

**The Man in the Gap, The Critic in the Cavity:
Filling Breaks in *Dubliners* and *Ulysses***

by

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Near the end of the *Nausicaa* episode in *Ulysses* Bloom begins to write in the sand:

I

Some flatfoot tramp on it in the morning. Useless. Washed away.....

AM A

No room. Let it go.

Mr Bloom effaced the letters with his slow book. Hopeless thing sand.

13: 1258-1266

The unfinished sentence in bold letters is Joyce's most obvious invitation or challenge to the reader to fill in a blank, and some readers inevitable have been less willing than Bloom to let it go. All sorts of valid entries have been offered: I am A, (the first letter of the alphabet); I am a... Jew, ... a stick in the mud (p.359), ...a Cuckold, ..."a fool perhaps" (see 1098), ... a pimp (see 841, 914-15, 982 ff; 1010-12, 1098-99; 1275), etc.

There are probably more possibilities but none of those mentioned has serious consequence for (mis)interpretation of the fiction, and all or most are derived directly from the text.

By "omitting vital evidence or introducing ambiguity, Joyce designed his puzzles to be unsolvable" and did so from the very beginning of *Dubliners*. This is the reasonable thesis Phillip Herring sets out to demonstrate in **Joyce's Uncertainty Principle**.¹ Somewhat less judiciously Herring continues "Initially perhaps Joyce

¹ Princeton UP, 1987, Preface ix-x.

addressed the problem of validation in reading and interpretation to insure that only initiates could read his revolutionary message; later enigmas simply pleased and amused him.” (xi) The “revolutionary message for initiates” here is rather less sensible on the critic’s part, but the delight in enigmas is real enough if whimsical on Joyce’s. Robert Adams in his book **Surface and Symbol** also rightly adverts to “Joyce’s penchant for building his novel around a series of holes in the pattern of reader information” (p. 26)

Or to change the image, a *text*, etymologically related to *textile*, is something more or less loosely woven by an author. It is in fact a kind of net, which the generic schoolboy defined well enough as a lot of holes tied together with string. All narratives are such nets – holes tied together with string, more hole than string, more left out than put in, and a Joycean narrative is perhaps more loosely woven in places than most. Even **our** personal narratives are full of gaps, and have to be like that to be tolerable even to our friends. In a fictional narrative some holes need to be filled by the reader, as a friend will fill in gaps in our spoken factual narrative, because he knows us and much of our ambience. But the reader does not know the writer, and so, recognizing which of the holes need to be filled, which holes are significant, is one job of the reader who hopes to do good criticism. Bad criticism results when we fill gaps that do not need filling or when we fill with the wrong material gaps that do need filling. If we do either then we are engaged in idle speculation at best, or wild conjecture at worst, and often in re-writing the story.

The crucial questions, of course, are: What IS a hole or gap that needs filling, and what is appropriate filling? Spaces that do not need filling or cannot be filled with certainty or plausibility on the available evidence still tempt critics, sometimes irresistably. But Samuel Beckett refused to speculate about the offstage lives of characters even in his **own** work: when asked, he replied that he did not know anything about that. Some Joyce critics, by contrast, know a remarkable amount about the offpage lives of **his** characters.

In my college days we were all expected at least to know of a book called **The Childhood of Shakespeare's Heroines** and to feel properly superior to its author, although few of us had read it. Its title indicated well enough the kind of missing information that no intelligent reader was expected even to ask about. We were *required* to read an essay by L.C. Knights titled: "*How many children had Lady Macbeth?*" a title meant to stand for all those pointless and unanswerable questions about such "gaps" in Shakespeare's plays. In fact the author of the essay did not spend much time, as I remember, on dismissing a question that he felt did not really deserve much time. He was right, but the sound of his warning blast has become very faint.

"I will tell you all," said lying author Martha Clifford, who is, of course, just a pen name for Molly Bloom, who has a post office box in Dolphin's Barn like the one Henry Flower has in Westland Row for the game the Blooms play. The game is called "Post Office", an epistolary variant of an adolescent kissing game. The two players sometimes invite a third like Boylan, and then their correspondence becomes Co-Response, with letters sent direct to Eccles St.²

You may think (rightly) that this speculation about Post Office shows a certain lack of discretion on my part, but such indiscretions have become dangerously popular with some Joyce critics, who see (or create) narrative puzzles to be solved, gaps to be filled, and who respond with an enthusiasm characterized by a

² John Gordon's somewhat different take on the Leopold / Martha business is a good deal more learned, ingenious and well-argued than mine, not to mention more entertaining, and a good example of what a really ingenious gap-filling might be like, free of the bias that motivates so many others. See "Bloom at Woodstock: Henry Flower Power," **JJQ** 39 (2002), 821- 828.

recent sane critic as “Readerly Paranoia.”³ In it he rightly complains about excessive “gnomon hunting”, the finding of gaps that need to be filled only because the critic needs something to fill, which leads to the aforesaid readerly paranoia which also specializes, not so much in fabricating unnecessary inventions like Post Office, but in finding nastiness where none exists in the text. “Paranoia” is StJean’s stronger term for what I would call simply “over-interpretation.”

The reason that such over-readers often find gaps that don’t exist or do not need to be filled is that, as StJean rightly remarks, we all prefer definite resolutions over ambiguity, and clear explanations for questions that have no final solution, in spite of our declared love of readerly texts with multiple meanings. Moreover, such over-interpretation is probably inevitable when a text is subjected to the kind of microscopic examination that it was never intended to bear, even when composed by Joyce or Virgil, Shakespeare or Browning. Some time ago, for example I read a discussion of the word “Chrysostomos” as it occurs in the first chapter of *Ulysses*, and already long-forgotten sermons of St John Chrysostom were exhumed from the volumes of *Patrologia Graeca*, the implication being that Joyce knew them as thoroughly as the rest of us, and that with one word he could imply, without stating, a world of negative things about Mulligan that the critic wants to hear. Sailing to Byzantium for an indictment of Mulligan seems almost certainly misdirected. It is an over-interpretation, closing a non-existent gap with an very unlikely filling. It surely says enough about Stephen and his love of

³ **Shawn StJean** “Readerly Paranoia and Joyce’s Adolescence Stories” in **JJQ** 35.4/36.1 (Summer Fall 1998), 665-682. I heartily agree with much of what St Jean says about paranoid reading, and I strongly recommend his article.

Along with St Jean’s article another good antidote against over-reading and over-determined gap-filling, is a much older piece that clearly and unfortunately did not have the intended effect: Robert apRoberts’s “**Araby** and the Palimpsest of Criticism; or Through a Glass Eye Darkly” which was published in the **Antioch Review** in 1966, p. 469-89 in response to an earlier article on *Araby* in the same journal by Harry Stone. It is a good deal more vehement than mine in its response to the excessive, sometimes almost hysterical commentary that it refutes. (This has been reprinted in **Twentieth Century Criticism**, vol. 35,)

language that he thinks sardonically of the Greek name of a church father, St John Chrysostom, meaning “golden mouthed”, to describe the witty, but decidedly bawdy-mouthed, Greek spouting Oliver *StJohn* Gogarty Mulligan, who also happens to have gold fillings in his teeth. Had Stephen spoken the word aloud, Mulligan would have noted the wit.

Look at a few examples of obvious textual gaps in well known stories by Joyce and others:

- a. In Poe’s *Purloined Letter* we are not told what is in the letter that makes it so valuable.
- b. In Conrad’s *Secret Sharer* the older captain and his crew give separate accounts of the killing on the *Sephora*. Crucially, we are not told what they say. We get only Leggatt’s account.
- c. In **Ulysses** Bloom raises the question of how many lovers Molly Bloom has had, but does not answer it definitely. Gap or mystery?
- d. In *Clay* Maria omits the second verse of a song which the reader is expected to know. We are not told.

a. What are the contents of Poe’s *Purloined Letter*? This HAS to be left indefinite. The reader **must** speculate, but not all answers will do. Most critics have concluded sensibly that the letter contains some incriminating stuff about a sexual liaison or a political intrigue. That is about as much leeway as the reader has for speculation. Either of these fairly vague notions will serve nicely so that the story, which is primarily about detection and retrieval, can proceed.

b. In Conrad’s *Secret Sharer* three accounts of what happened on the **Sephora** are available and two are *deliberately* not given. Oddly, most critics seem not to have noticed the gaps, a critical myopism as surprising as it is important, and an example of the critical sin of NOT seeing a gap that IS there. For, even though

the gaps themselves cannot be filled by the reader, it is crucial to notice that they are there, and that the narrator draws attention to them but refuses to fill them. This fact centrally affects the reader's judgement of what may have happened on the **Sephora**, and our judgement of the Young Captain's response to Legatt, the admitted killer.

c. How many lovers has Molly Bloom had? They have been variously calculated as between one, Boylan, and all those mentioned in the mental list Bloom comes up with in *Ithaca*. No definite answer can be had. And speculation will affect the reader's view of Molly's character. For many years Bloom's list was considered to be a catalog of credible lovers of a promiscuous woman; of more recent years equally intelligent critics seem to prefer the idea that she has had only one, Blazes Boylan and for the first time that day. Two recent authors try to **disprove** Molly's promiscuity the way Stephen is reputed to prove another conundrum — by algebra,⁴ and of course this is what more recent critics want to hear, as against the earlier generation who took the tack that Molly was easy. Certainty is not available, but speculation is not that risky.

d. In *Clay*, what is the second verse that Maria omits from the song she sings? This is a gap that definitely needs filling. In class, students do ask, intuiting that a definite answer is available, and indeed no speculation is needed. Joyce was forcing the reader even of his own day to participate by requiring him to recall the second verse, well known at the time. More recent readers need to consult the notes which generally give the words, and the words do have significance to our view of Maria.

Derek Attridge has a whole very subtle article on another and different gap in *Clay*: the refusal of the narrator to name the soft wet substance in the saucer that Maria touches with her hand at the Halloween game. More subtly than most, Attridge goes through the range of possible and probable suggestions and comes

⁴ Ray Mines and R W Dasenbrock, "'Nought nowhere was never reached': Mathematics in *Ulysses*," in **JJQ**, 35 (1997), 25-36.

down definitely for none. Sensibly he says “our interpretative decisions are, like Maria’s, to some degree the product of our fears and desires” (48). Somewhat more dubiously he continues “this uncertain narrative forces us into interpretative acts that we can never fully justify, both leading us towards a hidden reference, and denying its possibility.” (48) The verb “tempts” might be better than “forces,” and the second half of his sentence is more disturbing, wanting it both ways, a weakness of some modern criticism including this part of Attridge’s excellent article, unless it simply means that there are those interpretations that follow our predilections, but which do not seriously change the import of the story, somewhat like the alternatives in *The Purloined Letter*. But, as his own last sentences put it: “there is sometimes a virtue in not interpreting ... We perhaps shouldn’t be too quick to fill Maria’s saucer with common-or-garden clay.” (51)

Some more examples, confined this time totally to gaps left by the careless author of **Dubliners** and **Ulysses**. Some can be filled definitely or vaguely, some not:

1. What precisely was Father Flynn’s problem before he had a stroke? It is unnecessary to know with precision. In fact it needs to be left vague. Speculation about **syphilis** has no basis whatever in the story and is singularly unlikely.⁵ It would mean that he has broken his vow of chastity, probably with a prostitute, and there is no suggestion of this in the story. The assignment of sin to characters in fiction, and specific sin at that, and the castigation of those characters for it, is hardly the business of literary criticism. The literary critic does not fit well into the role of theologian and / or prosecutor. In the case of Father Flynn the story gives ample evidence for some rather general idea of a breakdown under stress and that is quite sufficient. We do not even know or need to decide whether it is the *result* or the *cause* of the crucial dropping of the chalice. Either will do, and will not divert the attention of the reader into the inappropriate fields of theological or

⁵ For the concurring opinion of a physician see “Thrust Syphilis Down to Hell” by J. B. Lyons in **James Joyce: The Centennial Symposium** ed M Beja et al (U of Illinois P., Urbana Ill 1986), p.178: “the suggestion that Father Flynn’s illness was general paralysis of the insane is, to my mind unacceptable. It is a poor compliment to Joyce to imply a degree of incompetence which would provide a classic account of cerebral arteriosclerosis ... instead of the tragic features of GPI, a rapidly evolving dementia punctuated by convulsive attacks and paresis, inexorably progressive and seen in the middle aged rather than the elderly.”

medical diagnostics.

2. In the *Boarding House* what passed in the interview between Mrs Mooney and Doran? This gap is part of the very structure of the story. It is necessary to know the substance of the conversation but not the details. And the narrator has already given us the substance of Mrs Mooney's argument as he relates her thoughts **before** the interview, so details of the actual meeting are unnecessary, — would, indeed, be repetitive. Here is a gap the author has created *and* filled in a slightly unusual way.

3. In *Ulysses* has Bloom set up the situation with Boylan & Molly ? This is an inevitable question which the text provokes;⁶ but it does not give us enough information to answer definitely.

4. Does Boylan have a similar deal with Bob Doran to borrow Doran's wife from time to time ?

outside la maison Claire [on Grafton St], Blazes Boylan waylaid Jack Mooney's brother-in-law [i.e. Doran of Boarding House], humpy, tight, making for the liberties
(W. Rocks, 10: 984-5)

where, presumably Doran can get some of the sex he does not get at home, and which Polly Mooney Doran now possibly sells to Boylan and others :

In Grafton street Master Dignam saw a red flower in a toff's mouth [for the flower in Boylan's mouth see WR, 334] and a swell pair of kicks on him [see Sirens] and he listening to what the drunk [Doran] was telling him and grinning all the time.
(WR, 10: 1150-52).

These gaps may tantalize and invite guessing as to whether Polly is turning her

⁶ For hints of this possibility see e.g., *Proteus*, 3: 366-69); *Aeolus*: 513,591, plus 604-613. *Lestrygonians*: 587-93; *Scylla*: 9: 1207-09; *Sirens*: lines 496-8; 506-7, 1209; 1219, 1222. But see 914. *Nausicaa*: 841, 914-15, 982 & the two following paragraphs; also 1010-12, 1098-99, 1275 ff. In *Eumaeus* 198-9 & 1425ff. *Ithaca*: lines 868-70 & 2127-2142.

home into a bawdy house like her mother's boarding house, and some of the suspicions engendered by such hints are confirmed, if that is the right word, by the barfly in *Cyclops* in his scathing comments on Doran:

up in a shebeen in Bride street [in the Liberties] after closing time fornicating with two shawls ... then see him of a Sunday with his little concubine of a wife ... And the old prostitute of a mother procuring rooms to street couples (Cyclops 802-814)

Though Noman's comment has been called slander and calumny, we already know enough about these people from *The Boarding House* to make what he says quite credible. But we can have no *certainty* about any Boylan-Polly liaison, since any number of other possibilities could be read into Boylan's chat with Doran. But what we know of all the characters involved makes the encounter suggestive.⁷ To assert my speculative suspicions as more than that would, however, be bad criticism.

5. How does Bloom know Mrs Sinico well enough to go to her funeral, as we learn casually in *Hades* and in *Ithaca*? This mild mystery has given rise to people identifying the Man in the Mackintosh with Duffy or even Captain Sinico of *A Painful Case*. And the Mackintosh gaps have led to a variety of other responses, though the Macintosh business is more of a puzzle than a gap, and its various "solutions" do not matter much.

6. Why did Bloom give up being a travelling salesman? What did he sell, anyway? Was he a total flop? What on earth can this quintessential city boy ever have done for a cattle jobber? He would hardly know one end of a cow from the other. He mentions timber tongue, but you could have got that from the papers, like information about foot and mouth. Apart from that, does he ever say anything that reveals real knowledge about the cattle trade? Why does Joyce give him such

⁷ See also *Cyclops* 12: 398-402 and the whole passage 12: 800-816.

an unlikely occupation?

Do any of these “gaps” need filling? Probably not. We may complain a bit about Joyce’s sometimes casual dentistry, but it is more than serviceable.

7. Why isn’t Nelson’s column in *The Dead* when there is prominent mention of other political monuments placed strategically throughout *The Dead*: Wellington, King Billy, O’Connell, Trinity College? Nelson’s column was the most prominently placed political monument in Dublin. It is noticeably missing although it practically shouts for inclusion. It is almost outside the window of the Conroy’s room in the hotel and they had to pass it just before they got to the door, just as they had passed the statue of O’Connell further down the street. It would have fitted in very well with the pattern of other political monuments in *The Dead*, and with the political Parable of the Plums in **Ulysses**, in which it figures prominently.

But Joyce did not put it in the story, nor is there any real hint that the absence is meant to be noticed as significant by the reader, as it is with the Conrad story above. The critic, therefore, is not entitled to put it there, or to make its absence meaningful. He cannot fruitfully speculate about its absence from the pattern that the reader may discern in the placing of political monuments in that story.⁸ This is an example of a question that is NOT provoked by the text in the same way as some of the preceding. It is a gap that has been made totally by the reader, and it can lead to little more than idle speculation of the kind exhibited by the next example.

8. What is the quotation from Browning that Gabriel was going to use in *The Dead*? Speculation about this has led some critics to unfortunate results. The

⁸ On such a pattern see Michael Murphy’s paper “Political Memorials in the City of *The Dead*” in **Joyce and the City** ed by Michael Begnal (Syracuse U Press, 2002), 110-122. The article can be found on this website.

conclusion of more than one critic is that the omitted Browning quotation invites us seriously to think of Gabriel Conroy, the sedate bourgeois in late 19th century Dublin, as a man in the same league with the Renaissance psychotic, the Duke of Ferrara who “murders his wife into art”. No evidence is adduced from the Joyce story by these critics to justify the selection of Browning’s *My Last Duchess*, a choice that seems clearly dictated by an interpretation already made— that Gabriel is a very bad man indeed.⁹

9. In his book **James Joyce and the Art of Mediation**, David Weir has a chapter on “Gnomonic Narrative” in which he declares: “I am not interested at this point in ‘filling in the gaps’ or speculating about the nature of unnarrated events, as Kenner does in his reading of *Eveline* and parts of *Ulysses*.”¹⁰ (On Kenner see below in this paper p.xxxxx). Nevertheless in his discussion of *The Dead*, when Weir DOES decide to conjecture, to “fill the gaps in Gretta’s gnomonic narrative” (83), he says that “In fact, Gretta’s story seems to encourage us to participate along with Gabriel in speculating that what Gretta has not told him is

⁹ Other critics have suggested different Browning poems. See e.g. J. Feeley in **JJQ** 20 (1982), 87-96; T. Rice in **JJQ** (1992), 36; M. Webster in **JJQ** 31 (1994), 552-7. None of these alternative suggestions is motivated by a wish to read psychotic malevolence into Gabriel’s character.

¹⁰ On p.71 he takes gaps as the equivalent of the gnomon as it figures in the first **Dubliners** story but “In addressing the problem of omitted passages or the suspension of narrative at crucial plot junctures, I have in mind something rather different from the question of narrative silences that has been discussed by Hugh Kenner.”

The articles of Kenner referred to are *Molly’s Masterstroke* **JJQ** 10 (1972), 19-28) and *The Rhetoric of Silence* in **JJQ** 14 (1977), 382-394.” Herring, on the other hand, as he himself frankly says, took his lead from Kenner.

highly sexual in nature.” (p. 82).

On the contrary, this is one of the least tempting of conjectures; her silence invites no more speculation than, say, the question: Why was she living with her grandmother rather than her parents? or How did she meet Gabriel? or Why did Gabriel’s mother dislike her? How many children had Gretta Conroy? And so on pointlessly. Weir speculates, implausibly I think, that Gretta left Galway to go to a Dublin convent because she was “great with” Michael Furey’s child, that is, she came to a kind of convent reformatory, a Magdalen house. At the same time he concedes that “whether it [the pregnant phrase] echoes the phrase ‘great with child’ is hard to say.” But if it is hard to say, how does one say it so easily? In fact, it is not hard to say. There IS no connection. What the text actually states is “I was great with him [Michael]” (82). This is an Irishism not a biblicism. It means they were close, and it is singularly unlikely that it means anything else as well or instead.

The critic **could** have come up with a couple of other explanations for Gretta’s convent stay that would make more sense in the context of the characters of **this** story and of Ireland of that period: that Gretta was coming to a convent boarding school, and that the seven or eight months that he takes to be a period of “confinement”, would be roughly the school year. It is also possible but less likely that she was coming as a postulant in a conventual order of nuns where she would be allowed home for the summer, or as a novice who did not stay for the whole novitiate. Many girls at the time certainly did one or more of these.

If one insists that Weir’s reading is allowable, there seems no reason why we should not go on to speculate that Gretta was in a Catholic version of the *Dublin by Lamplight* laundry having her tea made by someone like Maria of *Clay*, as “fallen” girls did indeed work in such places, run by both Catholic and Protestant organizations. Gabriel met her there when picking up his laundered shirts. His

mother disliked Gretta because she was “c(o)untry cute”, a Galway girl gone astray but cute enough, that is, in its Irish meaning, cunning enough, to snare Gabriel. These “facts” are not mentioned in the gnomonic account, but we are free to complete the narrative parallelogram with them if we allow ourselves the same latitude as Weir and others. For, if we too write about this much-written-about story we must have something new to say, at least one new thing, the more outré the better, like my laundry suggestion.

It does not take much reflection to recognize how unlikely all this is; to reflect that Gabriel Conroy is not Corley or Doran, that Gretta is not Polly Mooney or the slavey of *Two Gallants*. It is singularly implausible that Gretta would have a bastard child running about somewhere whom Gabriel (or his hostile mother) would not know about. There is no sufficient reason to believe that Gretta cheated Gabriel in such a fashion by marrying with such a secret; it is more unlikely still that, if it were true, she would blurt it out at this point or that Gabriel would take it as calmly as he does. That her reverie about the past nowhere *mentions* the child is surely a stunning omission if she had really had a baby; it would be a gnomon of a size to change the whole tone and tilt of the story, and it would not help much if we made Michael the freudening ghost of her bastard child that died.

But the speculation that Gretta was “great with” Michael Furey’s bastard child is one degree less extreme than Robert Spoo’s idea that Gretta is “great with” Michael Furey *himself*, that *he* is somehow her baby! Spoo does have the text quite right but gives it a meaning utterly implausible.¹¹

11. Another set of “answers” that illustrate the hazards of responding to invited

¹¹ Spoo’s extraordinary article has a suitably striking title: “Uncanny Returns in *The Dead*: Ibsenian Intertexts and the Estranged Infant” in **Joyce, the Return of the Repressed** ed Susan Friedman (Ithaca, 1993), 89-113.

or invented questions involve “simony”. The word recurs in some critical writing about the Lily-Gabriel episode in *The Dead*, and even Fritz Senn, a man normally very careful about his words, has referred to the tip Gabriel gives to Lily in *The Dead* as simony.¹² But we can rule that out as critical inattention; no cleric and no ecclesiastical or spiritual office is involved. The word **simony**, crops up for the first (and only?) time in *The Sisters* where the boy has seen this odd word in the catechism, one of the three words that puzzle and obsess him and the critics. But Flynn is a “simoniac” only in the boy’s dream, and that is about as real as the priest confessing to the boy or the strange oriental setting. Simony is an ecclesiastical offence in which someone pays with material goods or promises in order to get an ecclesiastical office, whether he is fit for it or not. That is its only meaning, and since Flynn has never risen from the humble bottom rank of assistant priest in a Dublin parish, there is no adequate reason for a critic to accuse him of simony. Bernard Benstock would have us believe that “the word simony emerges from its safe existence in the catechism into the fearful world of the boy’s dream and beyond”(38). “Simony translates itself in Dubliners in secular terms more often than religious” (39); hence the gold coin bit in *Two Gallants* is “the extension of simony into everyday life in Dublin” (42). He also applies “simony” to the appropriation of the gold coin in *Two Gallants*, to the tip Gabriel gives to Lily, the prayer book the people at the party assign to Maria, the kind of churchy education the priest gives the boy, the two shillings the boy in *Araby* wants to spend on a present for the girl, the small Farrington boy’s offer to pray for his father if he refrains from beating him in *Counterparts*.¹³ The only one of these widely diverse situations that even remotely approaches the usual meaning of *simony* is the last, and that is inverting it. The rest twist the meaning of the word out of recognition. This limitless extension of a word’s meaning to suit ourselves

¹² In “Gnomon Inverted” in **ReJoycing** ed R.M.B. Bosinelli & H.F. Mosher: U P of Kentucky, (1998) pp.252-3.

¹³ **James Joyce** (New York: F. Ungar, 1985), pp. 32-33 and 38-43.

will not do. We are not in Wonderland with Alice where Humpty Dumpty can declare that a word has any meaning he wishes.¹⁴ This practice turns a book written with “scrupulous meanness” into one that we wish were written with spendthriftly largesse. **Dubliners** is not the later chapters of **Ulysses**, still less **Finnegans Wake**.

12. Much more productive of lazy or invidious speculation that affects the whole tenor of the story has been the related question: What is the coin that Gabriel gives to Lily in *The Dead*? An answer to this question was and is no more necessary than to the question How many children had Lady Macbeth? or, in this story, What happened to Pat Morkan and his wife, the parents of Mary Jane? Answers to these questions were unnecessary in the first place, and still are. But

¹⁴ `But "glory" doesn't mean "a nice knock-down argument",' Alice objected. `When *I* use a word,' Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, `it means just what I choose it to mean -- neither more nor less.'

`The question is,' said Alice, `whether you *can* make words mean so many different things.'

`The question is,' said Humpty Dumpty, `which is to be master -- that's all.'

`Alice was too much puzzled to say anything; so after a minute Humpty Dumpty began again. `They've a temper, some of them -- particularly verbs: they're the proudest -- adjectives you can do anything with, but not verbs -- however, *I* can manage the whole lot of them! Impenetrability! That's what *I* say!'

`Would you tell me please,' said Alice, `what that means?'

`Now you talk like a reasonable child,' said Humpty Dumpty, looking very much pleased. `I meant by "impenetrability" that we've had enough of that subject, and it would be just as well if you'd mention what you mean to do next, as I suppose you don't mean to stop here all the rest of your life.'

`That's a great deal to make one word mean,' Alice said in a thoughtful tone.

`When I make a word do a lot of work like that,' said Humpty Dumpty, `I always pay it extra.' [Simony?]

a kind of baneful wish-fulfillment has made some critics see Gabriel's tip to Lily either as the coin of simony we have already mentioned, or as a gold coin like the one in *Two Gallants*, with similar ugly implications, even though *The Dead* does NOT say Gabriel's coin is gold.¹⁵ Now, Gabriel tips the cabdriver too but we know *that* tip was a shilling (silver) because the text says so, and we know that a shilling tip was generous at that period, especially for such a short trip. There is no reason to think that he gave Lily **twenty times** that much, unless of course one is determined to ascribe to Gabriel the really nefarious motives that some critics do. Yet the same critics do not speculate on his generosity to the cabby. That might be too obviously grotesque. There is in fact no gap here, unless the reader makes it.

And consider these related gaps: At what point in the party does Freddy return a sovereign to Gabriel? Does he put it in his palm or slip it into his pocket? Where did Freddy get a sovereign anyway? Most critics sensibly also leave these questions alone as gaps that do not need filling, but inevitably someone had to try — imprudently: “It is even possible that Freddy wheedled the coin from Lily or that she gave it to him out of revulsion.” (192 f).¹⁶ Revulsion at what? If we **must** speculate, a more likely conjecture would be that he wheedled it out of his mother on a promise of sobriety, or she gave it to him as a reward for taking the pledge, which, of course, he promptly broke. But why speculate at all? Gabriel tells us that Freddy actually *made* money in an unlikely enterprise — opening and operating successfully a Christmas card shop. Freddy? Well, Gabriel seems to believe it, and there is not sufficient reason to deny it. Put it down to occasional casualness by Joyce about plot or character. That is speculation enough. No need

¹⁵ See Patrick Ledden's corrective note about the imaginary gold coin in *JSA* 1994, 202-207.

¹⁶ J W Jackson and B. McGinley, **James Joyce's Dubliners: An Illustrated Edition** NY: St Martin's 1993, Note 192 f.

for bad critical dentistry with another gold filling.

Consider, by contrast, the sensible commentary of two critics from 60 years ago on the scene that immediately follows in *The Dead*. Freddy Malins arrives at the party a little the worse for drink, and laughing at some story he's telling which Gabriel does not find funny. What is the story? Does it matter? The narrator certainly draws our attention to it. But we are not told directly what it said. Mr Browne calls Freddy's attention to "a disarray in his dress" which Freddy "mechanically adjusts. What part of Freddy's clothing is in out of order? It could be his collar, his lapel or his tie. But we are not told.

In 1944 Levin and Shattuck answered these questions with plausible bluntness and admirable brevity: "Freddy Malins ignores the ladies, is drunk, tells dirty stories to the men and wanders about with his fly open."¹⁷ The last part is the only really speculative bit, but it is a reasonable reading of the narrator's discreet phrasing, a responsible filling of gaps, if these authorial discretions can be called gaps. Sensibly, these critics do NOT go on to speculate as to why Freddy's fly is open. But wait. Someone will.

13. Unlike most of the gap-filling for *The Dead* by critics, Michael Finney's speculation about what happens at the end of the story is positive. He has found a genuine *physical* gap on the page and a time gap in the story about 1 ½ pages from the end. Just before the gap Gretta is crying and Gabriel has just let go of her hand. Then comes a two-line space in all editions, and immediately after the space: "She was fast asleep," with Gabriel undressed and in the bed beside her. Finney speculates that in that space Gabriel and Gretta have made love after all, a conjecture that may or may not persuade; but it is a reasonable speculation. For

¹⁷ *First Flight to Ithaca*, **Accent** 4 1944, p. 97, repr. in **Twentieth Century Lit Crit**, v. 35,(1990), p. 134. The long article is a detailed comparison of **Dubliners** with incidents in the **Odyssey**.

The Dead is, I agree, a peculiarly Joycean love story. Finney's suggestion seems much more appropriately Joycean than the usual "epiphany" that so many critics ascribe to the end.

14. Kenner

No doubt the most famous two or three conjectures about gaps in **Dubliners** and in **Ulysses** are those of Hugh Kenner whom we have already mentioned.¹⁸ In one of these Kenner intuited a scene between Poldy and Molly that occurs in the *Calypso* episode of **Ulysses** without being mentioned. In this hypothetical scene Bloom goes into the bedroom once more and learns from Molly that Boylan is coming at four o'clock, and says in response that he will oblige by staying out all day. Kenner's conjecture does try to fill a genuine gap and to answer the question that the text does provoke: When did Molly say that Boylan was coming "At four", as Bloom later says she did? Not in *our* hearing. But he *knows* the assigation is for four o'clock. (See especially *Sirens* lines 188, 309, 352, 392, and *Nausicaa*, 846-850).

Kenner's guess is ingenious, plausible and well argued. But there are alternatives. Here is one — Bloom knows the hour because he is intimate with the inner organs of beasts and fowls, like a soothsayer, and the oracle has spoken to him through her familiar, the cat, another "she." The cat has to repeat the message more than once, with variations, before Bloom gets it; oracles mostly speak obscurely. But eventually it becomes clear that *Mkgnao*, *Mrkgnao*, *Mrkrgnao* means "at four" in cat language (probably in rising impatient tones), and the "she" of "she said" is the cat. It is in acknowledgment of this information that Bloom makes his burnt offering of kidney to Calypso or Mercury or someone.¹⁹

¹⁸ See *n. 11*; also his **Ulysses**, pp. 48-9. Bernard Benstock called Kenner "The Man in the Gap", a phrase from *Cyclops* (12:186), which I have also borrowed for my title.

¹⁹ "The Italian translator of *Ulysses* claims that the consonantic structure of the cat's *Mrkrgnao* utterance is a covert evocation of Mercury." Fritz Senn in "Book of Many Turns" (p. 39) reprinted in **James Joyce's Ulysses: A Casebook** (Oxford: OUP 2004), pp. 33-54.

Is this as valid as Kenner's speculation? Probably not.

It would, however, be simpler than all of these speculations, and quite adequate, to think with Robert Martin Adams that even in modern dress Homer nods from time to time, that he fails on occasion to fill even those gaps that would be better filled by him.²⁰ Casual carpentry or dentistry again or loose weaving.

More interesting is Kenner's other well known speculation that in the **Dubliners** story *Eveline* Frank belies his name, is a fraud, and means to trap Eveline into white slavery in Liverpool, not take her to happiness in Buenos Aires. This speculation is more interesting because it adds or reveals a possible and intriguing dimension to the story. Since we know almost nothing of Frank (he appears in the story only as a narrative of Eveline's) the speculation neither contradicts nor corroborates anything we know of the character from the story. It is a genuine if unstated possibility and, of course, it complicates our understanding of the ending of the story but does not bend it out of shape unlike some of the speculations about Gabriel Conroy. Whether Frank is frank or fraudulent, *Eveline* is still a story of a girl caught in an impossible dilemma; it is *her* story, not his. But if we see Gabriel Conroy as a gold-dealing Corley, a seducer / rapist of Lily, and a malevolent Ferrara — all charges which we have seen being made, — any or all of these speculations contradict everything else we are told about this dependable and sedate citizen, including his wife's "You are a generous person, Gabriel." Hence such speculations make *The Dead* a seriously different story. Gabriel, who seemed to be a striking contrast to almost every other adult male in **Dubliners**, is just another scoundrel.

Eveline's choice at the end is not "cowardice" as it has been called, or "paralysis". In fact Eveline's anguished decision is more probably a deliberate moral choice: if

²⁰ People given to speculation should re-read Adams with some regularity. It is less fun than wild speculation but it might help to prevent one losing one's critical shirt on wild bets.

Frank is for real, her choice not to go with him is the near-certainty of a crown of thorns over the chance of a bridal veil. It should move us deeply. Kenner's notion of fraudulent Frank only turns ambivalence into polyvalence; it does not **impose** a view that Eveline barely saves herself from a fate worse than death in favor of the slow death of the heart in a loveless life. Moreover, if the "cowardice & paralysis" critics were consistent they would congratulate Eveline on **escaping** marriage, considering the quality of life of nearly every married woman in **Dubliners**, including, in the opinion of some critics, even that well-heeled bourgeoisie, Gretta Conroy.

Kenner's is one of the few productive critical speculations I have seen, provocative in a positive sense.

15. Gap-finding and gap-filling with very little restraint is the chief mode of Margot Norris's new book, which she does have to grace the title **Suspicious Readings** (2003), though "Suspect" would have been the better adjective. Much of it had been published already as articles, to one of which I have taken serious exception in print (see n. # 4). For now that has to stand as my response to her kind of criticism. It would take a book as large as hers to challenge satisfactorily the kind of reading that her book practices and advocates: critical inventiveness with few if any controls, readings on an extended scale of the kind I have been questioning in this paper. An adequate answer to that will have to wait for another occasion.

END

