

The Dubliner in Each of Us

(“The Sisters” and the logic of what is said)

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Abstract: *Considering both published versions of James Joyce’s “The Sisters,” this essay discusses the relation between each other in order to question the validity of using the journal version (1904) to increase the intelligibility of the one published in Dubliners (1914). The analysis will attempt to demonstrate that here we may find the first flickerings of Hugh Kenner’s “The Arranger” and that the mirror Joyce intended Dubliners to be may have been transforming us critics into its own characters.*

Keywords: *James Joyce; The Sisters; gnomon; sodomy; indeterminacy.*

Comparing both published versions of “The Sisters”¹ one can have generous access to the very peculiar way by which James Joyce discovers and transforms implied meanings and misunderstandings in one of the main engines of his prose, taking the first solid steps towards the indeterminacy that characterizes his later work. Joyce as we know him, a writer capable of creating *Ulysses*, will show up somewhere in between these two versions, and it is our intention not only to expose our reasoning for such assertion but also to explore the peculiar way in which these two versions dialogue.

Before all, one could question the strange bond these versions maintain with each other: should the first one be considered a draft of the definitive story, the one published in *Dubliners*, or is it mere raw material to this autonomous work, indifferent to its original purpose? For if it is obvious that the plot remains the same, it is likewise obvious that what it tells us is radically other in both cases; thus, we have to face the question about the validity of using the brief-though-wordier version to affect the intelligibility of the sober-though-lengthier one. What do we get when we use *The Irish Homestead* version (henceforth *TIH*) to fill gaps volunteered by the one published in book form (henceforth *D*)?

Throughout his works, Joyce will increasingly compel the reader to make extreme guesses and inferences, to build another layer fit to transform the superficial meanings of his prose. Therefore, to discuss both the most subtle differences and the most visible ones existing between these two versions could point at the kind of inferences Joycean

works presuppose as given, as inescapable, and the guesses we could / should take in order to achieve a deeper understanding of the mechanics of his writing.

The unnecessary hand

The issue will be staged in the book version, where we find an Old Cotter using ostensibly elliptical, mysterious phrases, referring to who knows what, beside a boy-narrator that strives to understand these gaps (“I puzzled my head to extract meaning from his unfinished sentences” [D 3]). If we consider Joyce’s later work, there is something deeply Joycean in the behavior of this Old Cotter, while the boy-narrator stands for the reader that struggles with the text without ever reaching a satisfactory level of certainties (even the boy’s uncles seem to be at the same situation, the uncle replying in a strange way to Old Cotter’s insinuations, the aunt manifesting her incomprehension openly – “How do you mean, Mr Cotter?” [D 3]).

However, in the *TIH* version the subtext appears to be clear to every one involved in the dialogue, and this happens since its first moments (*TIH* 289-90):

While I was eating my stirabout I heard him saying to my uncle:
“Without a doubt. Upper storey–(he tapped an unnecessary hand at his forehead)–gone.”
“So they said. I never could see much of it. I thought he was sane enough.”
“So he was, at times,” said old Cotter.
I sniffed the “was” apprehensively, and gulped down some stirabout.
“Is he better, Uncle John?”
“He’s dead.”
“O . . . he’s dead?”
“Died a few hours ago.”
“Who told you?”
“Mr. Cotter here brought us the news. He was passing there.”
“Yes, I just happened to be passing, and I noticed the window . . . you know.”

Notice in advance that, despite picking up the conversation in the middle and people never stating who they were talking about, the boy is able to perfectly guess the subject: what in *Dubliners* are mysterious lines here convert into precise references shared by everyone (however, it’s important to say that the *TIH* version will only name the dead man two paragraphs after this initial dialogue, when in *D* we have a name at the beginning of the conversation). Nothing in Old Cotter’s speech is missed by this narcissistic and somewhat arrogant boy-narrator, whom will even criticize the old man’s redundancy in making use of a colloquial term (*upper storey*, “jocularly used for the head as the seat of the mind or intellect” [OED]) and then recurring to gestures to clarify its meaning (“he tapped an unnecessary hand at his forehead”). Old Cotter doesn’t want to be misunderstood in this version; he even reports what made him

believe Father Flynn died (“I noticed the window . . . you know”²). This, compared to the book dialogue, shows clearly the contrast between both proposals (*D* 2):

My uncle saw me staring and said to me:

- Well, so your friend is gone, you’ll be sorry to hear.
- Who? said I.
- Father Flynn.
- Is he dead?
- Mr Cotter here has just told us. He was passing by the house.

Here, we have the feeling that the boy failed to pick up the theme of the previous conversation, and this even after his uncle says “your friend”. In fact we will never know for sure if Old Cotter’s ellipses were about Father Flynn: the text was woven to suggest this possibility (especially when the boy says, later, “I puzzled my head to extract meaning from his unfinished sentences” just before imagining “the heavy grey face of the paralytic” [*D* 3]), but in *D* we find no strong evidence of this. If we read this as a text about misunderstandings (and not about the child’s response to the death of an old friend), we can easily imagine the boy making a mistake about the conversation he picked up: we believe the conversation was about Father Flynn because the boy thinks so, but only in *TIH* we have enough motives to arrive at this conclusion. This fluctuation, manifest in *D*, should warn us to proceed with care when interpreting Old Cotter’s initial phrases.

According to Hugh Kenner, in the journal version “the boy-persona is an excuse for working in a grown-up commentary of impatience and wonder”, whereas “[t]he wonder and impatience, in the revised edition, are placed as those of a boy” (Kenner 50): in *TIH*, the boy-narrator tries to appear mindful of what he intimates through the text, which doesn’t happen in *D*, where intimations are made without we being assured that the boy is aware of them³. We should have a close look at these suggestions that, once insinuated in the first text, are then removed from the later one but not always without leaving traces for their retrieving.

Faints and worms

In the *TIH* version, the kinship between Nannie, Eliza and the deceased Father Flynn is stated clearly by the narrator just at the point the story begins to talk about them, when, right after making a reference to Nannie and the priest, it starts a phrase with “His other sister, Eliza” (*TIH* 290): *his* and *other* connect the three persons and we have, right at the second page of a total of five, a possible meaning for the title (a suggestion that will guide the reading of the remaining pages – even if in the end it is proved insufficient or inadequate, it still works as a kind of orientation). The information will be confirmed several times thereafter, for instance when the boy, the aunt “and the

two sisters” (*TIH* 291) sit together to begin their final exchange, when the aunt calls Eliza as “Miss Flynn” (*TIH* 292) three times in a single page, or even when the narrative voice gives us a “‘Poor Nannie,’ said her sister” (*TIH* 292). The book version displays their kinship in a much sober way, for, besides suppressing “His other sister, Eliza” and indicating just twice the fact of the women being sisters (“at her sister’s bidding” and “she sat down behind her sister” [*D* 6]), the account also reduces “Miss Flynn” (*D* 7) to a single apparition in the enlarged final dialogue. Therefore, the confirmation of sisterhood appears just in two brief mentions, at the fifth page of a total of eight, and we will need one more page to confirm, by a very discreet detail, the kinship between Father Flynn and them⁴. The relation between story and title gets threatened by this delay and by the fact that now just one sister is somewhat important to the narrative: in *TIH*, both of them had some relevance to the story (Nannie read out the newspaper for her brother, she – and not Eliza – always spoke “*Freeman’s General*” instead of “*Freeman’s Journal*” [*D* 291], there are several things they make together...) and the title could force the reader’s attention to look for something there, but in *D* just Eliza has a main role, challenging any attempt to put title and story together.

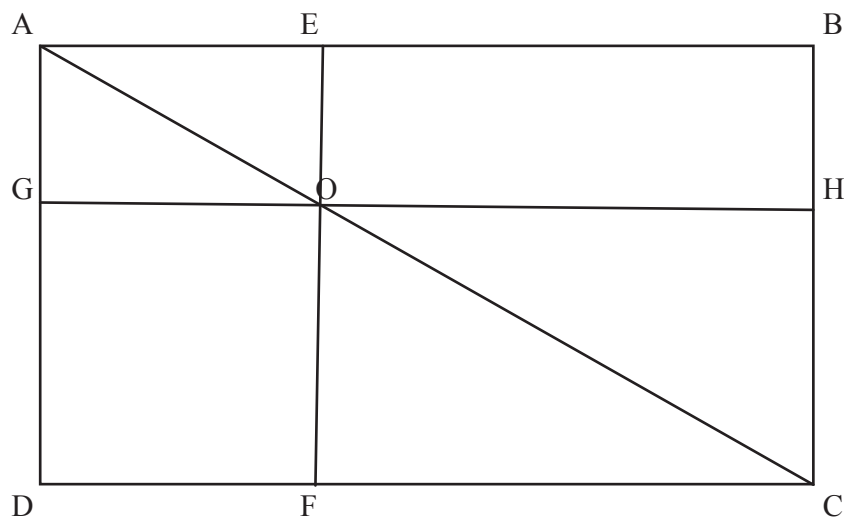
Calling attention to the mistake alluded above, in the book version Eliza is the one who says it (“Father O’Rourke [...] wrote out the notice for the *Freeman’s General*” [*D* 7]), this time in direct speech. Also, if in the first version we were sure of the boy noticing the fact, now we have to decide if the transcription answers for the boy’s perception (the first version presented no mistakes in direct speeches, but now we find a lot of non-normative scraps of English: “she’s wore out” [*D* 7], “rheumatic wheels” [*D* 8] instead of “pneumatic wheels”, “he was wanted for to go” [*D* 9], “brought in a light for to look for him” [*D* 9]) or for the preciousness’s of the narrator behind the boy-narrator – the one responsible for choosing “The Sisters” for its title, the one responsible for ending up the story abruptly.

These two versions vary also in the manner they refer to the Latin pronunciation Father Flynn was teaching the boy. If, in the journal version, we are expressly told that he was using the Italian one (“He had studied at the college in Rome, and taught me to speak Latin in the Italian way” [*TIH* 291]), forcing a link between studying in Rome and learning Latin this way, we have a distinct expression in *Dubliners*: “He had studied in the Irish college in Rome and he had taught me to pronounce Latin properly” (*D* 5). *Properly* makes us think about the possibilities of its meaning: Florence Walzl (1973) defends that it is a reference to the Italian pronunciation (and it may also “represent one form of dominance of Rome over the practices of nationalistic churches” [Walzl 394]), but the edition of *Dubliners* we are using, annotated by Jackson and McGinley, comments on the passage that “[t]here was a three-way dispute at this time as to how to pronounce Latin – Joyce originally wrote ‘speak Latin in the Italian way’” (*D* 5). Is it important to be sure?

Another difference that can throw light upon the nature of the inferences presupposed by this story refers to Nannie’s deafness. In *TIH* there is no room for doubt:

at her very first appearance, the narrator states that “Nannie (who is almost stone deaf) read out the newspaper to him” (*TIH* 290), adding also that when the priest “was tired of hearing the news he used to rattle his snuff-box on the arm of his chair to avoid shouting at her” (*TIH* 290-1). A few more lines and we find: “Nannie received us in the hall, and, as it was no use saying anything to her, my aunt shook hands with her for all” (*IH* 291). The revised edition proceeds in a completely different way. Erasing both the direct reference to Nannie’s deafness and the habit of the priest of rattling his snuff-box, all information we have in this respect will be summed up in “Nannie received us in the hall; and, as it would have been unseemly to have shouted at her, my aunt shook hands with her for all” (*D* 6). *No use saying to her* becomes *unseemly to have shouted at her*, and this is all we have. When it comes to an old lady, it makes sense to imagine (as unanimously critics and commentators do) that the phrase relates to deafness, but the game of inferences starts to get its stakes raised. After all, which text are we speaking of?

This snippet seems to us fit to illustrate the idea of “gnomon in the Euclid” (*D* 2), mentioned by the boy at the beginning of the revised edition: it is not just an irretrievable gap put there on purpose, but an information that was omitted without erasing the traces of its being there, thus permitting its restoring. According to Thomas Connolly (1965. 165), the edition of Euclid Joyce most likely knew defined *gnomon* as: “In any parallelogram the figure which is composed of either of the parallelograms about a diagonal and the two complements . . . is called a gnomon. Thus, if we take away either of the parallelograms AO, OC from the parallelogram AC, the remainder is called a *gnomon*.”



In other words, the gnomon would be, to “The Sisters”, and therefore also to *Dubliners*, the image for everything that is missing and nonetheless leaves room to be inferred or assumed, but not for the phrase Bloom was writing in the sand at the end of *Ulysses*’s thirteenth episode (“Nausicaa”) or even the things the “queer old jossler” (*D* 18) did

in front of Mahony in another short story of *Dubliners* (“An Encounter”). Despite quoting this very excerpt, Connolly does not call attention to this fact, insisting as other critics on the idea of *gnomon* as a “remainder after something else has been removed” (Connolly 1965, p.195). Years before but in the same way, Gerhard Friedrich (1957) wrote a thorough essay on the importance of this image to *Dubliners* along with a whole inventory of supposedly *gnomon* traits to be found there:

The characteristics of the Euclidean *gnomon* are moreover exhibited by Joyce’s method as well as by the essential human content of “The Sisters”. Such structural detail as old Cotter’s “unfinished sentences”, the boy’s inability to remember the end of his dream, his groping his way towards his usual chair in the corner of the late Father Flynn’s sitting-room, and the broken-off ending of the story emphasized by ellipsis points, exemplifies a condition even more strikingly indicated by the priest’s talking to no one, wandering about by himself, and being found hidden away in his confession-box in the locked and dark chapel, and further by the symbolic gazing into the empty fireplace in the dark room behind the shop. (Friedrich 422-3)

Everything can be read as *gnomon* in this perspective, and we get the impression that the boy-narrator smartly planted this word to work as a key not only to this story but to the entire volume. But he is just a boy, an unnamed boy of unspecified age – not James Joyce himself. The text forces us to imagine *paralysis* and *gnomon* linked together (perhaps, by free association, *paralysis* sounded to the boy’s ears as something close to *parallelogram*, a word that is key to the *gnomon* definition), and these two are in turn related to *simony* (*paralysis* also made him think of this word, for the boy believes we do not know why that the paralytic priest committed this sin), all three words that happened to occur to this boy becoming suddenly keywords not just to this story but to all fourteen others. Something in them asks us to make this connection, tries to states this connection as inevitable, which would be reason enough to resist them in order to avoid becoming Joyce’s puppets. To think these terms as keywords would fit quite well into a moralistic view of *Dubliners*, a reading that could not grasp the ambivalence of Joyce’s feelings towards his own land.

Another possible example of *gnomon* in the rewriting of the work could be Old Cotter’s presentation. In the *TIH* version, we first find him as “the old distiller who owns the batch of prize setters,” and only then we are told that he was rather interesting when talking about “faints” and “worms” (*TIH* 289). One should pay attention to the quotation marks distinguishing these words, implying that there is something strange with them – a clear attempt of the narrative voice to avoid any misinterpretations from the part of the reader. The revised edition not only will anticipate the “faints and worms” (*D* 2), now without any quotation marks, but will also completely change the context in which they appear, saying right after them “but I soon grew tired of him and his endless stories about the distillery” (*D* 2). As stated by Andreas Fischer, in the book version the

reader was not prepared to recognize the two words as technical terms of distillery, and so “the uncontextualized words *faints* and *worms* with their possible connotations of weakness and decay sound strange and ominous, mirroring the effect the words *paralysis*, *gnomon* and *simony* have on the narrator” (Fischer 1988. 21). Many translators saw themselves in trouble on account of this unexpected game of inferences that brings the polysemy of *faints* and *worms* to the foreground, blurring the technical meanings they would assume inside Old Cotter’s speech. Maybe this instability can even point to the way the boy misapprehends these words: we can assume he realizes their meanings differ from the usual ones, but there is some doubt to what extent he can define their specific senses. And so we notice that the handling of this device – the indeterminacy – can cause substantial imbalances in the meanings produced by the text, the suppressing of excerpts not only forcing the reader to find ways of retrieving them but also opening the text to unexpected significations.

I know what you mean: Father Flynn as Joyce’s Brunetto Latini

Something already pointed out by critics is the fact that the aunt should have gone to the sisters’ house in search of elucidation. Talking to Old Cotter made her uncomfortable because she could not infer the subtext shared by the old man and her husband. In the journal version this problem is already there but still not that evident. For instance, when she asks “Do you think they will bring him to the chapel?”, hearing in return “Oh, no, ma’am. I wouldn’t say so” (Old Cotter) and “Very unlikely” (husband) [TIH 290]. Why were they so sure? She then takes the kid to the house of mourning and tries to discover what was wrong with the priest and, during her conversation with Eliza, a question clearly shows her suspicions (TIH 292): “And everything . . . ?” According to Terence Brown, in a note written on this passage, “[t]he questioner seems to express concern here as whether Father Flynn received Extreme Unction before death”, adding also that “[t]he rite would only be refused in exceptional circumstances” and that “only in case of something very disgraceful indeed could it be imagined that a dying priest could be refused this last Sacrament of his Church” (*D*, Introduction 1992. 243). This mysteriousness makes her think of something sinful. The conversation between the uncle and Old Cotter (transcribed above) suggests they believe the priest has lost his mind, something Eliza will try to dismiss but end up reinforcing⁵.

The book version, in turn, omits the discussion about the priest’s madness and inserts vagueness and ellipses in its place. Old Cotter’s inability to verbalize his inner beliefs (in *D*), associated with the grotesque smile of the priest (in both versions) and the reference to a mysterious boy who caused the priest to break a chalice⁶ (also in both) made critics imply some sexual connotation to this mysteriousness. This interpretation begun in fact with George Robert, managing director of Maunsel & Co., which in 1909 had agreed to publish *Dubliners*: in August 20, 1912, Joyce wrote to his brother Stanislaus

that this man asked him “very narrowly was there sodomy also in *The Sisters* and what was ‘simony’ and if the priest was suspended only for the breaking of a chalice” (*Letters* II, 305-6). Joyce didn’t write his answer, favouring the suspicion. Old Cotter affirms, rudely, that it is bad for children “to have too much to say to a man like that”, defending that people should “let a young lad run about and play with young lads of his own age and not be . . .” (*D* 30). The uncle agrees and prescribes to the boy exercises and cold baths, something that, since Michael West (1970. 371), begun to be read as Victorian advices for minimizing the likelihood of masturbation in childhood. But how can we believe his uncle and an old friend (with whom the boy was somewhat attached in the past) discussing calmly about sexual matters involving the boy and a priest? No, it can look similar to what Victorian manuals counsel, but it is also another way of saying *mens sana in corpore sano* – a famous proverbial verse of the Roman poet Juvenal (Satire X).

Connolly was one of the first critics to point out that from Old Cotter’s “vague and tantalizingly incomplete sentences (...) one may conclude anything or nothing about Father Flynn” (Connolly 1965. 193). Thomas Dilworth, in a fabulous essay about this short story, made a point by stating that “because we know only that the priest has been paralyzed by strokes, we suspect Cotter of ridiculous bias against paralytics, a bias shared apparently by some Joyce critics who see the physical ailment as symbolic of some moral distortion” (Dilworth 1993. 100) – what should be considered in relation to the fact that “Cotter may resent having lost the boy as audience to the priest” (*ibid*). He continues by defending that “the lustful connotations of the priest’s smile” are “merely a consequence of physical paralysis” (*ibid*). This makes sense when we remember that the journal version displayed clearly a conversation about the priest’s madness (*mens sana*): as it happened to the Latin pronunciation, should we think the priest’s disease remained the same in the later version? The question of the title turns back to play a decisive role and Leonard Albert (1990) defends a perverse way of reading it:

In Joyce’s day the most common terms for a homosexual were “Mary,” “sister Mary,” or just “sister.” These terms were largely limited to the male heterosexual community; they were taboo words and so profoundly embarrassed mixed society that they were abbreviated, ameliorated, and diminished to “sissy,” which survives in a somewhat attenuated sense no longer taboo. *Webster’s New International Unabridged* defines “sissy” as, among other things, “an effeminate man or boy,” and, as first meaning, “diminutive of *sister*.” (...) “The Sisters,” therefore, has a meaning akin to “the odd couple,” or in today’s phrase, “the gay couple.” (Albert 362-3)

The ‘sissy’ hypothesis is amazing, but the way Albert uses it to interpret the text makes me wonder what idea of homosexuality he has. There is no homosexual relationship in here; if anything, there is pedophilia and nothing else. He tried to interpret the title as both alluding to Father Flynn’s sisters and to the boy and priest as a couple: it is interesting to question what sisters the title is referring to, but there is no point in

imagining just by this a gay couple and in blaming the boy for covering their illicit relationship.

It seems more interesting to question the sisters alluded to in the title in other sense. We have seen that people have been reading *sodomy* there even before the book was published: what if we accept that, in the book version, Joyce wanted to conceal the previous direct references to Father Flynn's madness in order to make the text suggests more strongly some sexual matter? A text intended to be misinterpreted or, as Marilyn French (1978) brilliantly put it,

The major devices used in the stories for conveying the Dublin mode of thinking are masking language and gaps. Masking language is euphemistic, clichéd, or preceptual, that is, saying what one thinks one is supposed to say. Gaps are ellipses in logic, language, or information. As is always the case with Joyce, the theme is not merely pointed to, but is incorporated into the style: the reader is forced to experience it. (444)

Here we should recall a passage suppressed from the book version, where the boy-narrator states that Father Flynn “had an egoistic contempt for all women-folk, and suffered all their services to him in polite silence” (*TIH* 291). We could read this as saying that the priest had no sexual interests at all (in a heteronormative society, people presuppose desire just between man and woman) – a thing not just expected but highly wanted in a priest –, but it is possible to read there also that he had no sexual interests *in women*. This is the way we want to see it: a man when imagined as a homosexual can be unmanned at the eyes of society, starting to be talked of in feminine, a sissy, sister. “The Sisters” then could be pointing to the fact that they were three women living in that house, not just two. However, I think this meaning exists just for the reader, a joke of the narrator with us, maybe the first flickering of *The Arranger* – this mysteriousness as the mirror Joyce wanted *Dubliners* to be, a mirror where readers could have a good look at themselves, projecting onto Father Flynn everything they think disgraceful enough to fit this unspeakability, the reader becoming a personification of Corley (“Two Gallants”), who “knew the inner side of all affairs and was fond of delivering final judgments” (*D* 44).

Notes

- 1 The first in the journal *The Irish Homestead*, 12/08/190, pp.676-7 (Gifford 1982); the later as the opening story of *Dubliners* (*D* 2-9).
- 2 This narrator doesn't seem interested in ambiguities. Consider, for instance, another passage suppressed in *D*, important to explain the subtext of Old Cotter's phrase: “As I went home I wondered was that square of window lighted as before, or did it reveal the ceremonious candles in whose light the Christian must take his last sleep” (*TIH* 289). With this, he avoids the abrupt time cut that distinguishes the passing from the first to the second paragraph in the *D* version (“as I went home”) and also offers meaning to the search for candlelight at the moribund's window.

- 3 Pay attention to the fact that, in the first version, the boy-narrator has access to events he didn't even witness and also to the other characters' conscience: "and then he used to make believe to read his Prayer Book. Make believe, because, when Eliza brought him a cup of soup from the kitchen, she had always to waken him" (*TIH* 291). In the book version, this converts into an account made by Eliza about the oddities she had been perceiving in her brother's behavior: "Mind you, I noticed there was something queer coming over him latterly. Whenever I'd bring in his soup to him there I'd find him with his breviary fallen to the floor, lying back in the chair and his mouth open" (*D* 8).
- 4 The procedure makes me think of, among other cases, the economy with which Joyce situates *Ulysses* in June 16, 1904, Bloomsday: just two incidental mentions throughout some 700 pages – one at the letter Boylan's secretary is typewriting in the tenth episode ("Wandering Rocks"), the other when Bloom reads the newspaper's special issue with race results in the sixteenth episode ("Eumaeus").
- 5 "Not that he was anyway mad, as you know yourself; but he was always a little queer. Even when we were all growing up together he was a little queer" (*TIH* 292).
- 6 Notice that the account Elize gives on this depends upon what *they*, and not her brother, *say*: "It was that chalice he broke . . . That was the beginning of it. Of course, they say it was nothing it was all right, that it contained nothing, I mean. But still . . . They say it was the boy's fault. But poor James was so nervous, God be merciful to him!" (*D* 9). It suggests that the priest and her sisters didn't (couldn't?) talk about that.

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