

Prescription and proscription in Dubliners

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PRESCRIPTION AND PROSCRIPTION IN *DUBLINERS*

Le style «d'une pauvreté scrupuleuse» utilisé par James Joyce dans les nouvelles de *Dubliners* sous-tend son projet d'écrire un chapitre de l'histoire des mœurs de son pays. Il traduit la soumission des personnages aux formes prescrites et proscrites dans les domaines verbaux et sociaux. L'effacement du narrateur reflète la paralysie résultant de cette déresponsabilisation face aux mots et aux événements.

The much-quoted authorial intention to “write a chapter of the moral history of my country” necessarily committed James Joyce to his accompanying “meanness of style” in *Dubliners*¹. At the time these stories were written, it was still generally regarded as within the limits of linguistic possibility that the historian could be an objective, detached reporter of events; that he could represent his chosen material through a language that was transparent; and that his descriptions could be innocent. Joyce, however, as has already been shown, wrote with an acute consciousness of the materiality of language², and accordingly precluded narratorial commentary to the utmost. The barest facts are given in *Dubliners* (though naturally these involve a process of selection), and the author cannot be found overtly inscribed in his text. Instead, the stories are told in voices entirely free from evaluation. They describe a moral existence regulated by prescription and proscription, so that the self-effacement of the narrator can be viewed as a reflex of the moral paralysis portrayed, or as an abnegation of the linguistic impulse implied in total submission to prescription and proscription.

From the beginning of *Dubliners* we see characters opting out of moral responsibility through either accepting prescribed social or verbal forms, or proscribing certain actions or words. The boy who narrates the first three stories is growing up in a world where

the social signs and rituals confuse him, and where the adults, through absence or silence, fail to help him deal with this moral confusion. In «The Sisters», the boy is waiting for the prescribed sign of two candles in the window for knowledge of the priest's death³, but as it happens, the news is transmitted by old Cotter and confirmed by the card and crape on the door of Father Flynn's house. Old Cotter's unfinished sentences puzzle the boy (p. 8) and indicate that whatever was wrong with the priest is proscribed by the laws of the church as well as in the utterance of old Cotter: it is prohibited or written out.

— No, I wouldn't say he was exactly . . . but there was something queer . . . there was something uncanny about him. I'll tell you my opinion . . .

He began to puff at his pipe, no doubt arranging his opinion in his mind. Tiresome old fool! When we knew him first he used to be rather interesting, talking of faints and worms; but I soon grew tired of him and his endless stories about the distillery.

— I have my own theory about it, he said. I think it was one of those . . . peculiar cases But it's hard to say . . .

He began to puff again at his pipe without giving us his theory (p. 7).

Thus the boy's confusion as to why Fr. Flynn had been relieved of his priestly functions is increased; and what had "gone wrong with him" as a result is little clarified either here or later in the exchanges between Eliza and the boy's aunt:

We waited respectfully for her to break the silence: and after a long pause she said slowly:

— It was that chalice he broke That was the beginning of it. Of course, they say 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!

— And was that it? said my aunt. I heard something Eliza nodded (p. 15).

Here, what the significance of the breaking of the chalice is remains unexplained; and although the priest, when alive, had "explained to [the boy] the meaning of the different ceremonies of the Mass (p. 11)", he had also mystified him in other respects for "His questions showed [him] how complex and mysterious were certain institutions of the church which [he] had always regarded as the simplest acts (p. 11)". The priest had also told him that "the fathers of the church had written books as thick as

the *Post Office Directory* and as closely printed as the law notices in the newspaper, elucidating all these intricate questions”, thus further confirming the inaccessibility of the church’s prescriptions to the understanding of the boy.

This failure of the ecclesiastical father to make what is prescribed comprehensible leaves the boy with no verifiable source of authority, for he is also without a biological father in the story. Besides, the process of his education seems to allow no space for him to inscribe himself in language or ritual: the priest had taught him “to pronounce Latin properly”, which is not an exercise to encourage the personal linguistic impulse; and he used also put him “through the responses of the Mass which he had made me learn by heart” (p. 11), which is another prescribed verbal ritual.

In the extra-ecclesiastical and female domain, the boy fares no better where clarification is concerned. If we return to Eliza’s “That was the beginning of it”, that pronoun ‘it’ without antecedent is never satisfactorily identified. The reader gathers that the priest’s mental health is in question, but this is never actually stated, and silence always intervenes at the point when it might be⁴:

— Wide-awake and laughing-like to himself So then, of course, when they saw that, that made them think that there was something gone wrong with him . . . (p. 15).

Eliza refuses to pronounce insanity, although she had provided a clue to it earlier when she said “He was too scrupulous always” (p. 14). Were she to admit the connection between the scrupulous attempt to remain within the prescribed forms and insanity, that would call the church, inscriber of these forms, to reckoning, thus calling into question the moral structure to which the adults of the story subscribe. Besides, it would preclude the kind of shuffling around of blame (implying responsibility) that allows the boy to be saddled with it at one point “They say it was the boy’s fault”. ‘They’ can say anything they like so long as there is a general failure on the part of individual adults to implicate (or inscribe) themselves in what they say—to take responsibility for it. And so long as everyone subscribes to what the indeterminate ‘they’ say, personal responsibility to and for the word is avoided. The boy Eliza refers to is not necessarily the boy who narrates the story, but the very fact that this point is never made clear to the reader merely aggravates the whole issue of responsibility to and for the word with reference to the moral formation of youth. The narra-

tor's 'failure' to identify 'the boy' of Eliza's statement is a reflex of her failure to identify an antecedent for 'they'.

Of the other two stories told from the point of view of a boy, the role of the church in the process of moral formation is also present, though in different guises. In "An Encounter", the ecclesiastical father is still to the fore proscribing the chronicles of the Wild West in *The Halfpenny Marvel*, and prescribing Roman History (p. 17). The narrator significantly hides his books, or the inscribed word, "in the long grass near the ashpit at the end of the garden", before absconding from school for a day to seek "real adventure". In his attempts to 'read' the outside world it becomes clear that his schooling has ill equipped him, for, when he comes upon a Norwegian ship at the docks, he recalls

I went to the stern and tried to decipher the legend upon it but, failing to do so, I came back and examined the foreign sailors to see had any of them green eyes for I had some confused notion The sailors' eyes were blue and grey and even black. The only sailor whose eyes could have been called green was a tall man who amused the crowd on the quay by calling out cheerfully every time the planks fell:

— All right! all right! (p. 19)

Here, the written inscription does not yield up its meaning to the boy because it is in a language foreign to him; he is confused in his expectations concerning the colour of foreign eyes (= foreign identities?); and the words uttered by the only sailor with the green eyes he was seeking make little sense in the context, although they are in English. Also, the "queer old josser" he encounters who does have green eyes, insists on talking of the very school and books the boy had tried to abandon for the day, indicating that "he had all Sir Walter Scott's works and all Lord Lytton's works at home and never tired of reading them" (p. 20). Yet he is ready to proscribe some of these for the boys:

Of course, he said, there were some of Lord Lytton's works which boys couldn't read. Mahony asked why couldn't boys read them—a question which agitated and pained me because I was afraid the man would think I was as stupid as Mahony. The man, however, only smiled (pp. 20-22).

The man is prepared to proscribe, but not to inscribe himself in that proscription. Small wonder, then, that the boys are led to hiding their real names and adopting evasive tactics in relation to the adult world in the person of this pervert who gives

the impression that he was repeating something which he had learnt by heart or that, magnetized by some words of his own speech, his mind was slowly circling round and round in the same orbit (p. 22).

It is clearly beyond the powers of a mere boy to break into this autism, linguistic or sexual.

In "Araby" the church is overtly present in the moral formation of youth only in the Christian Brothers' school and the convent and retreat to which Mangan's sister goes. However, religious terminology pervades the boy's musings on this girl who has fired his adolescent ardour; and her image, suffused with hints of the image of the Virgin Mary, haunts him. Woman has been exoticised for this boy, so that she remains ephemeral and, at her religious retreat, beyond possible inscription in his life. In his knightly quest for an offering for her at the bazaar, he only finds "a silence like that which pervades a church after a service" (p. 30). The exotic, exalted image inscribed in the young mind leads ineluctably to a sense of vanity when applied to living: "Gazing up into the darkness I saw myself as a creature driven and derided by vanity; and my eyes burned with anguish and anger" (p. 31).

Anguish and anger continue to appear interfering with the relationships between men and women in those stories where such relationships receive attention. Of the three stories where women are central, that is to say "Eveline", "Clay", and "A Mother", the roles prescribed for these women preclude a dynamic relationship to the word. In "Eveline", the young woman's home is watched over by a "coloured print of the promises made to Blessed Margaret Mary Alcoque" (p. 32), indicating both the parallel to Eveline's unhappy childhood and the model of self-sacrifice and *sisterly* love. The role prescribed for woman by the church derives from the Virgin Mary, discourages dynamic relationship with man, and encourages celibacy. Thus, the letters in which Eveline had inscribed her intention to establish a partnership with the man of her choice are never delivered, for she accepts this role. Her linguistic impulse also fails when "Amid the seas she sent a cry of anguish" (p. 37).

The self-sacrificing role of mother (to her brothers) has also been prescribed for Maria in "Clay", for she recalls of her brother Joe: "She had nursed him and Alphy too; and Joe used often say: — Mamma is Mamma but Maria is my proper mother"

(p. 92). Here, although the role is not directly prescribed by the church, Maria's name and her continuing piety, indicated by her preparing her 'Sunday' clothes for Mass the following morning, are reminders of its source. Also, at the laundry, "There was one thing she didn't like and that was the tracts on the walls" (p. 92): since the laundry is run by Protestants, the Virgin Mary will be banished from those tracts, unlike the promises to Blessed Margaret Mary Alacoque in Eveline's case. Maria's being caught in the circle of what is prescribed is especially borne out in her singing the song *I Dreamt that I Dwelt*, for not only does the song of its very nature confine the singer to the prescribed words, but Maria repeats the first verse twice (p. 96). The inarticulate anguish of her brother at hearing his benign, blushing, spinster sister sing of love is expressed in the last lines of the story in terms that convey a mixture of the comic and the pathetic:

his eyes filled up so much with tears that he could not find what he was looking for and in the end he had to ask his wife to tell him where the corkscrew was.

The adult male recurrently throughout *Dubliners* turns to alcohol to dispel threatening anguish.

Whereas the promises in "Eveline" are indicative of a unilateral binding through words, the contract in "A Mother" implies a mutual binding. But the mother of the story is unbending in her manner, as well as spiteful and cold, so that when only three of the planned four concerts of the contract actually take place, these qualities cause her to adhere rigidly to the original, contracted fee. This rigid adherence to the words or figures of the contract allows Mr Holohan to turn the tables on her, telling her that

the other four guineas would be paid after the committee meeting on the following Tuesday and that, in case her daughter did not play for the second part, the committee would consider the contract broken and would pay nothing.

— I haven't seen any committee, said Mrs Kearney *angrily*. My daughter has her contract. She will get four pounds eight into her hand or a foot she won't put on that platform.

— I'm surprised at you, Mrs Kearney, said Mr Holohan. I never thought you would treat us this way.

— And what way did you treat me? asked Mrs Kearney.

Her face was inundated with an *angry* colour and she looked as if she would attack some one with her hands (p. 135, my emphasis).

As a man, Hoppy Holohan, with his game leg, allows his duties to be usurped by Mrs Kearney, just as Mr Kearney, though described as "a model father" (only as active as a model, perhaps?), is notable for his absence. Consequently, the central female can only turn to the word for authority, and in the light of the non-transparency of language for Joyce, this inevitably leads to no-one taking responsibility for the word that is given in the contract, and accordingly to the anger of the woman against the man. This anger is accompanied by a failure of linguistic impulse, which was anticipated in the repetition involved in Mr Holohan's talking about the breaking of the contract from the other point of view, and in Mrs Kearney repeating the 'treating' motif.

Neither "After the Race" nor "Ivy Day in the Committee Room" has a woman actually present in the story. Nevertheless, women are inscribed in both, two-dimensionally. In "After the Race", this inscription is seen in the name of a street, Dame Street; in the name of the yacht, The Belle of Newport; and in the cards as the Queen of Hearts and the Queen of Diamonds. Besides, when Farley and Rivière dance a waltz, Farley acts as cavalier while Rivière acts as lady. This reduction of woman to token status produces an effect of particularly boyish fecklessness. Considering that the young men are in their mid-twenties at least, it is striking that at the point where the reader might justifiably expect some romance to enter, the only flesh-and-blood candidates are dispatched: "a short fat man was putting two handsome ladies on a car in charge of another fat man. The car drove off and the short fat man caught sight of the party" (p. 41).

In "Ivy Day in the Committee Room", the story most directly concerned with the morality of public life, women are implicitly held responsible for failure. Queen Victoria, according to perfidious and calumniating Henchy, kept King Edward VII from the throne until he was grey. And the attachment of both King Edward and Parnell to women is indirectly cited to discredit them. Considering the marked predominance of dialogue over narrative commentary in this story, the referential function of its language is peculiarly thin. With the exception of Hynes's painful poem of tribute to Parnell, there is little sense that the numerous characters volitionally inscribe themselves in their utterances. Henchy, for instance, when not being patently insincere, seems to continually quote himself or introduce red herrings. The general sense of hot air in the conversation is endorsed by the *Pok* of the corks being released from the stout by the heat of the fire. And

even though Hynes's sincerity concerning Parnell is not in doubt, his poem shows no linguistic energy: its language is shabbily shop-soiled and artless. And the poem is, of course, another prescribed form.

Song is exploited by Polly in "The Boarding House" as a decoy in the process of entrapping Bob Doran:

*I'm a... naughty girl.
You needn't sham:
You know I am.*

Because the words are uttered in the form of a song, Polly cannot be accused of overt coquetry, just as she and her mother cannot be accused of open complicity despite the evidence in the story that this is indeed what is afoot. The image of the Virgin Mary is also introduced in this story, for the purpose of exploitation by Polly: "Her eyes [...] had a habit of glancing upwards when she spoke with anyone, which made her look live a perverse madonna" (p. 57).

Lenahan in "Two Gallants" is caught in the same unproductive cycle as Corley who is "At present [...] about town" (p. 47), so that "His tongue was tired for he had been talking all the afternoon in a public-house", for "He was a sporting vagrant armed with a vast stock of stories, limericks and riddles" (p. 46). Prescribed verbal forms in this instance become currency for buying the drinks Lenahan cadges. Just as Corley exploits the woman, so Lenahan exploits the language for his own ends. But his tired tongue is the price he pays: linguistic exhaustion if not paralysis. The same linguistic exhaustion or paralysis is conveyed in the pleonasm of the inscription in the window where Lenahan consumes his plate of peas, a renowned source of flatulence, and his bottle of ginger beer, another gaseous commodity:

He paused at last before the window of a poor-looking shop over which the words *Refreshment Bar* were printed in white letters. On the glass of the window were two flying inscriptions: *Ginger Beer* and *Ginger Ale* (p. 52).

First, the notion of refreshment is here rendered colourless, being expressed in white; and ale and beer are synonymous, so why the two? Since they are in two "Flying inscriptions", we are encouraged once again to see language 'in the air', or not anchored in personal responsibility.

Language is also floating free from personal responsibility, in different ways, in "A Little Cloud", "Counterparts", and

“Grace”. In the first of these three stories, the language of the journalist, Gallagher, fails to pin down the immorality he attributes to the cities of Paris, London, and Berlin for his naive interlocutor, Little Chandler. And when the latter, who considers himself a poet, opens a book of poems by Byron for inspiration, he does so “cautiously with his left hand lest he should waken the child” (p. 76): left holding the baby, Little Chandler has inadequate liberty to approach the written word with vigour and discrimination. Accordingly, he reads the first poem in the book, which turns out to be the very first poem that Byron wrote at the age of fourteen. Not surprisingly, it serves to increase the reader’s impression of ‘hot air’:

*Hushed are the winds and still the evening gloom,
Not e’en a Zephyr wanders through the grove [...].*

Despite the juvenile derivativeness of Byron’s zephyr and evening gloom, Little Chandler responds to it as an ideal, which little reassures the reader concerning his linguistic responsibility as a possible poet.

In “Counterparts”, language is unanchored in personal responsibility in that Farrington’s copying duties preclude personal inscription. When he writes “Bernard Bernard” instead of “Bernard Bodley”, this repetition indicates a similar exhaustion to that we saw in “Two Gallants” in the Ginger Ale and Ginger Beer. Besides, the instances of mimicry in “Counterparts”, as well as in other stories, provide variations on withholding personal inscription. Likewise, the yarn into which Farrington’s wisecrack response to Alleyne is turned is repeated several times; and the refuge Farrington’s assaulted son takes in the *Hail Mary* shows an early form of attachment to prescribed forms.

Tom Kernan’s having bitten off the tip of his tongue conveys the curtailment of linguistic performance in “Grace”. Although his friends collectively coerce him towards proscription of the alcohol which had caused his accident, they retain the privilege of liberally consuming this source of linguistic impairment themselves in his presence, in one case even bringing a gift of “a half-pint of special whisky” (p. 153). As whisky loosens *their* tongues, they lapse into inaccurate and ignorant accounts of Latin mottos, ‘orthodox’ church dogma, and confused church history. It is against this irresponsible linguistic background that Martin Cunningham introduces the idea of moral reform:

— So we're going to wash the pot together, said Mr Cunningham. A thought seemed to strike him. He turned suddenly to the invalid and said:

— Do you know what, Tom, has just occurred to me? You might join in and we'd have a four-handed reel (pp. 149-50).

The proposal of 'washing the pot' in 'a four-handed reel' abuses the figure of metaphor, so that we are told it "conveyed very little meaning" to Tom Kernan's mind. Figurative language used irresponsibly succeeds in seducing the (converted) Protestant to attend the retreat given by Father Purdon where abuse of metaphor is once again encountered. For his sermon, though based on a text avowedly resistant to satisfactory exegesis (Luke XVI, 9), shamelessly exploits the ambiguity of the text to seduce the congregation with another metaphor: that of "spiritual accountant", an utterly indefensible mixture of the countable with the uncountable (p. 159).

"The Dead", as the most frequently explicated of the *Dubliners* stories, need not receive particular attention here, other than to note that it offers an instance of the journalist misunderstanding the symbolic process. When Gabriel sees the figure of a woman on the stairs listening to a song, he does not immediately recognize her as his wife, which causes him to reflect that

There was a grace and mystery in her attitude as if she were a symbol of something. He asked himself what is a woman standing on the stairs in the shadow, listening to distant music, a symbol of (p. 188).

Apparently unconscious of the fact that symbolic meaning is invested in such an image, and is not inherent or essential to it, he decides to call the picture he would paint of his wife *Distant Music*, thus denying the flesh and blood otherness of his wife, and his own implication in the symbolic significance he attributes to her.

Finally, "A Painful Case" raises most of the major moral issues of *Dubliners* with reference to prescription and proscription. The inscribed public absolution "No blame attached to anyone", from the coroner's report, fails to convince either the reader or James Duffy who asks himself how he was to blame. He realizes that he had sentenced Mrs Sinico to death by withholding himself. Yet both a "comedy of deception" and living openly with her were proscribed for him. Although the source of this proscription is not named in his reflections, the reader will recall

the dissimulated *Maynooth Catechism* on Duffy's bookshelves: "a copy of the *Maynooth Catechism*, sewn into the cloth cover of a notebook, stood at the end of the top shelf" (p. 98). Despite his loss of faith, he has clearly still remained bound by this regulating code from his childhood religious education.

Duffy's withholding himself from intimate physical contact is reflected in his relationship to language, where he seems rapt in contemplation of himself:

He lived at a little distance from his body, regarding his own acts with doubtful side-glances. He had an odd autobiographical habit which led him to compose in his mind from time to time a short sentence about himself containing a subject in the third person and a predicate in the past tense (p. 99)....

Sometimes he caught himself listening to the sound of his own voice. He thought that in her eyes he would ascend to an angelical stature; and as he attached the fervent nature of his companion more and more closely to him, he heard the strange impersonal voice which he recognized as his own, insisting on the soul's incurable loneliness. We cannot give ourselves, it said: we are our own (p. 102).

This autism of person and voice is also operative in his writerly pursuits where his chosen function is that of transaltor, which again precludes personal inscription. And even his manuscript is dissimulated by his pasting the advertisement for *Bile Beans* onto the first sheet.

This consideration of *Dubliners* draws attention to the intimate connection between language and morality in the stories. Failure on the part of the characters to inscribe themselves in their utterance reflects failure in the moral domain. Their indolence results in atrophy of their moral and linguistic capacities so that language is abused by those in a position to shape or re-shape mores. Adults fail to clarify their position to children, using silence and evasion. The church prescribes fixed responses, uses a dead language, and capitalizes on the ambiguity of the text in order to seduce and maintain authority. Besides, it prescribes a role for woman which precludes a dynamic relationship to either man or word. The moral and linguistic paralysis portrayed indicates that prescription and proscription form an inadequate basis for morality, for full responsibility entails personal inscription. Yet the author of these stories refrains from inscribing himself in them, so that what we have is a transcription of traditional signifying processes, with full respect for traditional etymology.

Having thus demonstrated his capacity for operating within prescribed linguistic limits and forms, the author has earned the freedom to later inscribe himself in the forward-looking, etymologically and referentially liberated language of *Finnegans Wake*.

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NOTES

¹ Richard Ellmann, ed., *Letters of James Joyce*, Vol. II, London, Faber & Faber, 1966, p. 134.

² See particularly Colin MacCabe, *James Joyce and the Revolution of the Word*, London: Macmillan, 1979.

³ James Joyce, *Dubliners*, London: Granada, 1985, p. 7. This edition will be referred to throughout.

⁴ For a study of the role of silence, see Jean-Michel Rabaté, "Silence in *Dubliners*", in *James Joyce: New Perspectives*, ed. Colin MacCabe, Sussex: Harvester, 1982, pp. 45-72.

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