

**Profound Silence:
The Irish Language in the First Stories of *Dubliners***

On a 1909 trip to Ireland, James Joyce reflected on how different his son's development, growing up in Trieste, would be from the author's own Dublin youth. Joyce wrote to his wife, "I felt proud to think that my son...will always be a foreigner in Ireland, a man speaking another language."¹ It's revealing that Joyce hopes his child will not embrace his father's native culture.

It's also revealing that the difference Joyce points to between his son and the Irish people is the language they speak. Since both he and his son were raised speaking English as a primary language, Joyce implies there is something specific in the way the Irish employ the English language that makes Irish-English distinctly inadequate, unique to the people of Ireland and the cultural suffocation he associates with them.

Joyce doesn't elaborate in the letter how this Irish language is unique, but we can see in *Dubliners*, the work Joyce had recently finished as he wrote the letter, that the Irish characters do speak their own dialect. It is a language of empty clichés and nondescript words that keeps the engine of daily life moving, in which words don't express personality but mask it, in which few people actually listen to each other and entire conversations consist of stock phrases like "God have mercy" and "I say!" The English in *Dubliners* is a different language than would have been spoken in any other European city.

Joyce's criticism of "Irishness" condemns a range of behaviors and attitudes, from religious dogmatism to poor housekeeping. But the way the Irish speak and how they

¹ Richard Ellmann, ed. *Letters of James Joyce*, Viking Press, New York, 1966, v. II, p. 255.

teach their children to speak offends him in particular. Especially in the first three portraits in *Dubliners*, which focus on the “childhood aspects”² of the citizens of Dublin —“The Sisters,” “An Encounter,” and “Araby”—Joyce sets up his argument that a boy becomes an Irishman through a discreet war waged by adults against children. The chief weapon of this battle is language and the children are at an insurmountable disadvantage.

Joyce mutates the typically nurturing relationship of child and caretaker into a struggle of conscience where adults do not enrich their children or help them develop, but stunt the children’s linguistic growth. The bright and quizzical boys of the first three stories struggle against this compulsory choking of their thoughts and words by disrespecting the adults or refusing to speak at all, but the force of the callous grown-ups dwarfs these efforts. The older Irish are hostile to the unpredictable youth, and out of their own insecurity stifle their young energy to protect the status quo. Joyce’s fictional parents act as the inverse of the author’s own paternal hope that his child would grow up “speaking another language” than he—these adults want to produce children that talk exactly as they do.

The battle lines between sensitive youth and brash grown-ups are drawn within the first page of *Dubliners*. Joyce’s first young narrator introduces “The Sisters” with subtle, perceptive language, relating that, “Night after night I passed the house...and night after night I had found it lighted the same way, faintly and evenly” (9). The light patter of the “night after night” repetition creates the same “faint and even” balance the candles do. Dissecting his own response to the word *paralysis*, the boy describes, “It had always sounded strangely in my ears...But now it sounded to me like the name of some

² Stuart Gilbert, ed., *Letters of James Joyce*, Viking Press, New York, 1957, vol. 1, p. 63. (5/5/06).

maleficent and sinful being” (9). It is striking that a young boy even *has* strong feelings about the sound of a word, that he can analyze them with such clarity reveals a finely-tuned intellect, ravenous for knowledge and stimulation. The boy has an innocent genius, speaking openly about his impressions of the world with energy though he has only begun to experience life.

But his delicate musings shift abruptly as he introduces his uncle’s friend. Shattering the gentle pace of the first two paragraphs Old Cotter bloviates “—No, I wouldn’t say he was exactly...but there was something queer...there was something uncanny about him” (9-10). Cotter’s crude words and stilted delivery create a jarring contrast to the boy’s poetic thoughts, the dash Joyce uses instead of quote marks is the first arrow shot in a war of language between child and adult that continues throughout the set of stories.³ The boy reacts as the reader does to Cotter’s vulgarity, disliking the man and turning his critical eye toward insulting the old drunk. In his mind, the boy fires back at Cotter, “red-nosed imbecile!” and “Tiresome old fool!” and the more sophisticated aside that Cotter, “used to be rather interesting, talking of faints and worms; but I soon grew tired of him and his endless stories” (11,10).

Cotter continues to blather about what behavior is appropriate for a young man and lets his unfinished sentences create a poisonous cloud that hangs above the family dining room. Cotter’s ellipses are not just aurally offensive to the boy. The old man speaks in coded language to Jack that leaves the boy unsure about what exactly he is implying, enticing the boy’s imagination by giving him a sense that something was

³ Joyce uses an identical pattern at the beginning of “An Encounter” where the boys’ “spirit of unruliness” is deflated by the interruption of Father Butler, and in “Araby” when the uncle’s arrival home swallows up the excitement of the “hour when the Christian Brothers’ School set the boys free” (20, 29).

somehow improper, even perverse, about his mentor, but keeping the boy from actually understanding his meaning. Michael West emphasizes how deliberate these vagaries are, describing how Cotter's "evasive remarks about Father Flynn's being 'one of those...peculiar cases' puzzle the child considerably, as they are meant to."⁴ The adults use obtuse language to conspire with one another to keep the boy confused.

But being the clever child he is, the boy uses his silence as a weapon against the adults who confuse and overwhelm him with their language. He feigns disinterest in his uncle's pronouncement of Flynn's death, saying, "I continued eating as if the news had not interested me," withholding from his elders any satisfaction they might get from telling him something he does not know⁵ (10). The next day he expresses his disgust at Cotter's patronizing by refusing to be fully "persuaded" that Flynn has died until reading the death announcement himself (12). In this act again it is his decision *not* to act or be persuaded that the boy expresses his anger. When he crams his mouth with porridge to keep from shouting at Cotter, there is a sense that the boy feels stronger in the silence, that his quiet fury energizes him more than a verbal outburst would. Psychologists term it "selective mutism," when a child refuses to speak in a public place, and though most often it is the result of anxiety and shyness, this boy embraces silence as an active method for maintaining his own identity. He cannot stand to acquiesce to the unpleasant language these adults speak. These subtle acts of defiance are the early stirrings of the children's

⁴ Michael West, "Old Cotter and the Enigma of Joyce's 'The Sisters'", *Modern Philology*, Vol. 67, No.4 (May, 1970): 370.

⁵ An early version of "The Sisters" makes more explicit the boy's sense that he is at war with the adults to learn and understand his world as he reflects, "So old Cotter had got the better of me for all my vigilance of three nights. It is often annoying the way people will blunder on what you have elaborately planned for." (???). Joyce scrapped these lines perhaps in an effort to make the hostility more implicit.

hostility toward their elders' obfuscating language and prohibition of knowledge, and this boy would rather not speak at all than engage his elders in their woefully inadequate Irish language.

In the bedroom scene, instead of escaping into his own thoughts, Cotter's yammering continues to trouble the boy as he "puzzl[es] my head to extract meaning from his unfinished sentences" (11). Marilyn French tells how before the boy falls asleep Cotter's "insinuations sink in" and the narrator "surely already knows that sex is sin, and he falls into a sensuous dream"⁶, but her version calls attention to what the boy "knows", or at least senses, instead of showing that what the boy mostly feels is confusion. French sees the boy's bafflement at Cotter's words as a kind of inherent knowledge, when it is closer to a lacking of knowledge. Like Cotter's "unfinished sentences" themselves, the boy's knowledge is fundamentally incomplete—a variation on the "gnomon" concept that reappears throughout *Dubliners*⁷. He knows something is amiss and intuits the significance of the words, but his quest for understanding is a struggle in which the knowledgeable adults are not resources for information, but obstacles to his comprehension, veiling facts and ensuring his ignorance.

Cotter and to a lesser extent Uncle Jack are the first of many cruelly indifferent adults that appear throughout these first three stories. The grown-ups discipline, harass, but mostly just ignore the children they are charged with raising, grinding down their sensitivity. What strikes the reader about these figures is how subdued Joyce presents

⁶ Marilyn French, "Missing Pieces in Joyce's *Dubliners*," *Twentieth Century Literature*, Vol. 24, No. 4 (Winter, 1978): 446.

⁷ For an in-depth look at this concept and how it influences the events of "The Sisters" see Leonard Albert's "Gnomonology: Joyce's 'The Sisters,'" *James Joyce Quarterly*, Vol. 27, No. 2 (Winter, 1990): 353-364.

their immorality. Cotter is not abusive to the boy. He does not even verbally insult him outside of implying the narrator's behavior is strange for a young boy. This toothless cruelty also surfaces in the grown-ups of the later stories. Besides the stranger in "An Encounter," the adults do not stand out as unusually unkind or corrupt in their rearing, as say Charles Dickens' Mr. McCawber or even Henry James' Sir Claude discernibly do—the two authors in most recent memory whose fascination with child development nearly equal Joyce's. Instead Joyce offers adults who inflict on the boys malice without passion. They are unspectacular villains who suit Joyce's concept of what is rotten with Dublin: not potent wickedness, but a pervasive emptiness.

The women of "The Sisters" are certainly less villainous than the men, but their hollow language is even more potent in its effect on the boy. The narrator describes feeling suddenly unable to "gather my thoughts because the old woman's mutterings distracted me" (14). Like Cotter's innuendoes, the boy comprehends the adults' speaking as vague "mutterings" and senses it challenging his ability to form thoughts of his own. We can see this in how his narrative tone changes as the adults continue to chat. The narrator begins with an alert description of the women, aiming a critical eye at Nannie and Eliza like he did to Cotter and Jack, noticing of Nannie "how clumsily her skirt was hooked at the back and how the heels of her cloth boots were trodden down all to one side" (14). But the language of the adults infringes upon his scrutiny. As the story continues, the mutterings are heard more than the boy's thoughts, and he is soon only interjecting generic observations like "Eliza took out her handkerchief and wiped her eyes with it," or "She laid a finger against her nose and frowned: then she continued" (17). As "The Sisters" concludes, the boy ceases his narration completely. It is only

“under cover of” a brief silence that he is able to so much as get up to retrieve his sherry (17). Craig Hansen Werner interprets the way the boy ceases to speak as Joyce implying that, “by the time he matures, the boy will be reduced to the more profound silence of the adult characters”.⁸ Yet as we saw earlier with Old Cotter, the boy’s muting of himself is not so much an imitation of the adults’ empty language as it is a defense against it.

The “profound silence of the adult characters” is not silence at all, but fear of silence. To fill the empty air they run to the refuge of space-fillers like “there’s no friends like the old friends” and “It’s when it’s over that you’ll miss him” (16). Their exchanges are getting at something, but the speakers don’t have the courage to say what they mean. They use a vague phrase like “I noticed there was something queer coming over him latterly” instead of offering their actual thoughts of what sort of disease or perversion was affecting the man (16). French describes this dialogue between Eliza and Nannie as “a tissue of clichés” and their goal is not to express how they feel, but to avoid awkwardness. As would be expected of people so committed to tradition, the women find security in the familiarity of clichéd expressions.

French suggests that as the boy listens in, he learns to model his language after them, that from these women, “the boy has already *learned* the use to which language is put—to conceal”.⁹ But it is still his choice whether he will practice the language lessons they are teaching him. While the women’s gossip subtly molds him into a dull thinker like themselves, it is his refusal not to join in, to protect himself “under cover of” silence, that curbs their efforts to make him speak like them.

⁸ Craig Hansen Werner, *Dubliners: A Pluralistic World*, Twayne Publishers, Boston, 1988, p.45.

⁹ Marilyn French, “Missing Pieces in Joyce’s *Dubliners*,” *Twentieth Century Literature*, Vol. 24, No. 4 (Winter, 1978): 448. My emphasis.

In the second story, “An Encounter,” Joyce takes this notion of an Irish-language education further, most obviously by beginning the segment in a schoolroom. The boys’ teacher, the typical despot in a father’s frock, forces them to monotonously recite the words of their Roman History text, demanding with a staggered rhythm that turns the priest’s words into verbal lashes with a linguistic whip, “Now, Dillon, up! *Hardly had the day...Go on! What day? Hardly had the day dawned...Have you studied it?*” (20). Significantly, Joyce does not have Father Butler ask them to recite facts or answer questions, he asks Leo simply to repeat what is already written, what he was supposed to have “studied” the night before. Butler’s own repetition of the textbook’s sentence and the fact that the boys are already repeating what is in their book emphasizes the adult view of language as a script to be memorized, rather than developed, manipulated, or used for creative expression¹⁰.

But instead of speaking the words the priest asks him to, Leo reads a cowboy-and-Indian comic book. The very un-Irish Old West cartoons act as a foreign temptation, similar to the eastern market in “Araby” and the dream of “some land where the customs were strange” in “The Sisters” (13-14). Here the temptation presents a specifically linguistic threat to the lessons Father Butler drives into his pupils. Not only does the comic undermine his class by giving the boys something more fun to read, but their love of Old West-style “adventure” entices them to skip Butler’s class altogether. Like the grudging silence of the boy in “The Sisters,” the comic book stirs the boys’ rebellious language and thinking, telling stories they find exciting in words they actually enjoy

¹⁰ Similarly, in “Counterparts,” Farrington’s son tries to escape his beating by repeatedly offering to say, “a *Hail Mary* for you” (94). The boys have learned they must say the scripted words the adults want to hear or face punishment.

reading. Disciplining their naughty behavior, Butler, like God reaching down to scatter the builders of Babel, snatches away *The Halfpenny Marvel* and asserts that *he* is shaper of their language—an empty and confusing language to them, but one that they must memorize if they are to get through his class, and through the rest of their lives in the pubs and offices of Dublin. Instead of Old Cotter’s obfuscations or the elderly sisters’ suffocation, Father Butler silences the boys actively, yanking away the comic and verbally rebuking them. His action escalates the growing hostility between children and adults that percolates throughout “The Sisters”.

But he does not whip or physically punish Leo, though it was particularly common in Irish Catholic schools¹¹. Instead they get verbal rebukes. The stranger’s talk on corporal punishment at the end of the story, as he waxes nostalgically on “the subject of chastising boys...that when boys were that kind they ought to be whipped and well whipped,” reminds us that Butler does *not* discipline his students this way (27). Like the other bland villains in this first triad of stories, the tension between adult and child in these early sketches are hostile but never violent. Though the snatching of the comic book and the creepiness of the stranger loom larger than the threats from the adults in “The Sisters,” the battles between youth and elder in all these first three stories are never physical engagements, they are fought on the field of words and meaning.

¹¹ One of the more illustrative descriptions of Irish discipline comes from Thomas O’Hanlon, writing in 1975 of his school days, “Corporal punishment was not merely accepted; parents felt it necessary...teachers [obtained] a touch of sexual satisfaction from beating children, on the face with their fists, on bare legs with canes, and by twisting their arms. This...is what Irish education seems to be all about.” Thomas O’Hanlon, *The Irish: Sinners, Saints, Gamblers, Gentry, Priests, Maoists, Rebels, Tories Orangemen, Dippers, Heroes, Villains, and Other Proud Natives of the Fabled Isle*, Harper & Row Publishers, New York, 1975, p.220-1.

The second adult in “An Encounter,” the peculiar stranger the boys meet while playing hooky, more closely resembles Old Cotter in his manipulative use of language than the didactic Father Butler or the sisters in the previous story. Rather than really wanting to teach the boys, he simply revels in his satisfaction in outsmarting and baffling them. The stranger asks what books the boys have read, more as a challenge than a question. He does not seem eager to share the writings of Walter Scott or Thomas Moore with them, but instead enjoys informing the boys simply that he owns all their works, that he “never tired of reading them,” but that, “there were some of Lord Lytton’s works which boys couldn’t read” (25). The stranger lords his knowledge over the less informed young boys. When the young protagonist lies about having read Sir Walter Scott, he gets only feelings of agitation and embarrassment and his comments about “when he was a boy” parallel Old Cotter’s platitudes about what is “bad for children” (25, 10). These two are caricatures of the concerned Irish parent, two profane fellows who exploit all the authority their age has granted them. Their words express a concern for child development while their behavior gives them away as having more self-interested motives. Through these men Joyce shows their desire to mold the boys in their likeness is rooted in insecurity with their own lives, not compassion for the youth. They exhibit only a desire to be smarter than the children they’ve produced, a commitment to tradition in the face of innovation and ideology when rationality threatens to undo their carefully-constructed realities.

Continuing this line of trickster figures is the boy’s uncle in “Araby”. In this third story, the narrator waits impatiently to go to the Eastern bazaar while his uncle teasingly asks if the boy knows the Irish poem “The Arab’s Farewell to his Steed” and then begins

to recite it, using the poem in the same taunting fashion the stranger uses the works of Walter Scott. Joyce then pits the arrogant humor of the uncle against the smitten seriousness of the narrator. The uncle tries to get the young man to have a laugh instead of go off on late-night adventures, merrily encouraging his nephew to just follow his example and call it a night. But the boy stands his ground, reporting, “I did not smile” to which the uncle eventually surrenders, saying “he was very sorry” (33). In this incident more than any in either of the previous stories, the boy’s resolve not to speak the language of his elders succeeds.

The newfound strength of the boy stems from the distance he has put between himself and his environment, spending more time with his thoughts than with other people. Of all these stories “Araby” is the most cerebral, and has only fifteen lines of speech compared to the 32 of “An Encounter” and 89 in “The Sisters”. While silence was how the boy coped with Old Cotter and the elderly sisters, now he relies on it almost entirely in every part of his life. He hides in the shadows when his uncle comes home, he peeks at Mangan’s sister from a discreet position on the living room floor, and feels like his senses “desire to veil themselves” (31).

The boy wants to disappear from the world, but he wants even more to make the world around him disappear, to “annihilate the tedious intervening days” (32). Like the boy in the first tale who finds the “mutterings” of the old women distracting, this protagonist also feels frustrated and uninterested in the adult-speak, having to “endure the gossip of the tea-table” which infringes on his romantic daydreams (33). But this boy seems more determined to silence the mutterings. Besides the girl he fawns over, all other outside stimulation infuriates him, from a ticking clock to street-singers. He copes with

his desolate world by convincing himself he is not a part of it and this strategy proves effective. His uncle's final acquiescence is not a result of the boy's impassioned requests, but his unnerving refusal to smile or express himself. The boy's silence proves to be an effective defense against the adults' empty chatter, as it simultaneously requires him to forfeit his passion and eloquence. In this boy who at first appearance seemed the strongest of the child narrators, Joyce has revealed the fruition of the diseased language of the Irish. It stems from a defensive impulse, and though it protects, at the same time it numbs.

Predictably, the one thing the boy does not distance himself from eventually suffers disillusionment and is cast aside. The coup de grace in the verbal battle comes in the form of the humdrum flirting of the "young lady" and "gentlemen" he overhears at the fair:

--O, I never said such a thing!
--O, but you did!
--O, but I didn't!
--Didn't she say that?
--Yes. I heard her.
--O, there's a...fib! (35)

The repetition of the empty words, inflected with denial and deceit, yank the boy from his romantic daydreams into the frivolous reality of how relations between the sexes in Dublin more often manifest themselves: not in excited declarations ("*O love! O love!*"), but triviality (31). Struck with the epiphany that this sort of foolishness is how boys actually win girls, the protagonist sees himself as "a creature driven and derided by vanity; and my eyes burned with anguish and anger" (35). He realizes that romantic language in Ireland does not sound like that in Victorian novels, and immediately turns against his own "vanity" for having thought that such fantasy could be true. Just as the

boy in “The Sisters” discards his rich language as he tries to shut out the gossip of the old women, this boy, who already shuts out the sounds and words of almost everything around him, is now on the brink of anesthetizing his last remaining passion. The final image of the boy staring with impotent fury into the Irish sky, silently promising himself he won’t suffer such embarrassment again, suitably concludes the trilogy of childhood stories. Now the rebellious silence that the young man uses as protection from the wretched language of the Irish adults has blunted his own senses and imagination. The boy has “matured” in the Irish sense of the word, and no longer needs Father Butler or Old Cotter to mold his language. He is now teaching himself how to speak like an Irishman.

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