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Dead Again

MARGOT NORRIS AND VINCENT P. PECORA

Our essays reflect the new theoretical perspectives we have acquired in the years since we each first published work on Joyce's story "The Dead" some decades ago. However, we approached these new readings in slightly different ways. Vincent Pecora responded in a revisionist spirit to his own 1986 "PMLA" essay on the story, attempting to come to terms both with certain lacunae in that reading and with his own change in perspective after more than twenty-five years of teaching and reflection. Margot Norris began by specifically engaging with Pecora's 1986 piece as a point of departure—and putting it into dialogue with her own early discussions of the intersection of aesthetics and gender in the work. Here she brings "Possible World Theory," a branch of narratology, to bear on the question of Gabriel and Gretta's relationship to narration and writing in order to address the figures' motives and sensibilities insofar as they shape the reader's engagement with the conundrum of their marriage. The conversation that ensued after we exchanged essays was very much a product of the Internet era: the authors began to correspond via e-mail, quite informally at first, and what is included here as an appendix is more or less the entirety of their dialogue. What is striking in retrospect is the degree to which the e-mail conversation, albeit accidentally, reproduces some of the characteristics of pretelephonic intellectual life, a life once recorded in voluminous epistolary debate. Of course, what was once true about such correspondence—the fact that it was often preserved in "hard copy" for decades, even for centuries—is generally speaking no longer the case. Today we routinely purge servers and hard drives of our written dialogues in ways that would make Samuel Richardson's "Clarissa" an

unimaginable work of art. Perhaps, though, we need to reconsider the enormous potential hidden in once again “writing,” rather than speaking, to one another, a “semantic potential,” as Jürgen Habermas might say, that for many years would seem to have been lost.

The Inkbottle and the Paraclete, by Vincent P. Pecora

The invitation to reconsider a story about which I first wrote more than twenty-five years ago has been an occasion for some personal reflection on the whole business of literary criticism, and especially on what I might call the irreducible vicissitudes of interpretation. That the things from which we derive meaning seem to change with time because *we* have changed is of course a truism, and this point applies to places and people just as much as to stories and poems. But at least on this occasion, I found it to be an interesting truism, full of possibilities. And so, like Wordsworth returned to Tintern Abbey, I found myself looking back on what I had written about “The Dead,” “with gleams of half extinguished thought, / With many recognitions dim and faint, / And somewhat of a sad perplexity.” It is the perplexity I felt on rereading both the story and what I wrote about it that I want to share in what follows—a perplexity much less sad than Wordsworth’s, but the consequence of recognitions dim and faint all the same.

The story unfolds with the same nonjudgmental “scrupulous meanness” of Flaubertian realism that distinguishes the earlier tales in the collection, with a heavy use of free-indirect discourse, though many have felt that it also marks a sort of departure for Joyce: it is a deeper, more developed piece of work; it points us toward the mature novels; and it seems to represent a reconciliation of sorts on Joyce’s part with an Ireland toward which, throughout the earlier stories, he had shown mostly bitterness and disdain. This last point, best argued by Joyce’s great biographer Richard Ellmann, albeit largely on the strength of a partial reading of one of Joyce’s letters, has been especially relevant for many critics, since Gabriel Conroy and his wife, Gretta, share characteristics of Joyce and his eventual wife, Nora, and since the narrative pattern of initial bitterness and disdain toward Ireland leading toward a kindlier acceptance seems to be repeated in Joyce’s subsequent

A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man and *Ulysses*. Moreover, the larger political journey taking us from youthful angry shame about one's colonized nation to a more complex and nuance-laden relationship with it would be later elaborated by critics like Declan Kiberd and Vincent Cheng as the sign of the postcolonial condition in Joyce. To be sure, there had already been a long and lively debate about the story's conclusion, defined largely by whether you believed Gabriel's humbled acknowledgment of his mortality at the end was a redemptive triumph of self-awareness and fellow feeling or a sobering, tragic, existential confrontation with death in an uncaring universe. But in either case, what Ellmann called a renewed sense of the "mutuality" with others that comes with being humanly vulnerable was the largely accepted reading of the ending, and no one (at least in print, as far as I could tell) had concluded that Joyce might be treating Gabriel with cruel irony. But to me, back in 1985, it appeared obvious that we should see Gretta at the end as self-deluded about her erstwhile hero, Michael Furey, and Gabriel as equally self-deluded about both Gretta and himself. And that was more or less what I claimed, decades ago.

Now, I did not originally present my argument in such bald terms, but clothed it in the rather thick and heavy folds of literary theory—vaguely deconstructive theory—so that the story seemed to be less about Joyce's ironic intentions than about the illusion of what Derrida had called "self-presence," exemplified by the misguided belief that we could ever make our intentions fully transparent to others, or even to ourselves (see, among many examples, Derrida 1973, 75–77). I thus drew less on earlier critics of Joyce's often-slippery irony, such as Wayne Booth, than on Derrida's more thoroughgoing critique of any notion of intentional consciousness unmediated by preexisting traces of language (see Booth 1961, 323–36). (The omission of Booth was something I tried to correct in the version of the argument that appeared in my first book, where, to the dismay of some of my more theoretically astute reviewers, Booth's older moralistic concerns over unanchored irony were brought back into the discussion; see Pecora 1989, 103–7.) I also borrowed heavily from Nietzsche's critique of Christian asceticism and altruism, which were prime examples for me of the illusion of self-presence. But most of all, I drew on Joyce's stated suspicions both of heroic Christ-like self-sacrifice and of the degree to which his own authorial intentions might be either just "old

phrases, sweet only with a disinterred sweetness” (*P*, 233)—that is, sentimental narrative or moral clichés—or perhaps forms of literary plagiarism, that is, unconscious forgeries of someone *else’s* language and intentions. This entire problem of language haunted by intentions not one’s own, and intentions haunted by language not one’s own—which was for me central also to the free-indirect discourse that was Joyce’s favorite narrative device—was symbolized most trenchantly by Joyce’s later figure of “the Haunted Inkbottle” used by the “pelagiarist” Shem the Penman in *Finnegans Wake* (182). (As Joyce’s pun suggests, acknowledging that we are all plagiarists of sorts is, in a sense, a Pelagian release from the taint of primal guilt, from the “original sin” supposedly incurred by betraying our originality, our origins.) The question Stephen Dedalus puts to himself in *A Portrait*—“Could his mind then not trust itself?” (*P*, 233)—was, I argued, precisely the question Joyce was articulating throughout his fiction. And the key to my argument about all this in “The Dead,” as the title of my original essay, “‘The Dead’ and the Generosity of the Word,” implied, lay in the word *generosity*.

In brief, I argued that the concept “generosity” had been thoroughly corrupted by numerous earlier moments in the text where it was either a false front for ulterior motives or the sign of a willing self-victimization on the part of the Irish nation as a whole (Ireland being, as Joyce wrote nastily in an earlier story, filled with the “gratefully oppressed”). Thus, when I came to the story’s penultimate paragraph, which follows Gabriel’s realization that his love for Gretta was trivial by comparison to the love of the heroic Michael Furey and which dramatizes the sudden appearance within Gabriel of a new self-awareness and acceptance of others earned through humiliation, my argument was that the attentive reader could not read the line “Generous tears filled Gabriel’s eyes” without feeling that it rang false, or, in simpler terms, that Joyce was being thoroughly ironic about Gabriel’s presumed emotional awakening. In my view, the gas worker, Michael Furey, was himself a gaseous creature etherealized by Gretta’s overwrought romantic sensibility. Here, my real guide was Hugh Kenner’s brilliant reading of the story “Eveline,” in which the title character is seen as unable even to comprehend how much she had fictionalized all that she thought she had lost when she decided not to leave Ireland with her suitor, whom Joyce ironically (so Kenner claimed) named Frank (see Kenner 1972, 38). But Gabriel seemed to

me even more of a sentimental fool at the end of the story than he was at the beginning, since he was in effect buying into a set of eminently Gaelic folk myths, largely originating in Macpherson's *Poems of Ossian*, which celebrated self-sacrifice, heroic romantic loss, and (last but not least) the saving virtue of a generosity that depended upon, indeed fetishized, one's own victimhood.

That is, Gabriel seemed to be passively and unthinkingly accepting all the cultural stereotypes that Joyce more than once indicated he believed were both the products and the enablers of Ireland's self-induced political and cultural victimization. I thus suggested that Joyce had constructed the story as a sort of narrative trap, one that would demonstrate to the reader just how easy it was to fall prey to such political and cultural clichés. Instead of making his peace with Ireland's unsought failings, and demonstrating a more generous understanding of the tragedy that had so often been Irish life, as Ellmann had argued, I suggested instead that "The Dead" was actually one more rotten egg hurled at the stereotypes of an Irish self-regard that found metaphysical comfort in its ability to endure humiliation, and then make redemptive music from it. The only problem in my reading, of course, was that most other readers did not think it accurately reflected what Joyce was doing, which meant either that in my interpretation Joyce's readers were on the whole as foolish as Gabriel and Gretta, since they so often took those characters at face value at the end rather than as figures of ridicule, or that the story was something of a failure. I opted for the former alternative, thereby earning some praise, but also a fair amount of enmity from a number of my colleagues in turn. Some, like Dennis Taylor, wrote immediately in a letter to *PMLA*'s "Forum" that my account absurdly presented Joyce's story as embodying "a gigantic cultural trap sprung by Christ." In a book published in 2003, Desmond Howard wrote that "reading Pecora reading 'The Dead' is both exciting and unnerving," noting with some irritation that my "menacingly articulate analysis . . . races beyond the borders of Joyce's fiction and into the very act of reading and interpretation" (Harding 2003, 65). The main problem for most of those scholars who objected to my interpretation was understandable enough, however, and it was a consequence of the sort of paradox that Paul de Man once upon a time liked to exploit. If Joyce had designed a story about seemingly hard-won insight that turned out to be just one more version of being duped, and moreover had done so

in such a hermetic and obscure fashion that one could never be sure where the joke stopped, then what would ever count as genuine insight, and how would we ever know when we had it, including insight about the story itself? Why wouldn't my own insight into the story then go up in smoke along with Gabriel's awakening? As Taylor cleverly (and I now think correctly) put it, my version of the story actually refused ambiguity, presenting Joycean modernism as "oddly puritanical: it excoriates Gabriel and denies that he has any choice." Nevertheless, for many years I was satisfied that it was enough to have made people nervous about the story. On rereading both the story and my essay, however, I was less satisfied (and this dissatisfaction also embraced the longer book-chapter version, which grounded the text's "cultural trap" in the "iron cage" of Max Weber's modern, administered society). It was not so much that I now feel that I had been wrong about the story, but rather that my own early account fell short in conveying just how perplexing this story really is.

Searching for the key to my perplexity, I began to reflect on the large amount of scholarship over the past forty years or so that has been devoted to the role of the reader in producing the meaning of literary texts. And, not surprisingly, I found that I agreed more fully than I once had with Hans Robert Jauss that an interpretation is a function of a historically defined "horizon of expectations," and with Stanley Fish (or at least with one of his various avatars) that an interpretation is a function of the "interpretative community" that validates it, and even with David Bleich and Norman Holland that an interpretation is a function of the individual reader's "personality," and ultimately the reader's unconscious thought processes, including everything from gender to the effects of trauma. My reading, I decided, was very much of its theoretical time and place, shaped by Derrida's deconstruction, by Foucault's critique of a panoptic modern social order, and by a more broadly based critical obsession, built on figures like Lacan and Althusser, with the various ways by which we had all been interpellated as manageable subjects by a given social order (see Althusser 1971, 170–83; Althusser in fact highlights "Christian Religious Ideology" as his prime example). To a degree, such ideas, like those ideas of reader-response criticism itself, have been quietly absorbed into much critical practice at this point. And although I cannot agree with the strong version of reader-response theory—Wordsworth's

“half-create” already seems more than sufficient—I also cannot ignore the large degree to which the rather formalistic notion of an “implied reader” and deconstruction itself played significant roles in my earlier interpretation of Joyce’s story, roles that they would not play today.

At the same time, both Wordsworth and Bleich helped me see that my reception of the story was in no sense simply a function of a historical moment or theoretical model, but was also a deeply personal response. Gabriel’s sense of superiority and humiliation, and especially Joyce’s angry frustration with the religious, national, and familial nets trying to keep him from fleeing everything that (he felt) oppressed him, as recounted in *A Portrait*, had uncanny parallels in my own life: an educated, formerly Catholic son of uneducated working-class parents, one who had been introduced to Joyce in a Jesuit secondary school. If I could not accept that Joyce was being sincere in portraying a fictional version of himself as learning to accept what he most desired to escape, then perhaps the roots of my critical approach could be found in my own unresolved refusal to make a separate peace with my family and its expectations. Moreover, it now seems eminently plausible that if I saw unflinching irony in Joyce’s narratives as the mark of the vigilant critical intelligence resisting the lure of unthinking sentimentality, it might be because something similar had become a kind of defense mechanism for me too—that is, aggressive irony as a psychic defense against messy emotional attachments. I began to wonder whether my elaboration of the story’s meaning was “menacingly articulate” precisely because articulating unwanted human ties in a menacing fashion was the best way I had at the time to keep them at bay.

Yet on further consideration, nothing in the archive of research into the role of the reader promised true explanatory comfort for my sad Wordsworthian perplexity. And none of it proved adequately explanatory for the simple reason that my predicament was, in fact, not really commensurate with Wordsworth’s. That is, I was responding not simply emotionally to a mute landscape, one that (as far as anyone knew) had no intentions embodied in it, but rather to language that had been deliberately organized by a human intelligence like my own and that actually seemed to be trying to communicate something to me. It was surely not all my fault that, having arrived once again at the famously hyperventilated purple prose of the story’s

conclusion, I no longer had a clear sense of what this piece of literature was finally supposed to *mean*. No matter how much I tried to convince myself that the problem was in *me*, and that any new reading of the story I might produce would be just as personally or historically determined as the old reading had been, I could not quite relinquish my sense that the story itself *did* matter a great deal, and that the difficulties of interpretation finally had to be traceable, in some fashion, back to particulars of the text and not simply explained away by characteristics of the reader or the epoch. If the latter premise were as true as the strong version of reader-response theory implied, then the confusion of daily life on this planet would be far more profound than it already is.

And so I turned to a critic who has been, and still is, rather hostile toward all this Wordsworthian (or deconstructive) talk of a reader's role in creating the meaning of a text, especially when that text is threatened with being reduced to little more than a chain of empty material signifiers resting lifelessly on the page. As it happens, for quite different reasons I had also been reading Walter Benn Michaels's book *The Shape of the Signifier*. Michaels has now combined two of his earlier arguments—that the meaning of any literary work is, and can only ever be, identical with the intention of the author and that the belief in cultural identity is at bottom no different from racism—into one grand unified theory. Not to put too fine a point on it, Michaels now claims that belief in the independence, or at least inevitably errant quality, of the signifier, of the sort that we associate with deconstruction and creative reading, logically entails cultural essentialism, and ultimately racism. "I am arguing," he writes, "that anyone who thinks the text consists of its physical features (of what Derrida calls its marks) will be required also to think that the meaning of the text is crucially determined by the experience of its readers, and so the question of who the reader is—and the commitment to the primacy of identity as such—is built into the commitment to the materiality of signifier" (2004, 13). That is, if you don't believe that authorial intention is the same thing as textual meaning, then you don't believe that people are defined by what they say and by their beliefs, and you must believe that people (not just readers) are defined by what they are, by a cultural essence (that is, something independent of rational beliefs), which effectively makes you a racist.

I do not want to get into the business of parsing Michaels's argument here. It is perhaps enough to say that I do not see why being suspicious of what people claim or think they mean by a given utterance, or wondering whether they really do believe what they say and imagine they believe, or recognizing along with Joyce that our inkbottles are often haunted, and that we often unconsciously plagiarize (which is really all that is technically required to make you a creative reader of some sort, even if not in consciously deconstructive terms)—I do not see why any of these claims necessarily mean that I must also believe that people have a specific and essential cultural or racial identity. Even Michaels himself seems to believe that people do not really always understand what they say they mean; otherwise, deconstructionists who say they are not essentialists could not make the logical error Michaels says they are making. That is, I do not see why Joyce's haunted inkbottle should entail cultural essentialism, though Michaels's argument points in that direction. Still, while I was dismayed by this latest turn in Michaels's larger antitheoretical project, reading his eminently persuasive ridicule of strong versions of creative reading reminded me just how much I agreed with him on certain key points. Indeed, despite my appropriation of strategies borrowed from deconstruction and reader-response theory, my earlier interpretation of "The Dead" was based squarely (as I indicated in my response to Dennis Taylor's *PMLA* letter) on my belief that I had more accurately discerned what Joyce meant us to understand than previous criticism had. Nothing in my original interpretation, I felt, contradicted the idea that, just as Michaels has long argued, the meaning of the story and the author's intention were one and the same. Today I would simply say, minus the theoretical jargon, that I believed then that Joyce was intentionally being far more ironic about his principal characters than most other readers were willing to credit. But it was never easy to square my underlying belief that I could better grasp Joyce's intentions—they were to me, at the time, clearly ironic—with my argument in the essay itself, which was that we should be thoroughly, deconstructively, suspicious about the nature of all intentions, Joyce's as well as Gabriel's, and that this suspicion was a logical consequence of Joyce's own (Pelagian) views of language and society.

As with my turn to Jauss and company for help, I found that Michaels's bracing certainty about the necessary identity of authorial intentions and

textual meaning did little to aid my perplexity, for as I have already indicated, my problem today is not that I have discovered a clearer set of intentions in the story different from the ones I found earlier. It is that I am far less certain today what the intended meaning of this story might be, especially of the ending, than I once was, and that this uncertainty is not the consequence of its being badly constructed. Moreover, I think I can also say that I have begun to wonder all over again what these words *intention* and *meaning* are actually supposed to represent where literature is concerned, whether they are in fact adequate concepts when faced with the literary object. I found myself recalling F. R. Leavis's witty dictum about Joseph Conrad's wanting to make "a virtue out of not knowing what he means" (1963, 180), and I have come to believe that it has more to recommend it than we generally are willing to admit. In any case, I have long wondered whether the claims put forward in Michaels and Steven Knapp's original essay, "Against Theory," were of much help in dealing with a situation in which an author foregrounds the necessity of what Conrad calls "singleness of intention," and then proceeds quite deliberately to undermine the phrase's coherence, perhaps getting lost along the way in the thickets of his own rhetorical fancy. I must admit that I am just as perplexed these days when I return, usually in preparation for a class, to Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, which grows somehow murkier, more incoherent, and more perplexing every time I read it. And don't even begin to talk to me about *Nostramo!*

So where does my perplexity finally leave me? I want to avoid, if I can, descending into a complete textual skepticism, for in fact I believe we know a great many things about texts and how they work. Instead, I want to return to the final paragraphs of Joyce's story, and see if all this reflection and rumination on readers and intentions might not point, just because of the perplexity, to a more adequate response. Above all, I want to address more deliberately now the question of the sentimental in Joyce, an element of his work that I had more or less denied in my earlier reading, and ask how it should be squared with Joyce's radically unsentimental technique. From Stephen Dedalus's overwrought, but very earnestly portrayed, pangs of conscience—his "agenbite of inwit" (*U*, 1.481)—over failing to pray with his sick mother, to Leopold Bloom's sincere belief that "love," as "everybody knows," is "really life" (*U*, 12.1482–85), to Molly Bloom's ingenuous,

uninhibited, final “Yes” aimed less at her suitor than at life itself, we have an author who may have learned most of what he knew about narrative from the French (he claimed at one point that he learned nothing from the English novel) but seems to have kept, where sentiment is concerned, a kind of hidden filial allegiance to Charles Dickens, a writer to whom he was at best overtly ambivalent (see Ellmann 1983, 233, 320–21). One simply cannot imagine, for example, Joyce’s great stylistic precursor Flaubert earnestly ending a novel with a woman earnestly exclaiming yes to a marriage proposal (even if she does quietly admit “well as well him as another” [*U*, 18.1604–5]), or (worse) seriously portraying her response as the triumph of the life force. From Balzac to Zola, the great French realists simply did not imagine that good novels could do the latter with a straight face.

Yet there are places in French fiction presenting similar interpretive dilemmas where sentimental endings are concerned. I am thinking especially of Flaubert’s well-known story “Un cœur simple,” written near the end of his alternately successful and disappointing career, a story Joyce knew and was perhaps a bit jealous of. It is a story that, as many have noted, repeats motifs found earlier in *Madame Bovary*, but in a somewhat less obviously ironic key. The ending is especially relevant to my ruminations about “The Dead,” for “A Simple Heart” is either one of the very few instances in Flaubert’s work where the reader is expected to be overcome with out-and-out tear-filled sentiment, or it is one of the cruelest endings in his entire corpus, one not sublime, but bitingly ridiculous. The “simple heart” of the title is Félicité, an obscure, pious, loyal, and trusting maidservant in the Normandy countryside of Flaubert’s birth. She is a character who, had she been Irish, would have been very much at home in *Dubliners*. Her most enduring affection is for her parrot, Loulou, at once a kind of surrogate son and lover, which she has stuffed and mounted when he dies. All of this information is related with the same economy and scrupulous lack of affect that Joyce admiringly imitated in his early writing. Depending on how one reads events like the stuffing of Loulou, however, the story is either dripping with sentiment or dripping with irony.

At the end, after many years of unrequited faith and faithfulness, Félicité, now blind, deaf, and addled, is dying of pneumonia. She enters her death agony with the same vomiting, throaty rattles, and bloody froth at

the corners of her mouth, and in the same religious delirium, as had Emma before her. But here, everything has been softened, made more obviously sentimental. As Flaubert ends the tale, his heroine lies dying with the worm-eaten mounted parrot now sitting on an outdoor processional altar set up near her room for the feast of Corpus Christi: “A blue cloud of incense was wafted up into Félicité’s room. She opened her nostrils wide and breathed it in with a mystical, sensuous fervor. Then she closed her eyes. Her lips smiled. Her heart-beats grew slower and slower, each a little fainter and gentler, like a fountain running dry, an echo fading away. And as she breathed her last, she thought she could see, in the opening heavens, a gigantic parrot hovering above her head” (Flaubert 1961, 56). Despite the fact that this story quickly became one of Flaubert’s most popular works, in which the pathos of Félicité’s demise, as well as her Holy Ghost of a parrot, were taken with great earnestness, some critics could not help but note the similarity to Emma Bovary’s end, which surely was infused with irony, and they pointed to the bathos, rather than the pathos, of Loulou’s dramatic apotheosis. Moreover, we know not only that Flaubert had strong anticlerical feelings, but also that he had a few years earlier read with great enthusiasm Spinoza’s *Theological-Political Treatise*, a book that might be said to have laid the foundations for seeing Christianity from the critical perspective of the anthropologist, so that his story might even be understood as subtly demonstrating the confused anthropological basis of religious illusions like the feathery Christian Paraclete. Or perhaps it is a purely linguistic confusion—a Holy Ghost of the inkbottle, as Joyce might say—that most amused him. After all, Flaubert’s elegant, sentimental *conte* is at bottom a long, meandering setup for a pun that is evident only in French: in her confusion, Félicité ends up mistaking her *Perroquet* for *le Paraclet*.

Yet, as Robert Baldick notes, Flaubert is also reported to have said that the story “is not at all ironical as you may suppose, but on the contrary very serious and very sad. I want to move tender hearts to pity and tears, for I am tender-hearted myself” (ibid., 15). In fact, there is an uncanny resemblance, or repetition, between the situation prompting Flaubert to write “A Simple Heart” and the one that prompted Joyce to write “The Dead.” Flaubert had often been disappointed by the negative response of those readers who understood the point of his irony, and by the misunderstanding praise of

those on whom the irony had been lost. George Sand, an old and close friend, had reproached him for “spreading unhappiness” with his books, and there is some evidence Flaubert wrote “A Simple Heart,” which is very much a biographically based homage to the narrow, ignorant, provincial environment of his youth, as a way of showing Sand that he could be more generous and accepting of the backwater French national life he had so bitterly satirized in previous novels (see *ibid.*, 12). Even if there were not good reasons to doubt Flaubert’s assertions of tenderheartedness, the story itself remains a wonderful example of a sort of narrative split personality. Flaubert’s stated hope that “now, surely, no one will accuse me of being inhuman anymore” (*ibid.*, 15), so similar to Joyce’s statement in the oft-quoted letter to his brother about wanting to be kinder to Ireland in his final story, itself betrays a certain repressed bitterness. It is as if Flaubert somehow resented having to write a more generously sentimental story in the first place, even as he felt he should. There is certainly something moving about Félicité’s miserable fate, with one humiliation following another as she declines, increasingly withdrawn into what is left of her memory. Yet I cannot help laughing when she begins to kneel down and pray to her badly taxidermied parrot as if it were the Holy Ghost, and when, in the last lines, the decrepit, worm-eaten Loulou descends from on high. This fusion of the sublime and ridiculous, this curious admixture of authorial generosity and cutting black humor, is (I am convinced) precisely what Flaubert intended, and one might say it is this deep equivocation between pathos and bathos that becomes one of the distinguishing marks of modernist literature, exemplified most spectacularly by Kafka’s hysterical laughter as he read his seemingly tragic novels to his puzzled friends. Beckett too would draw on this particularly unstable rhetorical tone, as if he had figured out how to pare down the story of Félicité’s obscure life to nothing but the skeletal structure of the unrelieved, yet mundane, and ultimately somehow ridiculous miseries that punctuate all such obscure lives. One could say too that Julian Barnes’s Nabokovian *Flaubert’s Parrot* is an obvious postmodern inheritor of this generic mutation.

So the question I want to pose is as follows: should we perhaps see the ending of “The Dead” as similarly structured by an equivocation between pathos and bathos? On the one hand, I am now willing to acknowledge that Gabriel’s implied final reverie is a sublime Homeric or Dantean vision of “that

region where dwell the vast hosts of the dead,” symbolically defined by powerful Christian imagery of “crooked crosses and headstones,” “the spears on the little gate,” and “the barren thorns” and by that snow lying “on all the living and the dead.” But on the other hand, it still seems to me somehow pretentious that Gabriel should think “the time had come for him to set out on his journey westward.” That swoon is still vaguely ridiculous, too alliterative, hyperbolic—“his soul swooned slowly as he heard the snow falling faintly through the universe”—a self-induced romantic delirium, not unlike Emma Bovary’s at her suicidal death, haunted by ghosts that Gabriel can only glimpse through his self-pitying tears. Thinking of the young Michael Furey, destroyed by a powerful yet thwarted passion, Gabriel’s acknowledgment that “he had never felt like that himself towards any woman but he knew that such a feeling must be love” does, I now am willing to admit, have a certain poignancy. Yet I wonder whether Gabriel’s delirious meditation on the putative sublimity of a love he has never felt is also a subtle parody of the romantic sublime—and we should recall that Stephen Dedalus “swoons” in the same way over his exaggerated sense of his sinfulness in *A Portrait*. We know from earlier stories just how satirical Joyce (like Flaubert) could be about such religiously amorous swoons. (Just a few months before beginning work on “The Dead,” for example, Joyce wrote to his brother, “Perhaps my view of life is too cynical but it seems to me that a lot of talk about love is nonsense” [letter to Stanislaus Joyce, November 13, 1906, *Letters II*, 189].) There is, I now recognize, something deeply human and moving about Gretta and her sorrow, and about her sense of a lost chance for passion in an otherwise dreary existence. But I cannot shake the feeling that, throughout *Dubliners*, it is precisely this preoccupation with the lost or missed passions of the past that is meant to be seen as paralyzing, as usurping the chance for passion in the present—as if we are meant to see Gretta, like Eveline, getting more pleasure out of what she thinks she lost than out of her real husband. And I cannot avoid thinking that Gabriel is somehow repeating the motif, lamenting all that he *could* have had with Gretta, had he only known what he was missing. There is now for me even real pathos in the figure of Michael Furey. Yet I still cannot dismiss the sense that he winds up being not only someone who once *sang* a romantic Irish ballad about unrequited passion, “The Lass of Aughrim,” but a quasi-legendary figure in his own right who

has stepped right out of the ballad into Gretta's memory. I am more willing now to accept that the word *generous* as applied to Gabriel's tears could be taken at face value, or perhaps simply as meaning "copious." But it still for me reverberates with irony in the context of the story as a whole.

I will not, that is, any longer deny the affecting poignancy of the conclusion, as John Huston's movie captured it. But what, finally, *are* Joyce's intentions, and did he know what they were before or after he wrote those final elevated paragraphs? A story like "Araby" clearly shows that Joyce, who liked thinking of himself as Luciferian, could be every bit as ironic as Flaubert about the power of religiously induced emotion to supply the passion that was missing in the obscure lives of oppressed (and repressed) people. Is something like that going on at the end of "The Dead," too, or is this story one case in Joyce's work where the cross and thorns of Christ's passion, and men angelically named Gabriel and Michael, are to be seen (as Ellmann and many others see them) as the real thing? And if all of it remains unclear, does the obscurity I feel mean that the strong claims of Bleich and Holland about the reader's role inevitably trump the claims of Michaels's pragmatism? I am not sure how to answer such questions. But I would like to conclude by asking you to imagine that "A Simple Heart," with its scrupulously ambiguous ending, might provide a kind of guide. And to illustrate why, I want to cite the thoroughly ambiguous letter Joyce wrote to his brother Stanislaus in 1906 that, in my view, has so often been misread in evaluating the meaning of "The Dead":

I have often confessed to you surprise that there should be anything exceptional in my writing and it is only at moments when I leave down somebody else's book that it seems to me not so unlikely after all. Sometimes thinking of Ireland it seems to me that I have been unnecessarily harsh. I have reproduced (in *Dubliners* at least) none of the attraction of the city for I have never felt at my ease in any city since I left it except in Paris. I have not reproduced its ingenuous insularity and its hospitality. The latter "virtue" so far as I can see does not exist elsewhere in Europe. I have not been just to its beauty: for it is more beautiful naturally in my opinion than what I have seen of England, Switzerland, France, Austria or Italy. And yet I know how useless these reflections are. For were I to rewrite the book as G. R.

[Grant Richards] suggests “in another sense” (where the hell does he get the meaningless phrases he uses) I am sure I would find again what you call the Holy Ghost sitting in the ink-bottle and the perverse devil of my literary conscience sitting on the hump of my pen. And after all *Two Gallants*—with the Sunday crowds and the harp in Kildare street and Lenehan—is an Irish landscape. (September 25, 1906, *Letters II*, 164, quoted in Ellmann 1983, 231)

It is remarkable how often the first part of this letter has been either cited alone or unduly emphasized in Joyce criticism to explain the significance of the story it describes. Written some months before Joyce began work on “The Dead,” the letter has been used by Ellmann and many others (even very astute contemporary critics like Michael Levenson a few years ago [1996, 426]) to suggest Gabriel’s, and by implication Joyce’s, decision to grant (in Ellmann’s words) “a kind of bondage, of acceptance, even of admiration to a part of the country and a way of life that are most Irish” (1983, 250). In my earlier reading of the story, I responded with a frankly oppositional critique that overemphasized the second part of the letter and focused on the passages that I felt proved that Joyce’s story was anything but the generous reconciliation with family and nation that most of his readers thought it was.

Today I want to take the letter as a contradictory whole, to come a bit closer to that binocular, rather than monocular, perspective that Joyce emphasized so trenchantly in the “Cyclops” episode of *Ulysses*. If I had to decide afresh what Joyce really did mean at the story’s end, I would say that I am not sure even he knew. Perhaps he tried to eat his cake and have it too, creating a character who finally gives in to the more generous impulses that Joyce himself obviously felt, all the while mischievously undermining that character, subtly parodying the larger spirit of reconciliation—which is, of course, what the Holy Ghost (the Paraclete, the Flaubertian Parrot) in his inkbottle is all about—with ambiguous details and rhetorical overkill. Joyce did not resort to the kitsch of a giant stuffed parrot welcoming his protagonist into the afterlife. But I believe that the author of *Dubliners* was somehow quietly at cross-purposes, if I can put it that way, with the beautiful, redemptive language of its finale, which even rhetorically occupies for me some strange middle ground between free-indirect discourse and

omniscient description. I think Joyce was finally so troubled and frustrated by the impossible morass of personal and political claims Ireland made on him that he could not decide whether he should reconcile with it or turn his back on it, and I think the end of the story with its swoon into the comforts of oblivion is the surest sign of Joyce's own deep and irresolvable ambivalence. Instead of deciding what he really felt about Ireland, I now believe, Joyce remained confused and uncertain and wrote an awfully good story about his perplexity. But perhaps that is just what all great storytellers do.

Art and Artlessness in the Possible Worlds
of "The Dead," by *Margot Norris*

Vincent Pecora's reading of Joyce's "The Dead" offers us perhaps the most acute interrogation of the signal conundrum at the heart of the story: does Gabriel experience an authentic or inauthentic epiphany at its end? Instead of offering an easy answer, Pecora concludes with an explanation of why it may be so difficult for us to challenge the significance and grandeur of Gabriel's gestures of heroism, generosity, self-sacrifice, and spiritual transcendence at the end of story. "If Gabriel fools himself, if in the very process that we accept as self-discovery, he only reimplicates himself blindly in the cultural conditions he longs to transcend, then we may simply be doing the same thing, in our reading, in our lives" (1986, 243). I take this statement to suggest that Gabriel and the reader share similar stakes in seeking some escape from what Pecora calls the "metaphysical discontent" (*ibid.*) of ordinary life, and those stakes lie in the most deeply embedded institutions of culture. This highly sophisticated formulation of the issues and perils at the heart of the story has rightly become one of our interpretive norms for reading "The Dead," and I would neither wish nor be able to challenge it. Vincent Pecora's essay "'The Dead' and the Generosity of the Word" appeared in the March 1986 issue of *PMLA*. My own essay on "The Dead" first appeared under the title "Stifled Back Answers: The Gender Politics of Art in Joyce's 'The Dead'" in the Autumn 1989 issue of *Modern Fiction Studies* and was subsequently reprinted in revised form in my 1992 *Joyce's Web: The Social Unraveling of Modernism*. This early reading of mine concurs with Pecora's argument that the story clearly demonstrates that art is not above politics—although I locate Joyce's