

“His heart against his ribs”: Embodied Tension in “The Dead”

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Abstract: *This article focuses upon the interplay between the verbal and the non-verbal, cognitive and embodied meaning, as it is rendered in James Joyce’s “The Dead.” It suggests that one of the subjects enacted in the story is the extent to which dissociation pervades social structures and cognitive frameworks, considers how this is played out in the protagonist’s predicament as lover and literary critic, and discusses its implications for the reader’s aesthetic experience of, and response to, the story. Finally, it argues that “The Dead” enacts the desire and failure to control the unpredictable, in life, love and art, and submits that its aesthetic power resides in making us experience both our desire for meaning and the potential failure of our effort to make sense of what we, like Gabriel Conroy, “cannot apprehend.”*

Introduction

2012 is the beginning of the “Decade of Centenaries” in Ireland, which will commemorate “the most momentous [decade of Irish] modern history,”¹ between 1912 and 1922. This year marks the commemoration of the Third Home Rule Bill, the Ulster Covenant, the sinking of *Titanic*, and the death of Bram Stoker. Testing moments as to how present Ireland relates to its past will include the commemorations of the Easter Rising in 1916, as well as the First World War, the War of Independence and the Civil War. In Joycean terms, this decade culminates in the centenary of the publication of *Ulysses*. Yet, 2012 marks not only the ninetieth anniversary of the publication of *Ulysses*, but also the anniversary of Joyce’s last visit to Ireland, at a time when he was trying to publish *Dubliners*, which would happen only on 15 June 1914. During his last stay, Joyce visited the graveyard where he thought that Michael Furey lied buried.²

One hundred years later, I will turn to *Dubliners*, and specifically to “The Dead,” to take up the challenge posed by the narrator in the very first line, which reads: “Lily, the caretaker’s daughter, was literally run off her feet” (*Dubliners* 175). “Literally” is the word I wish to focus upon: what sort of challenge is the narrator setting before us? Does the adverb suggest that we don’t always listen to what words *literally* tell us? In that case, the implication is that there may be more meanings to a word than meets the

ear, and that there may be meanings that we identify mechanically and others that elude our mechanical screen and require careful listening. I suggest we specifically focus on the interplay between the verbal and the non-verbal, and on how embodied meaning is conveyed. Ultimately, how does the literal record of life approach what Gabriel “was conscious of, but could not apprehend” (224)? How does what he cannot apprehend manifest itself and how is it worded? And how do we, as readers, engage both with the literal and with what we cannot apprehend?

Verbal and non-verbal

Other critics before me have shown how surface and subterranean meanings are played out in the verbal texture of “The Dead.” This geological metaphor is just another way of saying that there may be several literal meanings competing for supremacy, visibility, or acknowledgement in the story, and that their hierarchical status within the text depends on our interpretative radar, on what we tune to or zoom past, acknowledge or fail to acknowledge.

Three essays are of particular relevance to my own approach here today: Margot Norris’s “Not the Girl She Was at All: Women in “The Dead”” (1994); Daniel R. Schwarz’s “Gabriel Conroy’s Psyche: Character as Concept in James Joyce’s ‘The Dead’” (1994); and Greg C. Winston’s “Militarism and ‘The Dead’” (2004). Margot Norris argues that the story reads as “two texts: a “loud” or audible male narration challenged and disrupted by a “silent” or discounted female countertext that does not, in the end, succeed in making itself heard” (Norris 192). This raises the question of readers’ agency and of readers’ mirror images in the text, so that readers can choose to “abdicate as critics” (204), like Mary Jane Morkan, or be actively critical, like Molly Ivors.

Schwarz also identifies two competing narratives: the festive one, which is undermined by the silent but pervasive allusions to death and mortality. And Winston similarly shows how the festive narrative is undercut by a martial imagery that indicates conflict rather than harmony. As critics, are we likewise driven by internalised patterns of interpretation that determine what we find salient and ascribe meaning to? Is the invisibility of martial metaphors and death allusions a measure of “buried” collective fears? What brings us back to a text that, as Schwarz notes, “resists (perhaps resents?) the critic’s rational efforts to order it because it is allegorical and asyntactical” (123)? Do we look for ultimate mastery, ultimate surrender, or something else? Can the answer be looked for in what the critic comprehends or fails to comprehend in the text? I suggest we engage with what emerges unawares into the literalness of words and see where it leads us.

Let us first consider how words are embodied in “The Dead” and how the body makes itself manifest in words.

“Utter failure”?

The snow and the intimations of death at the end of “The Dead” creep indoors with Gabriel’s arrival at his aunts’ house. He arrives “as right as the mail” (*Dubliners* 177), “scraping the snow from his goloshes” and “scraping vigorously” (176-7), but just as the snow lies on his overcoat, so do death metaphors trip to his own and his aunts’ words: “my wife here takes three mortal hours to dress herself” (176), explains Gabriel, while his aunts worry that she “must be perished alive” (177). These seemingly inadvertent slips of the tongue bring mortality into the Misses Morkans’ annual dance, or perhaps simply spell out its presence, for not only is the story entitled “The Dead,” but we are told early on that the aunts inherited the house and took charge of their only niece Mary Jane following their brother’s death (175). That death might visit the house again soon is intimated before Gabriel’s arrival: “old as they were,” we are told through Lily’s perspective, Mary Jane’s aunts “did their share” (176). In fact, life and liveliness are repeatedly conveyed in an adversative syntax that seems to underplay the intimations of age and death, while registering them: “Julia, *though she was quite grey, was still* the leading soprano in Adam and Eve’s, and Kate, *being too feeble to go about much,* gave music lessons to beginners” (176; emphases added). Lily registers both the official version about the sisters’ active routine, and the visible signs of old age and impending death; the adversative syntax presents the old ladies as subjects of their actions, but also as subjects to death.

Just as intimations of mortality trip to the lips of those intent on celebrating life, so do emotions ripple unawares in the voice and in the body, making us wonder whether emotions belong to the same unacknowledged layers of reality as death. We notice early on that emotions set the tone of voice, as instanced in Gabriel’s encounters with various others, beginning with Lily, whose “bitter retort” discomposes him and turns the exchange into what he rates as an “utter failure” – we cannot but notice the double meaning of the word “utter” and how Lily’s voice conveys not just words, but emotions. Gabriel experiences Lily’s retort as the first of several assaults on his patriarchal status. Indeed, if Freddy Malins is the source of trouble that everyone fears and one of Gabriel’s roles is to “manage him” (176), unpredictable feminine behaviour will prove to be even more disconcerting insofar as it deviates from Gabriel’s solid expectations and does not offer a specular confirmation of the patriarchal role which he dutifully tries to perform. As Norris argues, Lily’s retort is the first of a series of “female back answers” that repeatedly disrupt “a male voice” (Norris 193). And if back answers are “the only thing [the Misses Morkans] would not stand” (176), just like the snow and the intimations of death, they are audible in the narrative and their disruptive effect can be assessed by their impact on Gabriel’s behaviour. The opening exchange with Lily spells out patriarchal gender and social expectations, and a critical resistance to both: whereas Gabriel expects Lily to get married “one of these fine days” (177) now that she has finished school, she articulates “with great bitterness” what she perceives as the exploitative nature of gender relations: “The men that is now is only all palaver and

what they can get out of you” (178). The aunts’ anxiety and Gabriel’s “restless eyes” (178) thus seem to indicate a subliminal awareness of existing tensions in a precarious state of affairs. Gabriel’s nervousness contrasts with seemingly positive emotions such as frankness and heartiness, which are first associated with the aunts’ behaviour and then even more so with Molly and Gretta. In the process, we are left to wonder whether frankness of heart may be at odds with the status quo.

Molly is described as “a frank-mannered talkative young lady, with a freckled face and prominent brown eyes” (187), attributes that point to liveliness rather than to standard beauty. Her tone of voice ranges from “abrupt” (187), to “grave”, “blunt,” “frank” (188), and then “friendly” (189) and “warm” (190), while her challenge for Gabriel to “keep in touch” with Irish is repeatedly accompanied by “a warm grasp” and “a soft friendly tone” of voice (189), and her suggestion for the Conroys to join in “an excursion to the Aran island” comes “suddenly” (189), seemingly impulsive rather than planned. Faced with his reticence, she adds gestures to words, reiterating the invitation and “laying her warm hand eagerly on his arm” (189). The motif of touch is echoed in the phrase chosen by Gabriel to justify his holidays on the continent, “it’s partly to keep in touch with the languages and partly for a change,” which prompts Molly’s query about whether he “do[esn’t] have [his] own language to keep in touch with – Irish?” and Gabriel’s famous disclaimer: “if it comes to that, Irish is not my language” (189). Rather than perceived as a dialogue, the exchange is permeated by martial allusions and is experienced by Gabriel as a “cross-examination” (190) and an “ordeal which was making a blush *invade* his forehead” (190; emphasis added). He is not the master but at the mercy of his emotions, and the assault on his sense of mastery comes both from without and within: it comes from his interpersonal exchanges with others whom he had rated as intellectually or socially below him; and from his exposure to his inner physical and emotional turmoil, that is, to that within him that he likewise considered inferior to his intellectual aptitudes. Much as he tries to conceal his emotions by avoiding eye contact and engaging in activity, this becomes increasingly ineffective. After all, his power and self-possession rest not only on a social hierarchy, which depends on others playing their own part and acknowledging his leading role, but on an inner hierarchy as well, according to which the mind tries to rule over the body and emotions, and the eyes over the other senses. Patriarchal as it is, this is a gender-based hierarchy, and it is therefore no surprise that the threats from without should come via women or emasculated men such as Freddy Malins, and the threats from within should come from what eludes rational control such as emotions and touch.

Gabriel’s “cross-examination” with Molly is followed by his cross-examination with Gretta, who wants to know “[w]hat words [he had] with Molly Ivors” (191), whose behaviour is perplexing not only to Gabriel (who refers to Molly as “that girl or woman”), but also to Gretta (who perceives Molly as a “comical girl”) and Mary Jane (who wears “a moody puzzled expression” when Molly leaves). Despite their differences, Molly, Gretta, and Freddy share some common traits: Gretta also speaks her mind “frankly”

(196), and resorts to touch to express her enthusiasm, as when she “clasped her hands excitedly and gave a little jump” (191) upon learning of Molly’s suggestion that the Conroys visit the Aran islands in the summer. The emotional temperature between the spouses is conveyed by the voice: whereas Gretta’s excited jump and clasp is accompanied by a cry, pleading to go to Galway, Gabriel “coldly” replies, “You can go if you like” (191), which prompts her to “[look] at him for a moment,” say to Mrs Malins, “There’s a nice husband for you” (191), and leave the room in tacit defeat. In his puzzlement, Gabriel fears warmth and companionship and longs for cold and solitude: “[His] warm trembling fingers tapped the cold pane of the window. How cool it must be outside! How pleasant it would be to walk out alone (...). How much more pleasant it would be than at the supper table!” (192) He is “unnerved” at the thought that he will be exposed to Molly’s “critical quizzing eyes” (192) and rehearses a criticism of the “new and very serious and hypereducated generation” (193); this is meant to target Molly, as if Gabriel is unaware that it might just as well apply to him, for Molly is his only intellectual equal, although her enigmatic, unmarried and politically engaged life is perplexing, since, like Lily’s retort, it deviates from prevailing social mores.

“Expressing in words what my feelings are”

Gabriel, in turn, complies with the patriarchal role expected of him. Anxiously awaited by his aunts to preside at the table and manage Freddy Malins, Gabriel dutifully obliges while feeling superior to those under his charge. Yet, the unpredictable flow of emotions that prompted Molly’s invitation and Gretta’s willingness to accept it make him long to evade human scrutiny, hence the appeal of the outdoor cold and snow. When time comes for him to take “his seat boldly at the head” (197) of a table laden with exquisite delicacies and described in precise martial terms,³ he “meet[s] a row of upturned faces” (203) and announces that he will “endeavour to express to you in words what my feelings are on this occasion” (203), although “his ten trembling fingers on the tablecloth” (202-3) strive to conceal what the narrator’s words reveal. If interpersonal exposure had triggered Gabriel’s sense of vulnerability and precipitated his intrapersonal struggles, this scene shows how his self-possession likewise relies on interpersonal nurturance, so that when a “hearty murmur of assent ran round the table,” the thought of Molly’s absence infuses him with confidence, while the martial metaphors used indicate the private battle unfolding in Gabriel’s mind: “It *shot* through Gabriel’s mind that Miss Ivors was not there and that she had gone away discourteously: and he said with confidence in himself” (204; emphasis added).

Gabriel’s stated aim is to celebrate “the tradition of genuine warm-hearted courteous Irish hospitality” (204), but his speech becomes more of a private verbal duel with absent Molly than a dialogue with the present company. With Molly in mind and seemingly unaware that both belong to the same “hypereducated” (204) generation,

Gabriel criticises a “sceptical” and “thought-tormented age” and a new generation lacking in “those qualities of humanity, of hospitality, of kindly humour which belonged to an older day” (204). In adversative syntax, he grants that this generation is “actuated by new ideas and new principles” and driven by an “enthusiasm” that, “even when it is misdirected, is (...) in the main sincere” (204). Earlier he had wondered whether Molly’s “enthusiasm” was “sincere” and whether she had “any life of her own behind her propagandism” (192). In a speech intent on praising old-time hospitality and critiquing present-day scepticism, Gabriel’s words seem prey to his own admonitions. If his is a “thought-tormented age,” his overt praise of hospitality is shot through with thoughts of hostility; if his aim is to express feelings in words, he sounds sceptical of both words and feelings. Indeed he seems to epitomise the age that he critiques, championing “affections” (204) of the heart but being tormented by the claims of the mind, doubting the sincerity of displays of enthusiasm, but letting “his voice [fall] into a softer inflection” (205) as he evokes “sad memories” (205), only to claim that “were we to brood upon them always we would not find the heart to go on bravely with our work among the living” for “we have all of us living duties and living affections which claim, and rightly claim, our strenuous endeavours” (205). Yet, brood he will.

What is the reader to make of this? Is the reader to be as sceptical of Gabriel as Gabriel is of Molly, wondering whether his feelings match his words or his words betray feelings that he seeks to conceal from others and possibly himself? If we follow Gabriel, are we to become what Sedgwick has called “paranoid readers”, driven by suspicion alone?⁴ In his speech Gabriel challenges his audience to “find the heart to go on bravely with our work among the living” (205). Let us then see where his heart takes him after his initial confrontations with Lily and Molly, followed by his apparent consecration at the head of the supper table.

Gabriel’s confrontation with Lily’s back answer and critical Molly is followed by his exposure to the no less perplexing Gretta, whom he aestheticises, “transform[ing] her both into a beautiful painting (...) and into beautiful prose” (Norris 195). Gretta arrests Gabriel’s gaze when he sees “[a] woman” on the staircase listening to music. He “was in the dark” (210) “gazing up” (210, 211) at the woman “in the shadow” (210), her face hidden from view and only the panels of her skirt in sight. “It was his wife” and she “was listening to something” (211). She is arrested by sound, he is arrested by sight. As readers, we share in Gabriel’s experience, follow his sensorial perceptions and cognitive interpretations, and accompany the process whereby his wife is perceived as a mysterious stranger with “grace and mystery as if she were a symbol of something” (211) and is accordingly reframed as if she were a figure in a painting entitled *Distant Music* (211). What exactly does he frame: the object and/or the subject of the gaze? Where does his aestheticising impulse come from: fascination and/or fear? How approachable or remote is the woman on the staircase? How do the male gaze and the female listening feature in the painting?

The male gaze seems to remain in the dark outside the picture – yet it is the male gaze that frames the picture. Does Gabriel’s hiding add to his power? By remaining unseen, he refrains from stepping into the scene and avoids both exposure and interaction. The fact that he “gazes up” at her indicates a distance that seems to be flattering to Gretta, yet the aestheticising distance precludes reciprocity. Besides, the impetus to aestheticise seems as much driven by what is in the picture as by what remains outside it: Gabriel captures Gretta as she is absorbed in listening to a song sung by someone outside the picture frame. Gabriel’s impulse seems to stem from his urge to contain what eludes containment, to familiarise as symbol what threatens and seduces him as foreign. The painting may thus be more representative of Gabriel’s cognitive procedures than of Gretta’s reality. In fact, as Gabriel’s hyper sensitiveness to the power of the gaze indicates, his gaze and Gretta’s listening may suggest distinct modes of relating to and apprehending reality. As Rita Felski reminds us, “It is the ear, rather than the eye, that epitomizes receptivity and vulnerability, as an orifice that can be penetrated from all directions, that cannot be closed at will, that can be invaded by the sweetest and the most unspeakable of sounds” (Felski 71). Yet, if hearing is passive, listening involves active attention; and if gazing involves power, being gazed at involves exposure and vulnerability, as Gabriel repeated senses. As Gabriel and Gretta prepare to meet as husband and wife, the question is how they relate outside the aestheticised pictorial frame, and outside their everyday routine: do they see and listen to one another? To what extent do the pictures in their minds frame their perception and shape their interpretations? Ultimately, does Gabriel’s propensity for aestheticising Gretta enable or prevent him from relating to the woman who is his wife? Does Gretta’s “romance” with Michael Furey enable or prevent her from relating to the man who is her husband?

“His own heart against his ribs”

Absorbed as she is in the memories triggered by *The Lass of Aughrim*, Gretta is unaware of Gabriel’s mental painting of her or indeed of the thoughts crossing his mind or the emotions rioting in his body. As he will later realise, he is likewise ignorant of the longings going through her mind, but this does not deter him from interpreting her behaviour according to his expectations. Entranced by the sight of his wife “under the dusty fanlight,” Gabriel notices “the rich bronze of her hair,” “the colour on her cheeks” and her eyes shining when a “sudden tide of joy went leaping out of his heart” (213) – this tide of joy is then his heart’s response to what his eyes saw in Gretta. On the way to the hotel, however, “[s]he had no longer any grace of attitude but Gabriel’s eyes were still bright with happiness. The blood went bounding along his veins; and the thoughts went rioting through his brain, proud, joyful, tender, valorous.” (214) “Moments of their secret life together burst like stars upon his memory” (214), and the dullness of quotidian life is redeemed by a secret narrative of adventure and romance that celebrates

“moments of ecstasy” and “long[s] to make her forget years of their existence together” (215). As the romance unfolds in Gabriel’s mind, words from the past visit Gabriel’s mind “[l]ike distant music” (215) while rhythmic prose conveys the pace and the tone of this adventure until the touch of her body sends through him “a keen pang of lust”:

She leaned lightly on his arm, as lightly as when he had danced with him a few hours before. He had been proud and happy then, happy that she was his, proud of her grace and wifely carriage. But now, after the kindling again of so many memories, the first touch of her body, musical, strange and perfumed, sent through him a keen pang of lust. (*Dubliners* 216)

As Gretta fails to play her part in the romance being rehearsed in Gabriel’s mind, his arms tremble “with desire to seize her and only the stress of his nails against the palm of his hands held the wild impulse of his body in check” (217). He can hear “the thumping of his own heart against his ribs” (217), and the more “abstracted” she is, the more he trembles “with annoyance,” realising that “[t]o take her as she was now would be brutal,” although he “longed to be master of her strange mood” (218). Romance becomes a battle, a struggle for mastery and self-mastery, with the chivalrous lover caught “in a fever of rage and desire “ (218), longing to possess the lover and struggling to control his own lust; “fearing that diffidence [might] conquer him” (218), he strives “to restrain himself from breaking out into brutal language” though he “longed to cry to her from his soul, to crush her body against his, to overmaster her” (218). At last, she seems to play her expected role in his script when she looks at him “strangely,” kisses him, and tells him that he is “a very generous person” (218). After all, “she had fallen to him so easily,” he muses. “Perhaps she had felt the impetuous desire that was in him and then the yielding mood had come upon her” (219) – his impetuous desire thus requires her yielding mood, and just as he is not the syntactical subject of the desire in him, neither is she the subject of the yielding mood required by his impetuous desire: as at the party, musical metaphors are laden with martial ones and love is not a dance but a battle, not an encounter but a wild struggle between conquest and surrender.

When Gabriel realises that Gretta’s thoughts were not “running with his” (219), a “dull anger” gathers “in his mind and the dull fires of his lust (...) glow angrily in his veins” (220) – he is at the mercy, rather than master, of an angry mind and body. His voice, previously “kinder than he intended,” now becomes ironic (220), but as Gretta reveals the course of her thoughts, he feels “humiliated by the failure of his irony and by the evocation of this figure from the dead” (221). “A shameful consciousness of his own person assailed him,” he “[sees] himself as a ludicrous figure,” avoids exposure to Gretta’s gaze “lest she might see the shame that burned upon his forehead,” and “trie[s] to keep up his tone of cold interrogation,” although his voice is “humble and indifferent”(221). When Gretta casts Michael Furey as a tragic lover – “I think he died for me” (221) – a “vague terror seize[s] Gabriel” (221). Feeling under the attack of “some impalpable and

vindicative being” (221), Gabriel “[gathers] forces against him” and “[shakes] himself free of it in an effort to reason and continue[s] to caress [Gretta’s] hand,” although “she did not respond to his touch” (222). Upon hearing the rest of the story, Gabriel “held her hand for a moment longer, irresolutely, and then, shy of intruding on her grief, let it fall gently and walked quietly to the window” (223).

Tragic as Michael Furey’s premature death is, at no time does Gabriel question Gretta’s story of sacrificial love: did Michael die for her or did he die of illness? “[Did he] not want to live” (223) so that she could live, or did he not want to live because he could not have her? If Gretta resorts to the frame of sacrificial love to interpret Michael’s death, Gabriel promptly endorses it and relegates himself to a secondary role in her life: “So she had had that romance in her life: a man had died for her sake. It hardly pained him now to think how poor a part he, her husband, had played in her life” (223). Sacrificial love is rated as the epitome of love, so that living with your lover can never match dying for her. Sacrificial death becomes the ultimate “moment of ecstasy” that wipes away years of “dull existence together” (215). Doubtful whether she “had told him all the story” (223), Gabriel concludes that it is “[b]etter to pass boldly into that other world, in the full glory of some passion, than fade and wither dismally with age” (224): boldness, glory and passion are thus “moments of ecstasy” that involve opting out of the life cycle, which is perceived as inevitably degrading and humiliating. The last image of Gabriel and Gretta is intriguing: he lies down beside her, thinking “of how she who lay beside him had locked in her heart for so many years that image of her lover’s eyes when he had told her that he did not wish to live” (224). They lie down side by side not in amorous rapture but each locked in his or her body, mind and heart, sharing neither the memories of their life together nor of present passion, but the image of the sacrificial lover who now presides over a marital bed that has become an altar to sacrificial love – is all that awaits them in their marital bed to “fade and wither dismally with age”?

Yet “[g]enerous tears filled Gabriel’s eyes” and are deemed the sign of a feeling that “must be love” (224). If the eyes hold the power of the gaze, how does vision change under the influence of generous tears streaming from the soul? The tears that cloud Gabriel’s vision, and the sleepiness that dulls his alertness, allow him to “[approach] that region where dwell the vast hosts of the dead” (224) and approach a liminal state between consciousness and subconsciousness:

He was conscious of, but could not apprehend, their wayward and flickering existence. His own identity was fading out into a grey and impalpable world: the solid world itself which these dead had one time reared and lived in was dissolving and dwindling. (224-5)

Gabriel’s gaze shifts from his wife’s sleeping body to the call of an outdoor world devoid of human presence, passion, or heat, devoid of what he had both feared and been

attracted to. No living body is in sight; the only human presence lies buried in the snow, but resuscitates with full force in humans' minds; and the only body in sight is Ireland's, where snow is "general" (225), with the plural meanings the word carries (Winston 125), and the "dark mutinous Shannon waves" (225) are the only liquid undercurrents in an otherwise solid scenario of "treeless hills" and "barren thorns" (225). Is the mutinous Shannon that runs between the east and west of Ireland akin to the blood streaming in Gabriel's body, a fluidity that is as passionate as it is threatening? Is the snow about the impossibility of love, of an intimacy that is not about mastery and surrender, but about encounter and co-existence? And how do we readers experience the last words in "The Dead", when a mimetic, analytic prose focused on sight gives way to a synaesthetic, rhythmic prose that blends incantatory vision with incantatory sound: do we succumb to its spell or try to master it? Do we respond with our sense or with our senses or perhaps with both?

"Dissolving and dwindling"

To conclude, I would like to bring together Gabriel the lover and Gabriel the literary critic, his experience as character and ours as readers. Schwarz notes that "[d]iscursively, the last sentence [in "The Dead"] makes little sense," though he grants that perhaps sense is not what we are to look for in it and it is to be experience as performative "discourse not story" (Schwarz 122):

[A]s discourse it shows us what Gabriel needs and lacks: song, lyricism, metaphoricity, escape from time into the non-rational, passionate states of being, a loosening of the bonds of self-consciousness. (Schwarz 122)

Analytical critics that we tend to be, is Gabriel's need our own? Gabriel's swooning and Schwarz's comment strikingly resonate with Rita Felski's description of listening to music, which "is often associated with a decentering or displacement of the self, a loss or blurring of ego boundaries, a sense of oceanic merging in pre-oedipal bliss" (Felski 71). If this may account for Gabriel's experience, it would suggest that the "dissolving" of his identity entails a revision of previous cognitive and affective procedures, including of the aesthetic procedures centred on analytical mimesis that are abundantly displayed in "The Dead." What happens when prose dissolves into lyricism, the visual makes room for the aural, word edges on music, and we border on what we sense but cannot apprehend?

In *Uses of Literature*, Felski proposes "four modes of textual engagement" that identify "certain affective and cognitive parameters" shared by lay and academic reading: recognition, enchantment, knowledge, and shock (Felski 14). Enchantment and shock are the two that more overtly concern the affective components of aesthetic experience, and the language used by Felski uncannily echoes "The Dead." Not only

does she refer to the ear's receptivity in the chapter on "Enchantment," but she discusses "enchantment's association with passivity, submission, and surrender" (75) in terms akin to Gabriel's experience, noting that "the knowing, self-possessed critic" will hardly acknowledge what Barry Fuller calls the "swoonier, more embarrassing" motives for reading, discarded as attributes of the "gullible, naïve reader" (75). Yet, there is a long "history of aesthetic, erotic, and religious practices that evidence a longing to loosen the fetters of consciousness, to experience the voluptuous and sometimes vertiginous pleasures of self-loss," although these are not to be taken as purely passive for "any form of engagement with a work of art requires a modicum of interaction" (75) between the power of the text and the power of the reader (76). In her chapter on "Shock," Felski's words on "the somatic register of responses" (117) to Achilles' story resonate with the process undergone by Gabriel, although Joyce's story is never evoked:

Art that disturbs or appals can trigger a spectrum of physical reactions. (...) Our body may react even before our mind registers what is at stake, underscoring the extent of our emotional suggestibility and physical vulnerability. (...) [W]e feel ourselves stirred by forces we only vaguely apprehend. The protective shield of the psyche is breached; our sense of autonomy and separateness is bruised; we are no longer in full command of our own response. We find ourselves in the realm of the abject, floored by the sheer physicality of our reactions, newly conscious of being stranded on the perilous border of nature and culture. (Felski 117-8)

It is precisely because "the act of reading fuses cognitive and affective impulses, [and] looks outward to the world as well as inward to the self" (Felski 132) that I think Gabriel's predicament as a critic and as a lover are not to be dissociated. And if subject takes precedence over aesthetics in our response to "The Dead," as Schwarz argues (Schwarz 123-4), I would add that one of the subjects enacted in the story is the extent to which dissociation pervades social structures and cognitive frameworks – dissociation between cognitive and affective knowledge, surface and subterranean knowledge, what we acknowledge we know and what we do not acknowledge. This is as relevant to Gabriel the lover as it is to Gabriel the critic, or to us. Joyce's story thus invites readerly modes of textual engagement that acknowledge sensorial, affective and cognitive forms of knowledge, as well as the unpredictability of what we don't know.

"The Dead" enacts the desire and failure to control the unpredictable, in life, love and art, and its aesthetic power resides in making us experience both our desire for meaning and the potential failure of our effort to make sense of what we "cannot apprehend." As readers, we are first introduced into the narrative through Lily's perspective, which gives way to Gabriel's once he arrives on the scene. He is supposed to keep disorder at bay; she is the first to voice an element of dissonance at the Misses Morkans' annual dance. We access Gabriel's thoughts, but are confined to his external perception of others' words and gestures; like him, we are left to interpret their behaviour,

and may be tempted to interpret his – and yet, we realise that we may be as mistaken as he is, over and over again. And no matter how attentive we are to the multiple meanings inadvertently released by words, to the “gaps, contradictions, silences [and] what is *not* said by the narration” (Norris 192), we are not spared Gabriel’s perplexities, rather are locked in them to the end. For the ending faces us with “the solid world (...) dissolving and dwindling” (225), just as the prose resists the critic’s “rational efforts to order it because it is allegorical and asyntactical” (Schwarz 123). We reach this moment after witnessing Gabriel’s repeated rational efforts to master the world without and within, all the while incurring in a succession of interpretative failures that culminate in his feeling “humiliated by the failure of his irony and by the evocation of this figure from the dead, a boy in the gasworks” (221). When irony, that supreme exercise in verbal and emotional mastery, backfires as humiliation, his internalised interpretative frameworks are shattered: can he trust words when his speech sounds “foolish” in hindsight and he can only find “lame and useless” (224) words as he anticipates Aunt Julia’s death? Can he trust “his riot of emotions” (224), which now seems ill-founded and hard to trace? Rather than animated by his passionate emotions, he lies down beside his wife with his shoulders “chilled” by the air of the room (224), while “generous tears” filled his eyes and his soul “approached that region where dwell the vast hosts of the dead” whose existence he “was conscious of, but could not apprehend” (224).

In his psychoanalytic reading of “The Dead,” Daniel R. Schwarz points out how “the mimetic code inserts itself when basic emotions like love and death are the subject” (123), adding that “our aesthetic sense itself is more likely to be pushed aside and relegated to the back burner when we are engaged by issues that matter to our human feelings – notably, issues of the human psyche” (123-4), so that “most of us will be engaged mainly by the representation of emotions that interest us” (124). Greg W. Winston’s more recent approach to Joyce’s story seems to corroborate Schwarz’s argument about the precedence of subject over aesthetic experience as he seeks to assess the extent to which “the conceit of militarism in “The Dead” continues to underscore a pressing concern for modern civilization, both in Ireland and in the rest of the world” (Winston 132). He concludes by noting that,

If “The Dead” helps us to understand what is at stake in the larger battle between war and peace, between violence and diplomacy, it is perhaps by demonstrating how that battle begins at the complex level of a single human heart. As the egos of nations and individuals continually reassert and redefine themselves, one hopes they might first, like Gabriel, confront the battle within, before engaging the battle without. (Winston 132)

And yet our engagement with the subject is not dissociated from our aesthetic experience of it – if anything, it may be prompted by it. If Gabriel is the critic’s mirror image in Joyce’s “polished looking-glass” (*Letters* 90), his confrontation with “the

battle within” comes about as his interpretative mechanisms and aesthetic procedures fail; similarly, our response to the emotionally compelling subjects in the story is not dissociable from our aesthetic experience, which, as Rita Felski reminds us, activates cognitive no less than affective responses. Gabriel’s concluding vision strikingly differs from his mental painting of Gretta listening to *Distant Music*: whereas earlier he had confidently captured and entitled the image of his wife, now his and our aesthetic experience entails the absence of such an assertive interpretative frame. Both Gabriel and the reader are thus left experiencing the potential battle between our desire for meaning and our perplexing confrontation with what eludes our grasp and mastery. If Gabriel is our most obvious mirror image in “The Dead,” since he embodies what Norris calls the “loud” or “audible male narration” (Norris 192), it will be interesting to see whether the various “silent” voices that partake of Joyce’s “critique of patriarchy” but do not fully “succeed in making [themselves] heard” (Norris 192) will become more audible as Ireland commemorates the past, assesses its relevance to the present, and tries to envision the future.

Notes

- 1 Jimmy Deenihan TD, Minister for Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, quoted in <http://www.ahg.gov.ie/en/PressReleases/2012/April2012PressReleases/htmltext,16417,en.html>. See also: http://www.taoiseach.gov.ie/eng/News/Government_Press_Releases_2012/National_Commemorations_Programme_Decade_of_Centenaries_2012-2022.html; and <http://www.northernireland.gov.uk/news-ofmdfm-060812-junior-minister-mccann>
- 2 For a “James Joyce Chronology, 1900-1922”, see <http://modernism.research.yale.edu/ulysses/chronology.php> (accessed 01.06.2012).
- 3 For a detailed analysis of the military imagery in “The Dead”, see Winston.
- 4 Sedgwick argues that a restrictive understanding of Ricoeur’s “hermeneutics of suspicion,” which was proposed as “descriptive and taxonomic rather than mandatory” and did not preclude a “hermeneutics of recovery of meaning,” has led to “the methodological centrality of suspicion to current critical practice [and the] concomitant privileging of the concept of paranoia” (Sedgwick 2003, 125). She adds that, “To recognize in paranoia a distinctively rigid relation to temporality, at once anticipatory and retroactive, averse above all to surprise, is also to glimpse the lineaments of other possibilities” (146). One such possibility is “reparative reading”, which entails engaging with surprise: “to a reparatively positioned reader, it can seem realistic and necessary to experience surprise” (146). Surprise is precisely what Gabriel is meant to keep at bay at the party and yet cannot escape from.

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