust, nor yet a virtuous denunciation of 'spiritual paralysis', real or imaginary. It is not a brief for prosecutors looking for a conviction. It is a chapter in a love story that does not end with the 'romantic' deaths of both lovers in their prime, nor with the prince and his Cinderella marrying and living happily ever after. It is a love story that begins for us on an evening in the life of Romeo and Juliet ten years *after* Romeo has married his 'country cute' Juliet against parental opposition, that common obstacle to the smooth course of true young love. It is an episode that glances, as most romantic stories do not, at some of the common irritants that ruffle the *married* love which follows the wedding where most romances end: annoyances that include tiresome social obligations and physical fatigue; the burden, even the loving burden, of children; small abrasions from rude colleagues and snotty servants, nostalgia for what might have been; even the minor infidelity of unmalicious sexual refusal by a spouse. It is perhaps the only kind of love story that Joyce was capable of writing; an elegy for the impossibility of perfect human intimacy even between a man and the wife he admires and desires; an understated lament for the impossibility of complete harmony among colleagues and fellow citizens, of perfect understanding between sexes and classes, between parent and child, between Ireland and England, the wronged and the wrongdoer, between all the living and the dead.

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<sup>3</sup> Rebecca West, **The Strange Necessity** (NY, 1928), 16-18.

But from a fairly early stage academic critics have looked at ‘The Dead’ as the last in a series of edged and barbed tales, and some academic critics have felt entitled to be at least patronizingly condescending towards Gabriel, a fellow academic, showing some of the same qualities in their criticism that they accuse him of. Gabespanking (the earlier and milder version of Gabebashing) seems to have started at least as long ago as books like Magalaner and Kain’s **Joyce** (1956), Kenner’s **Dublin’s Joyce** (1956) and Tindall’s **Guide** (1959)<sup>4</sup> which, being early in the field, can still be heard loudly in the commentary of those who would perhaps be reluctant to admit their indebtedness. Some never seem to have gotten beyond the wide generalities of Tindall’s introduction to **Dubliners**, with its infatuation for ‘paralysis’ and the idea of Joyce as a moral and spiritual critic of the people of his native city, never pausing to question his qualifications for that high calling. In more recent years the sport of assaulting the harmless central character of the story has become more competitive, almost a critical requirement, with the other inevitable prerequisite that each contribution become, if possible, more vehement and extreme in order to register on the assault scale. Why a fictional character who is a writer and teacher rather like most of his critics should be the object of such vehement attack is not clear except perhaps to psychologists.

After the fairly moderate cavils of Kain, Kenner and Tindall the animus against Gabriel continued,<sup>5</sup> indeed became more strident, and has turned in more recent years into severe gabebashing which has in large part been frankly misandrist. It can be well represented by a group of articles and chapters that pour down upon Gabriel’s rather unoffending head an acid rain of critical invective. In some of these commentaries, from which I will

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<sup>4</sup> M. Magalaner & R. Kain, **Joyce: The Man, the Work, the Reputation** (NY, 1956); Hugh Kenner, **Dublin’s Joyce** (Bloomington, Indiana 1956, repr. NY, 1987), and W.Y. Tindall, **Reader’s Guide to James Joyce** (NY, 1959).

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Edward Brandabur: **A Scrupulous Meanness** (Chicago, 1971) and Homer O. Brown, **James Joyce’s Early Fiction** (Hamden, Conn. 1972 & 1976). Brown, unlike many who follow him, does remind us that Joyce feared there might be justice in the hypothetical charge by Dublin newspapers that ‘the stories are a caricature of Dublin life,’ and reminds us also of Joyce’s admission that there was a good deal that was attractive about his native city that he had not written about in the earlier stories.

quote fairly extensively, biased literary criticism turns to sexist literary abuse. The increased volume and vehemence of these later critics sometimes confuses criticism ( literary) with unscrupulous prosecution ( legal) where the object is to persuade the jury to find someone guilty at any cost to probability. It equates criticism with indictment, denunciation, detraction, disparagement, vilification.

A subsection of an essay by Suzette Henke,<sup>6</sup> packed with strong accusations against Gabriel and vehement praise of Gretta, is the shortest of the articles I wish to look at. Gabriel is an ‘arrogant Irish pedant;’ whose somewhat fussy solicitude about the health of his wife and children is recast thus from the earlier expression of the same idea in Magalaner and Kain (96) : ‘he compulsively protects his family from the hazards of nature by insistent recourse to galoshes, green shades, dumbbells and stirabout. A minion of modern civilization, he betrays a deep-seated fear of exposure to the perilous fluidity of life’ (23). ‘The rabid patriot [Ivors] is rhetorically transformed into a heckling rabbit, hopping about in irrational frenzy’ (24). This last is the critic’s rhetorical transformation of Gabriel’s natural and rather mild irritation at Ivors for the unprovoked taunt generated by her nationalist enthusiasm. Having learned that Gabriel ‘successfully represses both instinct and passion, love and hate ... he can relate neither to heroic violence nor to erotic obsession’ ( p. 23), we are nevertheless told a little later that in the hotel bedroom he ‘is on the brink of erotic frenzy,’ and wants to do unspeakable things to his wife like ‘crush’ her in his arms in neurotic ‘conjugal appropriation’ (p. 25). There is much more like this about Gabriel. By contrast we hear of the ‘meteoric passion’ of the safely dead Michael Furey who had ‘given the ultimate gift of himself’ and thus ‘became a Christ of love, taking permanent possession of Gretta's heart.’ Gretta in turn ‘succeeds in endowing Ireland with heroic grandeur. ... Gretta proves to be the true ‘artist’ of the tale ... As mother and lover to both Michael and Gabriel, Gretta emerges as the first of Joyce’s contemporary heroines ...’ (27). The influence of such ecstatic criticism is indicated by the fact that part of that last striking sentence (‘mother and lover to Michael’) has been

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<sup>6</sup> ‘Sex-Role Stereotypes in “Dubliners” ’ pt. v, in **International Perspectives on James Joyce** ed Gottlieb Geiser (Troy, NY, 1986), 22-31.

developed with remarkable Freudian creativity in a more recent article by Robert Spoo.<sup>7</sup>

Further accusations have appeared in a widely-cited article by Ruth Bauerle.<sup>8</sup> Again, I have to be content with selections. Before you have read a full paragraph of Bauerle's paper you are informed without argument or demonstration of Gabriel's 'spiritual decay' and his 'vengefulness', of Gretta's 'centrality' to the story, all missed or underestimated by 'earlier students'. In the second paragraph you are told that 'the story has a central theme: the death of marital affection between May and John Stanislaus Joyce', a notion also missed by all previous scholars.

Because Lily's father is the caretaker, the house in Ussher's Island is somehow 'her father's hall' like the residence of the Lass of Aughrim in one version of the ballad of that name. Because Gabriel 'thrusts' a coin into the reluctant hand of Lily, he has committed rape of some kind: 'a thrusting clash of wills is as much rape as the pokking of corks from warmed stout bottles is a salute over Parnell's grave in Ivy Day' (116). Gabriel is 'rapacious towards Molly Ivors' (116) and 'rapacious towards his aunts'. If he does not notice that his wife is dancing, 'he ignores her publicly.' He allows her no 'voice of her own', though she speaks quite a bit, and in the bedroom has one of the longest stretches of speech that we hear in the story. 'Scarcely a woman has encountered Gabriel without being disdained, overruled or interrupted' (117) although the text plainly says that it is his aunts and Gretta who join in amused mockery of **him**, and that it is Lily (perhaps unwittingly) and Ivors (deliberately) who insult him.

As the party is breaking up, he admires the graceful stance of his wife on the stairs and thinks he would love to paint her in that pose. This passage is presented thus by Bauerle: 'Gabriel .... perceives Gretta across a vast human distance as "A woman standing on the

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<sup>7</sup> 'Uncanny Returns in "The Dead" : Ibsenian Intertexts and the Estranged Infant' in **Joyce: The Return of the Repressed**, ed. Susan Friedman (Ithaca, 1993), pp. 89-113.

<sup>8</sup> 'Date Rape, Mate Rape: Liturgical Interpretation of the Dead,' an extraordinary title in itself. It appeared in a book of essays edited by B.K. Scott, **New Alliances in Joyce Studies** (Delaware, 1988).

stairs.” What a power of coldness lies in “A woman” ! ... She is an object for his self-gratification.’ (117). It is hard for normal people to see what is wrong with a man’s looking with pleasure and desire at his wife, generally a woman. And a quick look at the relevant paragraphs makes clear the plain narrative implication that Gabriel is also looking at his wife with admiration. Because Gabriel is anxious to get to the hotel where he will ‘crush her body against his, to overmaster her’, as the text puts it, the critic tells us: ‘he is contemplating mate rape’ and ‘though he controls his lust, the brutal impulse remains strong’ (118), all this in spite of ‘that power of coldness’ with which he allegedly looked at her a short time before. This accusatory commentary goes on for another page, expressing indignation on behalf of a character who has shown no signs of resentment herself.

Why are all readers expected to be scandalized at the sight of real sexual passion in anyone in Dublin, especially in any **man**? Probably because an acknowledgement that satisfying male sexual passion was a sign of normal healthy human life would spoil a favorite thesis of Joyce critics: that everyone in Dublin has paralysis, especially of the loins. But since the passion is indisputably there in the story, it has to be discredited if the thesis is to hold. Hence Michael Furey's dead passion becomes romantic, semi-divine love, but Gabriel’s live sexual arousal is real or contemplated rape.

At the end of this section of Bauerle’s article the critic leads us out of the text altogether into the unpleasant and intimate details of the marriage of John and May Joyce, confusing the possible miseries of that real marriage with the totally hypothetical miseries of the fictional marriage of the Conroys.

Bauerle’s determined over-reading of the text has been welcomed by other critics who have accepted its more immoderate assertions without objection or critical examination, and have clearly been encouraged to find varied over-aggressive readings of their own.

Margot Norris is probably the most prominent critic who has taken up and developed Bauerle’s ideas in a long chapter/article that tries to provide a kind of theoretical

justification for such readings.<sup>9</sup> Norris's opening paragraph is not so much a commentary as a manifesto which begins to decode 'the bourgeois agenda of the narrative voice' (p. 97). But already she changes the text to fit her *own* agenda. Her opening sentence makes the text say what the critic wants -- that 'Lily does not complain about her lot' and 'that is why she gets on so well with her mistresses'. The text (which she quotes) actually says 'But Lily seldom made a mistake in the orders so that she got on well with her three mistresses.' This is a small distortion, to be sure, but why is it necessary? Apparently to make the political point of a commentator who assures us that the whole narrative is political and 'politically oppressive' in some way; oppressed servants like Lily are valued only when they do not complain about their lot. Another small distortion: Even though both the critic and the text refer to the older women as Lily's 'mistresses', Norris also refers to their relationship as that of 'master /servant' -- again, by itself a small change that would not be worth notice outside an article with such a misandrist bias. We are also told that in the surface narrative Lily is 'decorative', a 'pleasing domestic fixture', and that 'it may have been the surprise of Lily's slim prettiness that inspired his [Gabriel's] lust' (112). The 'prettiness' has been slipped in there adroitly, an unnecessary speculation pointing to an unpleasant conjecture. The text invites neither.

Moreover, Lily's back-answer to Gabriel is 'silenced' (97) although Lily actually **speaks** her back-answer -- 'silenced by a gold coin' although **no** gold coin is mentioned in the scene. But there **is** such a coin in a totally different story in **Dubliners**. The gold might be a minor slip were it not for the fact that in that other story it has very ugly implications which are transferred illegitimately by the critic's sleight of hand to this

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<sup>9</sup> This influential essay has appeared three times in somewhat different forms: 'Who Killed Julia Morkan: The Gender Politics of Art in "The Dead"' first published in **Modern Fiction Studies** 1989, (page 479-503); then as chapter 5 in her book **Joyce's Web** (Austin, TX 1992) and finally as 'Not the Girl she Was at All: Women in The Dead' in Daniel Schwartz ed. **The Dead: Case Studies in Contemporary Criticism**, (NY, 1994). My references are to the chapter in **Joyce's Web**.

quite different story.<sup>10</sup>

Like other critics who posit some nastiness on Gabriel's part to Lily, Norris fails to cite a significant sentence later in the story which might suggest a modification of attitude: After Gabriel has done carving the goose 'A chorus of voices invited him to begin his own supper, and Lily came forward with three potatoes she had **reserved** for him..' A victim bearing gifts?

The distortions I have mentioned, especially in the opening paragraph of a paper, do not inspire confidence in the rest of this openly political interpretation. Towards the end of that paragraph comes this sentence: 'Joyce dramatizes in "The Dead" the politics of art's determination to conceal its own politically oppressive functions' (98). Whatever this puzzling statement means, its first amplification is that in Joyce's 'audible' or 'loud' text there is revealed a 'disruptive feminist countertext' (98). This will need to be demonstrated rather than just asserted, to satisfy the inevitable sceptical question: Is the feminist countertext Joyce's or the critic's?

While Bauerle found that the central theme was 'the death of marital affection between May and John Stanislaus Joyce', for Norris 'the central question of the text is: whether or not art serves a political function.'(98). The answer apparently is Yes. "The Dead" is ironic and internally self-critical' (100) with a 'feminist strategy' that the critic 'imputes to Joyce'(101). The 'narrative voice' has a 'bourgeois agenda' but it cannot prevent back-answers 'erupting in the text.' The story is a 'critique of bourgeois love and marriage' (105) like Ibsen's Doll's House which vies with the story at hand for

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<sup>10</sup> Norris is not the only critic to err in this way. See also P. Herring in 'James Joyce and Gift Exchange' in **The Languages of Joyce** ed Bosinelli et al (1992), p. 177. Vincent Cheng did it in his original essay, 'Empire and Patriarchy in "The Dead"' in **Joyce Studies Annual**, 1993, 16-42, but changed it in the relevant chapter of his book (see n. 18) after correction by Patrick Ledden, whose whole short corrective note is well worth reading (**JSA**, 1994, 202-7). For Leonard (1993) see later in my paper. The mythical gold coin reappears in a recent essay by J.P. Riquelme "The Dissolution of the Self and the Police" in **Rejoicing** ed. Rosa M.B. Bosinelli and H.F. Mosher (Lexington, Kentucky, 1998), 123-144.

central place at points in this commentary: ‘Not only is Gabriel Conroy Joyce’s Torvald Helmer, but the narration, the story itself as narrated, is Joyce’s Torvald Helmer’ (99). But ‘Joyce uses Browning’s “My Last Duchess” against Ibsen’s Doll’s House in a way that de-romanticizes Gabriel’s balcony scene with Gretta on the stair to reveal the oppressive sexual and aesthetic politics that propel it’ (100). Neither the Doll’s House nor the Browning poem is ever mentioned or clearly adverted to in the story. One has to conclude that it is not Joyce but the critic who is ‘using’ them ‘to reveal’ something.

‘Male discourse in tribute to female beauty must be scrutinized as symptom and mask of **murder** and **rape**’ (101) which may have some relevance to Browning’s (unmentioned) poem but not to Joyce’s story. There is a great deal else about ‘stifled, choked female outbursts,’ (99) ‘*brutal* gestures of occlusion, oppression and exploitation, *doubly brutal* because ... masked as love.’ (100). And a smaller if singularly unnecessary charge: in a reference to Gabriels’s earlier relationship with Gretta his perfectly normal lover’s motion of stroking a letter from his beloved is degraded to a ‘masturbatory gesture’ completed by the ‘caress’ of his own recollected words (102). Even Kate’s compliment to Gabriel’s mother, that she was the ‘brains *carrier*’ of the family, is turned into an italicized insult as it had been in an earlier paper by Adrienne Munich, of which more in a moment.<sup>11</sup>

Some separate entity called ‘the narrative,’ is accused of ‘repressing and discrediting’ the ‘more egregious sufferings and oppressions of the servant class’ (Norris, 111) including what one ‘could infer’ from the scene between Gabriel and Lily whose back answer is no longer stifled but ‘remarkable’. Bauerle’s charge of rape in this scene is reduced to flirtation or attempted seduction of Lily as a result of the ‘slim prettiness’, already mentioned. All of this is made to connect somehow with Gabriel’s later ‘romanticizing’ of Gretta, a ‘cynically hypocritical’ affair, and connected also with his self-reproach after his sexual refusal by his wife, a self-reproach which is ‘a cowardly cover for intentions

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<sup>11</sup> ‘Dear Dead Women: Or Why Gabriel Conroy Reviews Robert Browning’ p. 129 in New Alliances. (See n. 8 above). All emphases in this and following paragraphs are mine.

variously adulterous, exploitive, and insincere' (mid 112).<sup>12</sup>

For Bauerle, Gabriel is a borderline rapist; for Norris he is also a borderline psychotic like the murderous Duke of Ferrara in Browning's poem 'My Last Duchess', which she seems to know is the poem from which Gabriel was going to quote. In support of this idea she does not quote the Browning piece that Gabriel had in mind, but cites Adrienne Munich who has this suggestion: 'Imagining his wife as a picture on a wall may allude to 'My Last Duchess' in which the jealous Duke murders his wife into art. Gretta's final sleep also parodies the murder of a wife by a jealous proud husband, a diminishment of that proud (though possibly impotent) Italian Duke into this humbled Irish Conroy' (Munich, 132). Even diminished and humbled, 'Gabriel turns his wife into an eloquent picture. His title *Distant Music* recalls Browning's "A Tocatta of Galuppi's" in which the distance of eighteenth-century Venetian music evokes for the nineteenth-century English speaker a silent and faceless woman.' (132)<sup>13</sup>

I will leave without comment the breathtaking association between a mild-mannered, married schoolteacher, father of two children in Victorian Dublin, with a jealous proud, "possibly impotent" and murderous aristocratic madman of Renaissance Italy. But I must observe that all the young revelers in 'Tocatta' seem to be masked; at any rate one cannot find a faceless woman. One **can** find 'a lady, cheeks so round and lips so red / On her neck the small face buoyant.' No man in the poem is given that much by the truly

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<sup>12</sup> A similar charge of 'romanticizing' spills over to another male character: the critic suspects that Bartell D'Arcy has something sexual going with Miss O'Callaghan after D'Arcy has sung 'The Lass of Aughrim' (badly) as a 'serenade to seduction. We can only speculate about its success.' (113). Indeed.

<sup>13</sup> 13. In 1982 John Feeley, whom Munich has read, suggested with some plausibility, the 'Epilogue' to **Asolando**, Browning's last volume published in the year of his death 1889 (**James Joyce Quarterly** 20, 87-96). Thomas Rice in **JJQ** 30 (1992) p. 36 has suggested the preface to **Parleying** in which Browning has dialogues with the dead. Michael Webster has made a pretty good but properly tentative case for 'Abt Vogler', and does cite the lines he considers apt (**JJQ** 31, 1994, 552-7). None of these suggestions yields the psychotic malevolence in Gabriel necessary for the Ferrara thesis.

faceless narrator, but there are “millions” of kisses, difficult for the faceless. Citing the lines I have quoted, however, would not serve the thesis that the male writer, Joyce or Browning (or Gabriel), uses ‘the faceless woman [as] a symbol of his becoming an artist, a symbol of male poetics, a representation of male writing. It represents itself as an incomplete portrait, a violent decapitation, the deformation of woman to make art.’ (Munich, 133).<sup>14</sup>

Does any of this intemperate language relate to our story? As far as we know Gabriel makes no real pretence of being an artist of any kind. He seems content to be just a literary critic, like the rest of us.

Norris prefers Ferrara over Galuppi: Joyce sets up ‘an implicit analogy between Gabriel’s presentation of Gretta as a painting called *Distant Music* and Browning’s dramatic monologue in “My Last Duchess” ’(102). But, perhaps because the comparison is so obviously strained, it is dropped to make way for one with Ibsen’s **Dolls House** once more. Gabriel and Torvald, Gretta and Nora are equated almost point for point. Charges of ‘mate rape’ and ‘date rape’ are now borrowed from Bauerle with thanks. We learn about the ‘fatuity of husbands’ like Gabriel and Torvald who fantasize about their wives, and go ‘to *enormous* lengths to alienate [their wives] from their origins, isolate them from families and friends, and silence their memories and feelings.’ (104). Whatever

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<sup>14</sup> Munich’s essay is, if possible, an even more striking example than Norris’s of critical belief in and practice of the Rule of Hyperdense Intertextuality enunciated by Peter J. Rabinowitz: ‘any intertextual connection is interpretively relevant’ (143): ‘A Symbol of Something: Interpretive Vertigo in “The Dead” ’ in **James Joyce: The Dead**, ed. Daniel Schwartz (Case Studies in Contemporary Criticism), (NY, 1994), pp137-149.

‘Dear dead women’ of Munich’s title is a phrase from ‘Toccatà’. Perhaps it is partly the rollicking rhythm of the poem that causes her to miss or ignore the melancholy of the poem’s ‘Ubi Sunt’ contemplation of the mortality of **all** golden lads and girls who must as chimneysweepers come to dust, a meditation that might go with ‘The Dead’ in a way quite different from the one she chooses.

about Torvald, there seems to be no basis at all for this charge against Gabriel other than his reluctance to go himself to Galway, though he clearly says that his wife can go if she wants. His momentary grumpiness under the ill-bred pressure of Ivors seems to be the only ground for such extreme critical exaggeration.

Gabriel's anxieties for the health of his wife and children, a source of some amusement to his relatives in the story, are transformed into 'petty paternal tyrannies masked as solicitude and practiced on the bodies of wife and children' (104), though a moment later the critic agrees that Gretta is making a '*playful* joke about Gabriel's *solicitude*.' Can these two statements be reconciled? Moreover, Gretta and Nora 'bear *enormous* family responsibilities' and raise children 'with coercive interference from their fathers' and endure 'personal interdictions and domestic prohibitions, patronized in private and sometimes insulted in public.' (All p. 105). Again, whatever the truth of these statements as applied to Ibsen's play, they are a combination of speculation and exaggeration when applied to Joyce's short story. The love of Gabriel and Torvald for their wives is 'the perversity of uxorious bourgeois love,'— by contrast with the proletarian version of Michael Furey, perhaps, or the aristocratic version of Ferrara which it nevertheless manages to resemble. Lacan is cited to explain that even the sexual fidelity of the men is somehow a flaw; in both cases it is really **infidelity** which 'takes the form of transforming the wife herself into another woman' (107). The evidence for this in 'The Dead' is not cited. A similar kind of 'infidelity' is attributed to the women, but with obvious approval.

Gabriel, we hear, isn't the man Michael Fury was because he wants himself and his wife to wear goloshes in the rain of Dublin where it rains a lot. Real men don't wear goloshes. 'Gretta,' we are told with approval, 'reserves her desire, her recognition, for the virginal male', Michael Furey (107). Here the feminist cliché about the polarized male view of women — either virgin or whore — is unintentionally (and amusingly) mirrored: man is either the lustful brute Gabriel or the virgin Michael, both of them (arch)angels in a previous critical life. Gretta 'loves' her husband (perhaps), but only within the strict limits of the critic's quotation marks. 'she is grateful to him for his nurturance' (107)

is the most magnanimous gloss the critic can come up with on Gretta's own comment as she kisses her husband lightly: 'You are a very generous person, Gabriel.'

In Norris's reading of the story Gabriel is not the only oppressively brutal patriarchal father; there is also the Holy Father. The epigraph at the head of her article tells us 'a Joycean joke that isn't funny: Question: Who killed Julia Morkan? Answer: The pope.' Joycean? Joke?

Now, while ejecting or demoting aunt Julia from the choir in accordance with the papal decree is perhaps unfair and ungrateful, to call it 'theological and economic *violence*,' is excessive, whether Julia's service was remunerated or, more probably, voluntary and unpaid. We are invited 'to speculate that Julia Morkan is ... killed by *sex discrimination*, the victim of a species of *ecclesiastical murder*' (116). Our critic admits that she cannot 'prove' this extraordinary charge (the quotes around 'prove' are hers), but she pulls in a reference from a later work to prove it anyway, the musing by Bloom in Ulysses: 'Great song of Julia Morkan's. Kept her voice up to the very last.' (8.417-18). The inconvenient statement in 'The Dead' that Julia is still the leading soprano at Adam and Eve's is simply called a 'lie' (again with quotation marks, 116), and the discrepant statement that she has lost her place is preferred as the truth. But a plausible reconciliation of these conflicting statements in the story is available: although Julia is in remarkably good voice for her age, a number of places in the text suggest that she *is* getting a bit old and doddering, and so, if one must guess, it is more reasonable to guess that the papal decree, otherwise widely evaded or ignored, has been used as a convenient way to ease her out of her dominant position which she now has to share, perhaps with a younger soprano (Marion Tweedy Bloom, perhaps, or Kathleen Kearney, if we must import from elsewhere). Moreover, the critic takes no notice of another relevant statement in the text that might help to modify charges of 'ecclesiastical murder' and 'economic violence': Mary Jane still has 'the organ at Haddington Road' church, so that it is clear that papal decrees were taken sometimes with a pinch of salt. We are also told that 'the members of Julia's choir' came to the party. Not her 'old choir', or even

neutrally ‘the choir at Adam & Eve’s’. The implication is that she is still there in some capacity, a probability that Norris concedes without retracting her previous accusations: ‘if Julia still sings in the choir at all any more, it is certainly not as its lead soprano’ (116). This is called having it both ways.

Is there any evidence in the text for saying that Julia ‘sacrificed the promise of having her rare coloratura soprano make her a prima donna’ ? (116). Julia may indeed have belonged on the opera or concert stage, as the critic says, but there is no evidence that she was deprived of such fame by anything other than better competition and/or the lack of many such jobs even for gifted women in the Dublin of her day. Norris’s dubious assertion might not matter much by itself but it is not by itself; it is in an essay full, as we have seen, of such vehement and dubious statements. Saying that Julia Morkan is the ‘supreme artist’ at the party may well be true, but the overwrought fervency of the statement invites the ungallant retort that she did not have much competition. Bartell D’Arcy is the only other vocalist, and he is hoarse. If his hoarseness is diplomatic, a hostile critic could say that it is because he is afraid to compete with Julia; a more magnanimous reader might think it is because he is unwilling to fight his hostess for her moment in the sun at her own party.

This whole section about Julia Morkan (about five pages) is designed to make up for the fault of the writer or that other subject, the narrative, who got it wrong by putting Julia in the margins and not in her proper place at the center to which she is restored by the critic.

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<sup>15</sup> Putting in the center what the author has mistakenly placed on the margins appears to be a favored tactic with some feminist critics. I have seen it done with works as far apart as a fourteenth-century romance and a twentieth century novella. The title of the latest example I have seen in Joyce criticism clearly means to evoke an echo of the Norris essay: a paper called ‘Who Killed Mrs Sinico?’ by Mary L. Evans on ‘A Painful Case’. It deprives James Duffy of even the dubious honor of the chief responsibility for the death of Emily Sinico, and bestows it on her daughter Mary who makes a brief appearance in the courtroom where her account of her mother’s inebriety (two sentences) ‘moves me almost to tears and makes me find in Mary Sinico the proximate cause of her mother’s demise.’ (398). Mary, it appears, is in a ‘father-child conspiracy’ (400) with Captain Sinico and is ‘a facilitator of patriarchal arrangements’ (399) **Studies in Short Fiction** 32 (1995), 395-402.

‘Empire and Patriarchy in the Dead’ : As the title clearly indicates, this chapter in a book by Vincent Cheng <sup>16</sup> parallels or confuses the very real oppression of Ireland by England, which he has ably sketched in an earlier chapter, with the situations of some of the **Dubliners** stories and particularly with the ‘patriarchal’ behavior of Gabriel Conroy in his own household. Cheng feels the ‘canonized’ view in criticism of ‘The Dead’ is ‘sanitized’ because it did not, before Bauerle and Norris, accuse Gabriel of the more heinous sins mentioned above. Yet Cheng’s own reading, which includes the required ‘epiphany’ at the end, is surely as sentimental and sanitized as any canonical reading, in spite of the fashionable politically correct vocabulary. The closed-minded scholars who, he says, resisted the spoken version of his chapter were not perhaps as stone-aged as he suggests. It is right and enlightened to resist some notions. He himself has accepted without critical examination the articles by Bauerle and Norris, finding Bauerle’s paper ‘provocative’ in the admiring sense, and Norris’s chapter ‘compelling.’ Indeed, he seems to have contributed to the latter to judge by the acknowledgments in Norris’s book, and he adds little that is new except the highly dubious parallel between the British Empire and the Gabrielite male ego, a parallel heavily dependent on a doubtful pun on male and (Royal) Mail, ‘a phallogentric imperial institution’. Gabriel is rebuked for going to the only University available to him, and for cultural snobbery and patriarchal ‘hegemony’. Cheng accepts uncritically and with apparent eagerness the parallel between Gabriel and Browning’s Duke of Ferrara, and the arousal of Gabriel into ‘brutal lust’, ‘brutal’ being a word he uses even more often than Norris. He also welcomed Norris’s charge that Lily is bribed with a gold coin, though, under correction, he removed the gold. <sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Chapter 5 in **Joyce, Race and Empire** (NY, 1995).

<sup>17</sup> See note 10 above. Cheng (with some others) also has the odd notion that Lily is a full-grown woman in spite of the text which calls her ‘a slim, growing girl’ who has recently quit school and is probably no more than fourteen. According to Brenda Maddox, *Nora Barnacle* ‘went to school until she was twelve -- the usual leaving age at that time. ... Many of both sexes had less [education].’ *Nora* went to work at a convent in Galway as a portress, in charge of admitting visitors, that is, roughly the job that Lily has in this story. (**Nora**, Boston, 1988), p. 13. I assume that Cheng does not quite accept the charge that Gabriel has raped Lily; otherwise

For people who are so ascetically censorious about lust, it seems that a true lover has to be one free of passion, free of physical desire, a sexless anomaly, a celibate day dream without jouissance, a joycean nightmare -- he has to be dead. If 'traditional' readings of the story are sanitized, one is tempted to call this new view sterile and barren.

Cheng's chapter is, then, not so much a convincing new interpretation, as a summary collection of recent feminist pronouncements and of political ideas appropriated from the likes of Fanon and Gramsci, men whose writings are not always easily applied to the Ireland of the early twentieth century. In fact his chapter, like some of the other writing I have mentioned, reduces Joyce's short story to a tract, as it reduced another story, 'Two Gallants', in Cheng's own words, to a 'parable'.

In the chapter on "The Dead" in the book **Reading Dubliners Again: A Lacanian Perspective**<sup>18</sup> Garry Leonard, apparently a male feminist, has a variant of that favorite with critics, the scene between Gabriel and Lily, a version that seems to have been influenced by the critics already mentioned together with Jacques Lacan of his title: 'Gabriel terminates the exchange with Lily by thrusting [a gold coin] into her hands. This gesture is followed by his abrupt withdrawal. Their social intercourse is terminated in a manner that mimics sexual intercourse' (297). The square brackets around [a gold coin] are the critic's, so he *knows* that **he** is thrusting something into the text that is not Joyce's. What this mimics we are not told.

One might try comparing a later scene that is not commented on (is stifled?) by the critics who read so much into the the Lily/Gabriel scene. As the horsecab carrying the Conroys, D'Arcy and Miss Callaghan reached the hotel after the party 'Gabriel jumped out, and in spite of Bartell D'Arcy's protest, paid the driver. He gave the man a shilling over his fare.' Presumably he put the money into the driver's hand. It is not clear why the critics do not accuse Gabriel of silencing D'Arcy or of wishing to buy, seduce or rape

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pedophilia could be added to Gabriel's other offences.

<sup>18</sup> Syracuse, 1993.

the cabdriver with his tip. Nor are we told the significance of the actual sovereign, presumably a *real* gold coin, that Gabriel lent Freddy Malins nor the implications of its unexpected return by Freddy to Gabriel. Surely something really inventive could have been done with that by the same ingenuity that turned Gabriel's tipping into tugging.<sup>19</sup>

But the low point in Gabriel's critical afterlife surely comes with another article by Garry Leonard (1993). Here, among other things, the scene in which Gabriel looks at his wife on the stair and thinks he would like to paint her in a picture called "Distant Music" is paralleled to scenes in a set of erotic postcards with suggestive names (646-7); and in the course of a painfully detailed literary psychoanalysis, Gabriel's mildly erotic anticipatory mental picture of approaching his wife in their bedroom and his actual rather unassertive and failed advances to her are compared to another Victorian dirty postcard. The comparison is drawn out in detail, complete with pictures:

Figures 1 and 2, for example, show a mass-produced version of Gabriel's erotic reverie. In figure 1 a man has silently entered the woman's bathroom. He gazes upon her, observing with pleasure her [naked] body, while she conducts herself in a manner that indicates she is oblivious to his presence. Then after he announces himself, she turns, looks, and suddenly gives him an expression of welcome as she accepts his flowers. The man's hand, clutched to his heart, is the visual equivalent of Gabriel's ellipsis of ineffable satisfaction when he imagines Gretta turning to look at him with a look of passionate understanding. (618).

What he [Gabriel] wants is to be the erotic equivalent of her schoolmaster, teasing out the

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<sup>19</sup> A more recent article finds still another proof of Gabriel's guilt: his tipping of Lily is 'a gross violation of the etiquette of his class and period' as demonstrated by a quotation from the 14<sup>th</sup> edition of Emily Post, dated 1984 (**not** 1884). Moreover, 'sounds in *The Dead* [at least 345] are inextricably entwined with gender' (189) and 'It is even money that men will produce either harmony or noise; however, women are five times more likely to produce harmony than noise.' (186). D.L. Higdon, 'Gendered Discourse and the Structure of "The Dead"' in **Rejoicing**, 179-194 (See note 10).

implications of her body's involuntary confession. ... Gabriel is a would-be master of the erotic, a priest of love, taking the involuntary confessions of pleasure signaled by a woman's body as the discourse he wishes to interpret and optimize. (637)

Gabriel Conroy, in his own erotic reverie, is recognizable as the quintessential twentieth century "pornographic" hero because he raises the issue of Gretta's desire only to "discover" that she wants him to do whatever he feels he must. (641. The quotation marks are in the article)

The whole paragraph from which that last quotation is taken tries to parallel the Annunciation by the angel Gabriel to the Virgin Mary with pornography and eroticism. References to the Gabriel-Gretta bedroom scene and to pornography are intercalated in astonishing fashion with references to the Bible story, a comparison not merely thrown out as a casual aside but a notion reiterated in the paper several times with some insistence.<sup>20</sup>

To return to the story that *Joyce* wrote: does Gabriel find out anything profound about himself or his wife? He finds out that the song at the end of the party had reminded Gretta of a boyfriend she had many years ago that she cared for and pitied and still pities because he died so young, and they were fond of each other. Gretta has told her story of early love without apparent malicious desire for the sexual humiliation of her husband. She knows with the unconscious certainty born of her experience with this 'generous

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<sup>20</sup> All quotations are from "Power, Pornography and the Problems of Pleasure: The Semiotics of Desire and Commodity Culture in Joyce" in **JJQ** 30.4 & 31.1 (Special Double Issue, Summer / Fall 1993), 615-665. Lacan, Leonard's lens for **Dubliners**, had a naughty nineteenth-century picture of his own that was a naughty pun on his name. It had not, of course, been "mass-produced", but had been painted to somebody's order by an artist of note. Apparently you could view it only by turning quite literally into a peeping Tom. See Sarah Faunce, **Courbet Reconsidered** (Brooklyn: Brooklyn Museum and New Haven: Yale U.P., 1988), plate 66.

person' that he will hear her story without thinking it a deliberate slur, and will accept her present disinterest in sex without making a scene. She is right. He is a bit chagrined and disappointed because he wanted to make love, and finds that she is too preoccupied with a memory that does not include him. Humbling but not humiliating. First a little bit jealous, then a little too hard on himself for his disappointed desire, Gabriel is finally quite generous about the 'superiority' of Michael Furey's adolescent passion, real or imagined. His own offering is the undramatic but lasting gift of the faithful husband and father, a gift not fervently romantic or melodramatic like Michael Furey's passionate forlorn sacrifice, as depicted by Gretta. For her picture of Michael is a painting of sorts, and probably tinted by the nostalgia of twenty years. 'Distant Music'. In fact it is Gabriel who has gladly given his life for Gretta and who apparently intends to go on doing so.

The claim of some commentators about Gabriel's 'epiphany' in that last scene is dubiously positive; it is a redemptive operation performed by the sentimentally heroic critic on a text and a character that do not need critical redemption. *The Dead* is a peculiarly Joycean effort at a love story, as I have already suggested, an unsentimental narrative like the others in the book which it ends, a story which is predictably unlike most other love stories, but a love story nevertheless. It is not about anything as pious as resurrection or redemption. Joyce had little time for either, and Gabriel is not spiritually dead or lost, in spite of the assured assertions of virtuous critics.<sup>21</sup> He and his wife are quite alive and reasonably well in the fiction. That is why they are imperfect, why they experience misunderstanding and disappointment in each other. The dead probably have

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<sup>21</sup> T. Rice says in *JJQ* 30 (1992), p. 36, that Gabriel is incapable of love, that his little jab at Ivors 'condemns him to the Ptolomean punishment of death-in-life' of Dante's *Inferno*, for it is, we are assured, a mortal sin of failure in hospitality like that of others in that part of Dante's Hell. M. Reynolds democratically condemned most of the adults in *Dubliners* to one or another circle of Hell, but 'the final section of Dante's *Inferno* is reserved for traitors who are buried in the eternal cold of frozen Cocytus. ... All the aspects of betrayal can be found in the last story of *Dubliners*.' (*Joyce & Dante*, Princeton, 1981, p. 161). In 1993 Mitzi Brunsdale repeated Reynolds in a chapter that summed up with enthusiasm almost all the vices of Gabriel, Dublin and Ireland though, with unexpected restraint, charges of rape were omitted. (*James Joyce: A Study of the Short Fiction*, NY, 1993), pp. 36-46.

no misunderstanding or disappointment with each other. Joyce does **not** end his story with the melodramatic ending of Ibsen's **When We Dead Awaken** to which it has been compared. His characters do not march off singly or as a couple to unlikely 'romantic' death in an avalanche, gaining in the experience some spurious redemption. There are no avalanches in Ireland, certainly not in Joyce's Ireland.

In fact, his couple are underwhelmed. After a sexual disappointment, the man slips between the cold sheets of the bed where his wife has fallen asleep, while the snow falls gently outside. She has been tired, and sidetracked by nostalgia, so she has missed his desire and sexual need this time. Munich prefers to think of this as a wife inflicting a deserved 'sexual defeat' on her husband (127), and Norris likes the notion that Gretta 'takes revenge for a denied trip to Galway ... in a way that displaces her husband forever from the passionate center of her life' in favor of a wraith (99). Nothing in the story leads us to believe that Gretta would think of that as proportionate. Surely the most straightforward reading is more fair to Gretta: she has simply, like her husband, been less than the ever-perfect spouse — out of tiredness and preoccupation, out of momentary lack of awareness or generosity. Nothing irretrievably wrong about that, in the judgement of reasonable married people, who have to be more understanding than literary critics.

Why do so many of these critics prefer to read an elegiac story of imperfect love as a litany of dispraise, a hymn of hate? One recent striking exception is Michael Finney who has made the interesting suggestion that the end of the story is a muted rendition of love's old sweet song, that in fact, Gabriel and Gretta **do** make love after all, that her sleep and his last musings are the results of satisfied desire. His speculation is refreshingly affirmative and restorative.<sup>22</sup>

This tale takes place about 1900 in the Dublin of Gabriel and Gretta, not the Dublin of

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<sup>22</sup> 'Why Gretta Falls Asleep', **Studies in Short Fiction** 32 (1995), 475-81. It is suggestive of the state of Joyce criticism that Finney felt obliged to make this and other interesting suggestions in a lighthearted, tongue-in-cheek style.

Tristan and Isolde. The medievals had a romance, the moderns have a marriage, a loving marriage for the most part, it seems, with its occasional romantic interludes and occasional failures of communication, of perfect understanding, of total satisfaction. Even 'romantic' love is sometimes like that; married love often is. Joyce got that right even if some of his commentators do not want him to have done so. And even if Finney cannot be proved right, the love of the Conroys is shown to be alive and reasonably well, quite capable of flourishing again after the brief chill that has fallen on sexual passion, after the departure of the snow that falls on monuments to the great like Wellington and O'Connell, on the graves of the poor like Michael Furey in Oughterard, on the hotel where Gabriel and Gretta sleep, on the roof of every lover in the land, upon all the living and the dead.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Sceptics (and others who think that I may have excerpted unfairly) are urged to read in their totality at least the major pieces from which I have quoted. Only then perhaps will it be evident how much this criticism has already lost contact with the story under discussion.

