

### The Voice of the Author and the Author of the Life: James Joyce's *Dubliners*

Throughout the first fourteen stories of James Joyce's *Dubliners*, he connects the development of an authorial voice with the ability to author of one's own life. The first three stories portray children who still have the potential for both. In the four that follow, adolescents fail to develop either. The next two sets of stories reveal the consequences of that failure for individual adults and for society at large. The last piece, however, complicates this connection through an exploration of the life of a man who, at first, seems to have achieved both; the question of what Gabriel has achieved and what he will achieve suggests the paralysis general throughout Dublin society, as the ambiguity in a mature man's life echoes the ambiguity of potential in children.

"The Sisters", "The Encounter", and "Araby" present children as potential authors. The use of first person voice suggests that the boys on whom the stories focus may gain the ability to tell, and create, their own stories. Nonetheless, this triad illustrates the difficulties of fulfilling this potential.

"The Sisters", while setting the theme of paralysis, also presents one possible picture of the early experiences of a writer able to address that theme and thus highlights a tension inherent in such an author's development: to write about it, he needs to experience it, yet that experience must be overcome, through self-authorship, in order to write at all. The story's first paragraph indicates the child's simultaneous attraction to and repulsion from the paralysis of the priest's body, and since the priest represents Catholicism, that feeling can be extended to the Church and thus to Irish society in general, as it is addressed in the remainder of the book. Moreover, the boy examines paralysis as a word:

Every night as I gazed up at the window I said softly to myself the word paralysis. It had always sounded strangely in my ears, like the word gnomon in the Euclid and the word simony in the Catechism. But now it sounded to me like the name of some maleficent and sinful being. It filled me with fear, and yet I longed to be nearer to it and to look upon its deadly work. (1)

That gnomon belongs in Euclid and simony in the Catechism implies that paralysis should belong in some written work, too: the boy could be *Dubliners'* eventual author. At the

same time, the priest's death frees the boy from his "great wish for him", creating a space in which the narrator may gain control of his life.

The next story, "An Encounter", follows another bookish boy. Early on, he refers to himself as one of "the reluctant Indians who were afraid to seem studious or lacking robustness" (8). While his apparent studiousness provides him with a base of knowledge for becoming a writer, his willingness to seek adventures and his discovery of one indicate willingness and ability to find his own material. Self-authorship can feed literary authorship. But one cannot know if this boy will develop into a writer, and the older man's identification with him emphasizes this uncertainty. The boy could end up equally paralyzed, "his mind slowly circling round and round in the same orbit" (13).

In "Araby", on the other hand, the shallowness of the protagonist's early writerly development undermines his self-authorship, yet this early growth represents the potential for something deeper. The way the boy invests his world with symbolic significance displays the exaggerated Romanticism of the beginnings of that voice: "Her image accompanied me even in places most hostile to romance . . . I imagined that I bore my chalice safely through a throng of foes" (16). Similarly, by cataloguing the books that belonged to the priest who previously inhabited his house, he shows some interest in literature. That he prefers *The Memoirs of Vidocq* because "its leaves were yellow" (15), however, suggests the limits of his interest.

The child's real life experiences parallel and are framed by the shortcomings of his literary ones. When the bazaar itself fails to meet his quasi-Romantic expectations, he has an epiphany that rejects his surface-level interest in books as well as his mission to Araby and the excessive Romanticism that led him there. Whether, from his delusions, he turns to anything more constructive, remains to be seen; the stories of adolescence that follow suggest how challenging that will be.

"Eveline", "After the Race", "Two Gallants", and "The Boarding House" all paint images of adolescents who fail to move towards an authorial adulthood. (Though some of these characters seem older, they occupy an adolescent position in society.) The use of third person narrative implies that the characters can't grow into the authors of their own

stories, though some of them show that they at least once had such potential.

Eveline is not one of those characters: she shows almost no ability to use language or to control her own life. Living in poverty and having to take care of her family, she probably never had much education. How Eveline “had consented to go away, to leave her home” (21) is never shown; she may have only nodded to Frank’s request, thus wordlessly placing herself in his hands rather than making a true choice. When she thinks about leaving the stores, she thinks about what “they” will say about her and what Miss Gavan has said to her before (21), not about speaking for herself. The final scene of the story draws lack of linguistic ability and self-authorship together in Eveline’s final failure: “She answered nothing” (23). Her only vocalization comes as Frank is being pulled by the crowd aboard the ship: “Amid the seas she sent a cry of anguish!” (23). As she cannot move, unable to make any choice, she can’t form words. Of course, even had she gone with Frank, she would not have been claiming authorship of her life: not knowing the language would have left her dependent on him.

Whereas Eveline lacks the education that might have allowed her a voice and self-authorship, Jimmy in “After the Race” has had every educational advantage. His father “had sent his son to England to be educated in a big Catholic college and had afterwards sent him to Dublin University to study law . . . Then he had been sent for a term to Cambridge to see a little life” (25). But as that final phrase implies, the goal has never been for him to learn: it has been for him to move into upper social structures. That the son participates in his father’s intent is illustrated by the company he keeps, as well as by the description of his lifestyle. As he tries to advance socially, rather than to develop his own abilities to see the world and construct his own story, he finds “great pleasure in the society of one who had seen so much of the world and was reputed to own some of the biggest hotels in France” (25). He relies on another’s view of the world, another’s voice, to fill in for his own thoughts and observations, which sets him up to be duped by the more sophisticated card players. By not developing his own authorial voice, he loses control of his life.

Each of the eponymous characters of “The Two Gallants” represents a distinct failure in development of such a voice. Lenehan, enjoying Corley’s conquests vicariously, mostly

asks questions of his companion or else makes encouraging comments on his friend's exploits. In this reliance on another's spoken experience, he resembles Jimmy in the previous story. He, however, has at least an awareness of the position in which that places him: "A shade of mockery relieved the servility of his manner. To save himself he had the habit of leaving his flattery open to the interpretation of raillery" (31.) Nonetheless, he remains subservient, unable or unwilling to control his life. The closest he comes to self-authorship is in possessing an eloquence that prevents "his friends from forming any general policy against him" (30); he approaches control of his own life through language.

Corley, on the other hand, fails to observe the world in a way that would allow him to develop an authorial voice and thus become the author of his own life in a meaningful way: "He spoke without listening to the speech of his companions. His conversation was mainly about himself" (31). This underscores the essential emptiness of his speech. Furthermore, Corley expends what verbal abilities he has to con a young domestic servant, not to change his life or to record Dublin paralysis.

"The Boarding House" shows how that paralysis passes from generation to generation. Polly and Mrs. Mooney, though they seem to have an understanding about what should happen between Polly and Bob Doran, never discuss it (39-40). Without putting it into words, it cannot be examined. In her essay, "*Dubliners: Women in Irish Society*", Florence Walzl notes that the events of the story ensure that Polly will suffer the same troubles her mother did in marriage (47-8). Polly never vocalizes her real desires, even to herself; had she been able to relate her "hopes and visions" to her mother, it might have changed the progress of the story. Maybe she would have been sent back to typing after all, a profession that, might have provided a space for development of a voice.

The description of Bob Doran's youth also sets him in a context from which an author could emerge: "As a young man he had sown his wild oats, of course; he had boasted of his freethinking and denied the existence of God to his companions in public houses." (41). But by the beginning of the story, that has changed. His weekly purchase of *Reynold's Newspaper* has become as empty a devotion as his attendance at Mass, for he has given up free thought for employment by a Catholic wine merchant. In giving up his ability to

speak new ideas, he also gives up his ability to author his own life. It no longer matters that “[h]is instinct urged him to remain free, not to marry” (41).

The stories of maturity-- “A Little Cloud”, “Counterparts”, “Clay”, and “A Painful Case”-- show what follows such adolescent failures: adults without their own voices or control over their own lives. All four use third-person narrative and portray unhappy, trapped individuals.

Chandler in “A Little Cloud” dreams of authorship but never strives towards it. He cedes (linguistic) power to others: “He had never been in Corless’s but he knew the value of the name” (45). Indeed, the closest Chandler comes to authorship is when the third person narrator relates his thoughts: his words appear only in another’s voice. Nor can he claim authorship of his own life. He wants to read to his wife from his books of poetry, “[b]ut shyness had always held him back” (45). His wife has chosen their house “and it reminded him of her. It too was prim and pretty. A dull resentment against his life awoke within him. Could he not escape from his little house?” (53). When his child’s sobbing disrupts his reading, he concludes: “It was useless. He couldn’t read. He couldn’t do anything . . . It was useless, useless! He was a prisoner for life” (53-4). Yet he is not trapped by life itself but, rather, by lack of authorship in either sense.

Similarly, Farrington of “Counterparts” works copying out other people’s words, but he has been losing even that linguistic ability. In rewriting a contract, he can’t get beyond “In no case shall Bernard Bodley be . . .” This apparent lack of voice makes his comeback to Mr. Alleyne surprising to “the author of the witticism no less than his neighbours” (58). The shock of speech leads him to retell the incident in the pubs, but in doing so, he makes it just another reiteration, another act of copying. His failure to say anything else new and thus develop his own voice parallels the rest of his failures in the world of the pub.

In the following story, “Clay”, Maria considers “what a pity it was Alphy and Joe were not speaking. They were always falling out now but when they were boys together they used to be the best of friends: but that was life” (66). That people who ought to be speaking to each other are not implies their loss of voice, while the last clause shows that Maria sees that loss as inevitable. Indeed, her role as peacemaker in the laundry is that of a

silencer, stopping the meeting of opposed individual voices.

Playing such a role, she cannot (or cannot allow herself) to make sense of the sort of desperate effort at self-assertion Farrington makes in the previous story, which is echoed in this passage: "He [Joe] told her all that went on in his office, repeating for her a smart answer which he had made to the manager. Maria did not understand why Joe laughed so much over the answer he had made" (67). That she has convinced herself of the goodness of quiet parallels the ways in which she assures herself that her life, which she has not chosen, not authored, is really for the best: "She used to have such a bad opinion of Protestants but now she thought they were very nice people, a little quiet and serious, but still very nice people to live with (65); "She arranged in her mind all she was going to do and thought how much better it was to be independent and to have your own money in your pocket" (66).

In contrast, James Duffy of "A Painful Case", seems at first to have developed his authorial voice. In his home, "[w]riting materials were always on the desk." (70), but the first hint that he might not be so writerly appears at the end of the first paragraph: "On lifting the lid of the desk a faint fragrance escaped-- the fragrance of new cedarwood pencils or a bottle of gum or of an overripe apple which might have been left there and forgotten." New pencils are unused, while the apple's age suggests that he rarely opens his desk. Together, they indicate that, though he sets himself up as a writer, he does not actually write often. The penultimate sentence of the second paragraph, at first glance, banishes this notion: "He had an odd autobiographical habit which led him to compose in his mind from time to time a short sentence about himself containing a subject in the third person and a predicate in the past tense." However, it's important to note that he only occasionally creates *a* sentence: he does not sustain that autobiographical turn of mind long enough to make even a short story.

Once again, the individual without a developed voice cannot take authorship of his own life. He refuses Mrs. Sinico's advances and falls back into his old, stale routine. In fact, his life grows more barren, as he avoids concerts, whereas musical entertainments had been "the only dissipations of his life" (71). After he reads about her death, he attempts to author his own emotions about the incident into feelings of repulsion at her weakness (75-

6). For a time, he succeeds, but the effort finally fails:

He asked himself what else he could have done. He could not have carried on a comedy of deception with her; he could not have lived with her openly. He had done what seemed to him best. How was he to blame? Now that she was gone he understood how lonely her life must have been . . . His life would be lonely too until he, too, died . . . (76)

His perception of things he “could not” have done, failures in self-authorship, leads into the collapse of his constructed emotions, the death of what he considered his authorial voice.

Still, of the four figures of maturity that Joyce presents, it is Duffy, who has come closest to gaining an authorial voice and who is also the most removed from public life. The next three stories-- “Ivy Day in the Committee Room”, “A Mother”, and “Grace”-- deal with that sphere (reflecting politics, culture, and religion respectively) and so reflect the social and political realm created by those who lack even self-authorship.

In “Ivy Day in the Committee Room”, Hynes’s doggerel on Parnell underscores the contrast between the great figure and the present-day politicians. Hynes not only writes on a past figure rather than creating his own stories (or participating in others’ acts of self-authorship through real political activism) but writes poorly. The silence that follows his reading reveals the others’ difficulties with speech; they are even more distant from authorship. When they finally do respond, their empty phrases-- “Good man, Joe!” and “it was a very fine piece of writing”-- do not explore the subject deeper or connect the lamented Parnell to their current situation. In the absence of strong voices, it’s unsurprising that they seem more interested in money and alcohol than in issues and ideas.

Divergently, Mrs. Kearney, “A Mother”, has surrendered self-authorship (marrying only out of spite (91)) and so tries to assert her voice through others. For instance, she takes over writing the ads for the concert series. With her daughter Kathleen, she even tries to alter which language she speaks in order to pursue social advantage: “When the Irish Revival began to be appreciable, Mrs. Kearney determined to take advantage of her daughter’s name and brought an Irish teacher to the house” (92). As this mother notes, the name Kathleen aligns the girl with figures, such as Kathleen ni Houlihan, who represent

Ireland. Given that equation, the story can be taken to portray the Irish Revival as the effort of adults, who have given up their own self-authorship, to control the voices of a nation's youth. The disastrous conclusion-- likely the end of Kathleen's singing career-- indicates that such stymied individuals can only succeed in passing on their own failures.

Mr. Kernan's loss of a piece of tongue at the start of the next story, "Grace", makes his similar lack of authorial voice physical. Still, he seems to have one of the better marriages in *Dubliners*, which might suggest some sort of self-fashioning:

[Mrs. Kernan] accepted his frequent intemperance as part of the climate, healed him dutifully whenever he was sick and always tried to make him eat a breakfast. There were worse husbands. (105)

Notice, though, that Mrs. Kernan acts in the ways that make it a stronger marriage than others; she makes the judgment that it is better and does so in a way that blends her thought with the narrative. The extent to which she has developed her own authorial voice cushions herself and her husband. His friends, too, have developed their own voices to some extent, as demonstrated by their plot to straighten him out and the rapid-fire banter through which they draw him to the retreat.

Failures of understanding about Church history, however, indicate the weakness of their voices. In the end, they all resign these voices to the authority of a simoniac priest, and so Mr. Kernan is locked into a cycle of intemperance and superficial repentance. Even those who have developed their voices to some extent have not made them strong enough to oppose Church authority, and the theme of Catholicism as a cause of paralysis in *Dubliners* is well known. Because no one can have the authorial ability, or authority, to speak against the Church, it cannot be changed and its harmful effects cannot be fought, which makes this story another reflection on the effects of lack of authorship on the public sphere.

"The Dead", however, operates differently from "Grace" and the rest of *Dubliners*. Gabriel has developed his own authorial voice: he writes literary reviews for *The Daily Express*, teaches, and often blends his own thoughts with the narrative voice. He even refuses to switch to another language, Irish, though others say it should be his own (129). That he gives the toast at the gathering suggests that others recognize his possession of a

voice and that he uses it in a public sphere, despite some misgivings. Indeed, for a time, it seems that Gabriel has transferred that authorial voice over into authorship of his own life. He has married a woman of whom his family did not approve (127) and vacations on the Continent rather than giving into pressure to spend his holidays in rural Ireland (128).

But a suggested trip to the West, his wife's home, undoes this appearance:

"There was no row," said Gabriel moodily, "only she wanted me to go for a trip to the west of Ireland and I said I wouldn't."

His wife clasped her hands excitedly and gave a little jump.

"O, do go, Gabriel," she cried. "I'd love to see Galway again."

"You can go if you like," said Gabriel coldly. (130)

Of course, he doesn't expect that his wife will go without him. Mentally, though, that is precisely what she does and, in so doing, she subverts his irony and undoes his tenuous authorship of his life. This actually begins when she listens to Mr. D'Arcy sing "The Lass of Aughrim". Gabriel's failure to recognize his wife at this point-- "A woman was standing near the top of the first flight, in the shadow also" (143)-- displays not only his distance from her but also his loss of authorship in the face of her imagined flight back to western Ireland. His own words have worked against him and against his intent in speaking them. Later, as she relates the story of the young man who died of love for her, he at one point "feels humiliated by the failure of [another instance of] his irony" (149). He has lost his ability to use language masterfully as well as to control his life.

In the final paragraph, however, as his own thoughts merge again with the narrator's voice, he regains at least literary authorship. But whether he can move back towards self-fashioning remains questionable. His journey westward could be towards rural Ireland or towards death. If the former, he gives in to others' demands. If the latter, he may be surrendering, or he may be growing up in a way the previously discussing characters don't (maturing is a movement towards death) and thus (re)claiming authorship of his life. Suspension within this ambiguity implies paralysis, if only a temporary one.

This concluding stasis implies that the challenges faced by potential authors never leave, even should those writers pass through all the difficulties the other stories show to be

present in childhood, adolescence, adulthood, and public life. This may be especially true in the case of an author attempting to address the theme of paralysis as Joyce does in *Dubliners* or, perhaps, it is better to say of one who faces that theme in daily life and so must face it even just to gain self-authorship.

Works Cited

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