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BENJAMIN, JOYCE AND THE DISAPPEARANCE OF THE DEAD

GRAHAM MACPHEE

The idea of eternity has always had its strongest support in death. If this idea declines [... then] the face of death must have changed. It turns out that this change is identical with another – the one that has diminished the communicability of experience to the same extent as the art of storytelling has declined.

--Walter Benjamin, "The Storyteller" (1936)

I

In *Ulysses* death is everywhere, immured in the present as memory, mourning, ritual, tradition, allusion, etymology, or simply the iterability that is the necessary condition of meaning. Indeed, consciousness seems to exist only as the fraught and ultimately futile attempt to hold back the impatient and ineluctable return of the dead—the “nightmare” of history from which Stephen is trying to awake. And when the guard of consciousness is down, as in Nighttown, the text stages a Judgment Day where “the dead of Dublin from Prospect and Mount Jerome in white sheepskin overcoats and black goatfell cloaks arise and appear to many”(U 526)

However, if death pervades the text, it does not function to mark, as in T.S. Eliot, an immutable chthonic to set against the vagaries of historical time. It is important not to underestimate Joyce’s figuring of death, for if the appearance of the dead invokes traditional modes of belief, the conditions of appearance are fundamentally modern. This modernity is perhaps nowhere so striking as in the Hades episode, where Bloom’s profane imagination undercuts both the Catholic Latin of the Requiem mass and the Protestant English preferred by Tom Kernan. For Bloom, the promise of eternal life collapses in a heap of bones and scattered organs, at whose center sits the desacralized heart:

A pump after all, pumping thousands of gallons of blood everyday. One fine day it gets bunged up and there you are. Lots of them lying around here: lungs, hearts, livers. Old rusty pumps: damn the thing else. The resurrection and the life. Once you are dead you are dead. The last day idea. Knocking them all out of their graves. Come forth, Lazarus! And he came fifth and lost the job. Get up! Last day! Then every fellow mousing around for his liver and his lights and the rest

of his traps. Find damn all of himself that morning. (*U* 107)

For all its comical ghoulishness, Bloom's outlook is not without pathos – as evidenced by his concern for Paddy Dignam's bereaved son ("Poor boy! Was he there when the father?") (*U* 104). Indeed, both empathy and irreverence can be understood as functions of that wider historical condition we have come to associate with the secularization of death, a condition which underlies Bloom's practical turn of mind. The same practical outlook that renders the heart a "rusty pump" pumping thousands of gallons a day ultimately finds its corollary in the technical description of the Ithaca episode:

Did it flow?

Yes. From the Roundwood reservoir in county Wicklow of a cubic capacity of 2,400 million gallons, percolating through a subterranean aqueduct of filter mains of single and double pipeage constructed at an initial plant cost of £5 per linear yard by way of the Dargle, Rathdown, Glen of the Downs and Callowhill to the 26 acre reservoir at Stillorgan, a distance of 22 statute miles. (*U* 591)

Here we find those myriad tendencies that have come to define modernity: as the disenchantment of the world; as the subsumption of nature under the rule of equivalence in commodity production; as the age of the world picture and the advent of technology.

The practical turn of mind fixes the visible and, by extension, the invisible within uniform spatio-temporal co-ordinates. Thus Bloom imagines an underground world "all honeycombed" with "oblong cells", muses on the fertility of "the soil [...] quite fat with corpse manure", and speculates that there would be "more room if they buried them standing up" (*U* 110). To the practical mind, the invisible is subject to the same laws that govern the visible, and in a sense we might identify a similar extrapolation from the sensory world to the supersensible in modernity. It is not that the supersensible directly mirrors the sensory world, but rather that the supersensible must recognize or negotiate with profane temporality. Or to put it another way, in modernity our conceptions of value and meaning must come to terms with the temporality of technology.

In contemporary criticism, attempts to reorient our thinking of time have been powerfully influenced by deconstruction, a critical perspective that has found a particular affinity with modernism's linguistic playfulness. In "*Ulysses Gramophone*" (1984), Jacques Derrida famously invokes the stuttering "Kraahraark! Hellohelloworld" of the gramophone that Bloom imagines as a complement to memorial photography, exploiting its etymological double charge in order to reframe the temporality of the living voice in terms of the technicity of writing.¹ The gramophone stands as a figure for the essay's "preontological" (Derrida, "*Ulysses Gramophone*" 302) conception of the double yes, which as a "universal presupposition" (*Ibid.*,

¹ Jacques Derrida, "*Ulysses Gramophone. Hear Say Yes in Joyce*", in Derek Attridge, *Acts of Literature* (London: Routledge, 1992), 253-309.

303) locates within “the manipulatory operation of hypermnesic reappropriation” (Ibid., 304) the inevitability of “all the risks of technical repetition, of automatised archives, of gramophony, of simulacrum, of wandering deprived of an address and destination” (Ibid., 305). In attempting to restore life to the dead, in fact the gramophone reveals the necessary and inevitable inherence of death in life, of absence and deferral in presence and the present.

Derrida’s reading of *Ulysses* powerfully connects the temporality of meaning with the technicity of “writing” as exemplified by the gramophone, and perhaps still more in the essay, by the telegraph and the telephone. But equally, it might be objected that the essay threatens to elide the temporal specificity of *techne* in aligning it with a *différance* that is “preontological” and a “universal presupposition”. Or, to put it another way, the essay’s conception of technology risks hypostatizing death: for while it discovers death in technology, it does not explore the historically variable technics of death.

The aim of this study is twofold. First, it is to re-examine Joyce’s figuring of death by looking at the last story of *Dubliners*, “The Dead”, a text which dramatizes some of the risks involved in deconstructive readings of Joyce. To do so it draws on Walter Benjamin’s critical study of Leskov in “The Storyteller” (1936), which addresses the decline of storytelling through a consideration of the historical transformation of death, which is closely linked to the analysis of technology which occupied him at this time, and which finds its most famous formulation in “The Work of Art in the Age of its Technical Reproducibility” (1935/6).² Unfortunately, this connection has largely been ignored by English-speaking criticism, which has tended to dismiss “The Storyteller” as exhibiting “a palpable nostalgia for a bygone era”.³ However,

² “The Storyteller: Observations on the Works of Nikolai Leskov” and “The Work of Art in the Age of its Technical Reproducibility”, both in Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, Volume 3, trans. E. Jephcott et al. (Cambridge, MA: Belknap-Harvard UP, 2002), 143-166 and 101-134. An early, unpublished draft of “The Storyteller”, entitled “Little Tricks of the Trade”, is thought to have been written between 1929 and 1933, which suggests that Benjamin’s engagement with the themes of “The Storyteller” is in fact co-extensive with the composition of the Work of Art essay; see Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, Volume 2, trans. R. Livingstone et al. (Cambridge, MA: Belknap-Harvard UP, 1999), 728-30. For an account Benjamin’s thinking of technology, see G. MacPhee, “Glass before its Time, Premature Iron: The Unforeseeable Futures of Technology in Benjamin’s *Arcades Project*”, *New Formations* 54 (2005).

³ Michael Jennings, *Dialectical Images: Walter Benjamin’s Theory of Literary Criticism* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1987), 8. Although this remains the most extensive study of Benjamin’s literary criticism in English, the volume offers no further consideration of the essay. For an alternative approach to Benjamin’s concept of criticism see Howard Caygill, *Walter Benjamin: The Colour of Experience* (London: Routledge, 1998), chapter 2.

far from seeking to reconstruct an integral moment now past, “The Storyteller” looks to identify different possible futures within the new condition of narrative marked by the disappearance of storytelling. From this perspective, Benjamin argues, “it is possible to find a *new* beauty in what is vanishing”.⁴

The second aim is to ask a broader question not just about literary modernism, but about the “modernist criticism” of which deconstruction may yet be judged a part. For if poststructuralists—from Barthes to Kristeva to Derrida—elaborated their central intellectual terms and gestures by reading formally self-conscious texts by writers such as Mallarmé, Proust, and of course Joyce, then their critical positions—whether ostensibly positioned in relation to these authors or not—must be recognized as part of the “afterlife” of modernism. As such, the ways in which they remember, or repeat, or rehearse the past cultural constellation of modernism takes on a wider ethical or political significance. The history of Joyce criticism points with some urgency to the stakes involved here: for in the trajectory from high modernist formalist—whose texts perform a pure “revolution of the word” in which historical determination is erased in a blinding *jouissance*—to the “subaltern” Joyce of more recent postcolonial criticism—where the colonial project of erasing and eliding the premodern and the precolonial is itself recognized as part of the modernist text—the question of the appearance and disappearance of historical determinacy returns.⁵ Understood in these terms, the afterlife of Joyce’s text asks each critical perspective brought to bear upon it to what extent it is able to register both the openness to futurity involved in its experimental form—as linguistic indeterminacy or polyvocalism—and the ways in which that formal experimentation may encode the historical determinacy—the weight of dead generations, or “nightmare of history”—of European colonial modernity. To the extent that the globalized present remains determined by the moment of imperialism, this question remains unavoidable for any critical practice that claims an ethical or political significance.

II

In “The Storyteller” Benjamin aligns the secularization of death in Europe with his broader account of technology, a connection secured by an

⁴ Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, Volume 3, 146; emphasis added. Subsequent references to this work will be in the body of the text, abbreviated as *SW3* and accompanied by page numbers.

⁵ As significant points that might help plot this trajectory see for example Colin McCabe’s *James Joyce and the Revolution of the Word* (London: Macmillan, 1978), and Enda Duffy’s *The Subaltern Ulysses* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994).

understanding of the nineteenth century as the “pre-history” of technological modernity. “In the course of the nineteenth century”, the essay observes, “bourgeois society—by means of medical and social, private and public institutions—realized a secondary effect, which may have been its subconscious main purpose: to enable people to avoid the sight of the dying” (*SW3*, 151).

The importance of this shift for Benjamin lies in his understanding of the role of death in the historical transformation of apperception—or the spatio-temporal co-ordinates of cognition and perception which underlie particular configurations of meaning, value and belief. As the essay recounts,

Dying was once a public process in the life of an individual, and a most exemplary one; think of the medieval pictures in which the deathbed has turned into a throne that people come toward through the wide-open doors of the dying person’s house. In the course of modern times, dying has been pushed further and further out of the perceptual world of the living. It used to be that there was not a single house, hardly a single room, in which someone had not once died[...] Today people live in rooms that have never been touched by death—dry dwellers of eternity; and when their end approaches, they are stowed away in sanatoria or hospitals by their heirs. (*SW3* 151)

This account emphasizes the cognitive and perceptual significance of death by stressing its constitutive role in structuring the “perceptual world of the living”, and by identifying its visibility with instruction and communicability. The disappearance of death therefore marks a crucial shift associated with the rise of modern, technological societies, a shift which Benjamin describes in terms of the decay of “experience proper” (*Erfahrung*) and the predominance of “lived experience” (*Erlebnis*).⁶

Within this framework, the apperceptive conditions of meaning and belief in pre-modern societies are understood to imply a spatio-temporal continuum characterized by the community of creation and the eternity of the Creator, rather than being restricted within the purview of the isolated consciousness and its discrete life-span. Consequently, each individual death finds its meaning within the continuity of “experience” (*Erfahrung*), a spatio-temporal configuration in which death appears as a recurring motif *within* the texture of experience, not as the final limit or point of cessation. In “The Storyteller”, this apperceptive arrangement is imaged in the vocabulary of weaving and in the recurring figure of the medieval church clock with “its revolving procession of creatures—a procession in which, depending on circumstances, Death is either the leader or the last wretched straggler” (*SW3* 153). As Benjamin remarks in another instance, “this is an image for a

⁶ See the important essay “Experience and Poverty” (1933), in Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, Volume 2, 731-5. The essay was published in Prague just months after Hitler’s rise to power, and although brief, it provides a significant context for understanding Benjamin’s writing through the 1930s.

collective experience to which even the deepest shock in every individual experience—death—constitutes no impediment or barrier” (*SW3* 157).

The emergence of the modern subject implies a quite different structuring of apperception, which in turn transforms the nature of death. While death can be assimilated or made meaningful within the experiential coordinates of the medieval world, from the standpoint of modern, atomized subjectivity, death is *external to meaning* since it marks the cessation of lived experience (*Erlebnis*). Death “disappears” in the sense that it becomes the limit of an individualized experience, rather than a recurring constituent of collective experience.

Understood in these terms, the disappearance of death marks a transformation in the very conditions of meaning, a transformation which is described in the Work of Art essay as the “shattering of tradition” (*SW3* 104) and in “The Storyteller” as the decline of the communicability of experience (*SW3* 143-4). Benjamin’s term *Erfahrung* designates an experiential matrix which, despite continual modification, remains relatively stable over time, and so implies a mode of transmissibility or tradition that includes both persistence and destruction. The endurance of objects—whether linguistic or visual artifacts, patterns of behavior or ritual, or social customs and institutions— involves their reoccurrence within an interpretative context that is at once comparable with and different to that in which they were produced. Objects are therefore subject to reinterpretation, but within the confines of the relative continuity of tradition: as such, interpretation involves a transaction or negotiation between different configurations of experience. However, once the conditions of experience are localized within the apperceptive subject as “lived experience” (*Erlebnis*), the relative continuity engendered by the collective patterning of *Erfahrung* is lost; therefore, each new experiential context is radically discontinuous or incommensurable. While the object may nonetheless be read or deciphered, interpretation now proceeds according to the parameters of the existing conditions of experience, effacing the traces of those in which it was produced.

The disappearance of death in the welter of lived experience therefore marks a fundamental reformulation of the very terms of the historicity of meaning—or of what Benjamin calls the “afterlife” (*fortleben, nachleben*) of the work.⁷ This new condition is manifested for Benjamin in the prevalence of “information” that accompanies the rise of the newspaper: “the value of information”, the essay remarks, “does not survive the moment in which it was new”, and so “it lives only at that moment” (*SW3* 148). Paradoxically, then, while tradition involves both the continuing life *and* death of the transmitted

⁷ Benjamin’s notion of “after-life” is developed in “The Task of the Translator” (1922) and “Goethe’s Elective Affinities” (1919-22), both in Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, Volume 1, trans. R. Livingstone et al. (Cambridge, MA: Belknap-Harvard UP, 1996), 253-64 and 297-360.

object, in lived experience what is transmissible is now *only death*—or the failure of another context of experience to appear. Thus, as Benjamin observes elsewhere, “the buried corpse” has become “the ‘transcendental Subject’ of historical consciousness”.⁸

“The Storyteller” explores the prospects for narrative within this new condition by way of a comparison between the different possible futures signaled in turn by the story and by the novel form, which for Benjamin includes the short story.⁹ However, the temporal orientation of this comparison has been widely misunderstood, and underlies the accusations of nostalgia leveled at the essay. Benjamin associates story and novel with, respectively, *Erfahrung* and *Erlebnis*, in the sense that the structuring of each narrative mode finds a particular affinity or compatibility with a different configuration of experience; but this is not to identify a particular narrative mode with a corresponding historical “stage”, nor limit its significance to a single point in time.¹⁰ Indeed, the fundamental premise of the essay is that although the experiential conditions which gave rise to the story are now lost, the story “lives on”—not authentically or as it once was, but inauthentically.¹¹ Its analysis of the story is not an act of resurrection, which would disinter the story and reconstruct it as it once really was, but an examination of its “afterlife”, in which the story—like the vitriolized body of the young miner of Falun in Leskov’s story “The Unexpected Reunion” (“*Unverhofftes Wiedersehen*”)—reoccurs within changed historical circumstances to unprecedented effect (*SW3* 152).

Understood in these terms, “The Storyteller” pursues two distinct aims, although in the present context we are concerned only with the first of these. Its initial task is to develop a critique of the novel that will respond to the experimental tendencies we have come to associate with aesthetic

⁸ Walter Benjamin, “Central Park” (1938-9), trans. Lloyd Spencer, *New German Critique* 34 (1985), 35.

⁹ “In point of fact”, writes Benjamin, modern humanity “has succeeded in abbreviating even storytelling. We have witnessed the evolution of the ‘short story’, which has removed itself from oral tradition and no longer permits the slow piling up, one on top of another, of thin, transparent layer which constitutes the most appropriate image of the way in which the perfect narrative is revealed through the layers of various retellings” (Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, Volume 3, 150).

¹⁰ In fact, Benjamin’s approach is even more dynamic than this summary suggests, since the distinction of “story” and “novel” already marks a rethinking of the narrative possibilities of epic; see Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, Volume 3, 152-4.

¹¹ Leskov was of course not a journeyman or medieval seafarer but, like Leopold Bloom, a commercial traveler. His stories therefore do not mark the authentic return of storytelling but its *inauthentic after-life*, as the essay repeatedly makes clear. More broadly, Benjamin understands the condition of narrative within technological modernity in terms of the after-life of the story, although again this return is inauthentic; see note 13 below.

modernism, but without falling back upon notions of progress or decline. Its second is to generate an alternative framework for addressing the new narrative forms generated by technological media like radio and film, in order to provide a counterweight to the aesthetic categories inherited from Romanticism and the Enlightenment.¹² Thus, far from being an antiquarian exercise, the essay proposes a double agenda whose outlook is decidedly forward-thinking.

III

The comparison of the story and the novel form in “The Storyteller” is designed to draw out the implications for narrative of the decay of collective experience (*Erfahrung*) and the predominance of lived experience (*Erlebnis*). Within the terms of collective experience, the course of the world and the fate of the community are viewed as intimately entwined, so that the historical experience of the collective provides the categories for understanding the world. From this perspective, the relationship of events to one another is continually modified according to the unfolding fate of the community, which reinterprets its destiny in the light of its changing fortunes. In contrast, the viewpoint of the modern subject is bereft of such an inherited experiential context, wherein the unfolding of events would remain meaningful within the terms of tradition—even if that meaning changes over time. Instead, the subject is isolated from the course of events, and views them externally as a fixed causal trajectory that ultimately ends in a discrete point or moment of finality. Such a perspective is characterized by spatial individuation and temporal fixity in its isolation and freezing of a succession of discrete moments as the chain of cause and effect (*SW3* 152-3).

These different spatio-temporal configurations of meaning underlie the essay’s comparison of story and novel. According to Benjamin, storytelling does not pursue the unique narrative of an individualized personality, but summons up “many diffuse occurrences” (*SW3* 154) within which the role of protagonist “keeps shifting from figure to figure” (*SW3* 160). And because the

¹² This second task predominates in the last four sections of the essay, and centers on the different ways in which the fairy tale anticipates the condition of narrative in modern technology; see Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, Volume 3, 156-62. Although largely ignored, this connection is in fact fundamental to Benjamin’s engagement with technology: see the fragment “Mickey Mouse” (1931) and “Experience and Poverty”, both in Benjamin, *Selected Writing*, Volume 2, especially 545 and 735; and the discussion of Mickey Mouse in the Work of Art essay, where Benjamin observes that technology’s “renew[al]” of “an old tradition” is not necessarily “reassuring” (Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, Volume 3, 130n30).

story anticipates a continuum of readability in tradition, it eschews the patterns of cause and effect that emerge within the individualized viewpoint. Consequently, it strives to remain “free from explanation”, so that although “the most extraordinary, marvelous things, are related with the greatest accuracy, [...] the psychological connections among the events are not forced on the reader” and “it is left up to him to interpret things the way he understands them”. In contrast to the information that characterizes the newspaper—“which does not survive the moment in which it was new”—the story “does not expend itself”, but in the unfolding of tradition “preserves and concentrates its energy and is capable of releasing it after a long time” (*SW3* 148). In being reinterpreted in tradition it is both reproduced and recast within successively modified contexts of experience, so that its afterlife involves an accumulation that is both an act of preservation and an act of destruction or betrayal. In this way it can both “absorb the course of events [...] and [...] make its peace with the passing of these, with the power of death” (*SW3* 153-4).

In the novel, on the other hand, the spatio-temporal co-ordinates of meaning are bounded by death, and so are locked within the individualized compass of lived experience. However, far from lamenting the loss of collective experience, this comparison is designed to generate a critical framework which aligns contemporary literary experimentation with the longer-term tendencies towards irony, parody and aesthetic self-consciousness, which have characterized the novel from its inception. Benjamin’s aim is to avoid a progressive conception of literary development, and instead to describe the novel as a force-field of tensions whose coherence is perennially liable to interruption, distortion and disfigurement.

The comparison between story and novel in the essay is first of all designed to overturn dominant expectations about representationalism, which extrapolates the novel’s power to render the “fullness” of experience from its prosaic location in the profane world of modernity. From Benjamin’s perspective, however, it is precisely because the novel is located “in the midst of life’s fullness” and seeks to “represe[n]t [...] this fullness” that it “gives evidence” not of the self-presence of life, but “of the profound perplexity of the living” (*SW3* 146). For once the temporal continuum of tradition is lost, inner experience becomes separated from the course of external events, and its categories of meaning and value appear arbitrary and capricious—the source not of confidence in the self-presence of meaning, but of “profound perplexity”. The conflict between internal time consciousness and other modes of narrative or historical time which characterizes the novel is understood as a crucial manifestation of this perplexity. In the language of Lukács’ *Theory of the Novel* (1920) which the essay invokes, this awareness of time is identified as a function of the “transcendental homelessness” which is for Lukács the

fundamental condition of the novel.¹³ Thus, in Benjamin's view, the novel's rootedness in lived experience aligns it not with the communicability of meaning and the fullness of life, but with incommunicability and loss: "To write a novel", remarks Benjamin, "is to take to the extreme that which is incommensurable in the representation of human existence" (*SW3* 146).

The critical force of Benjamin's approach lies in its articulation of Lukács' conception of the novel as "the form of transcendental homelessness" (*SW3* 155). In the modern condition of transcendental homelessness, lived experience is bounded by death, and so its assignment of value and meaning remains arbitrary because internal and unrelated to the course of the world. However, in the *representation* of lived experience provided by the novel, events are invested with an apparently "necessary" meaning in their advance towards "that death [which] is already waiting for them—a very definite death, at a very definite place", namely the literal or figurative "death" which marks the end of the novel (*SW3* 156). The essay's approach cuts across the notions of empathy, identification, "reflection" and representationalism long associated with the novel; for according to Benjamin,

The novel is significant not because it presents someone else's fate to us [...] but because this stranger's fate, by virtue of the flame which consumes it, yields to us the warmth which we never draw from our own fate. What draws the reader to a novel is the hope of warming his shivering life with a death he reads about. (*SW3* 156)

Rather than recognizing death as a nonidentical moment of collective experience, the novel integrates individual and world by identifying the horizons of collective meaning with the individualized limits of lived experience. But the "warmth" it thereby promises remains an empty hope, since this identification only serves to consolidate the subject's frigid isolation and so confirm the cold arbitrariness of its unhappy fate.

The essay's political critique of the novel form is underpinned by this understanding of its generalization of an individualized conception of death. However, the essay seeks to establish a critical framework that avoids blanket judgments, and so its articulation of the tensions inherent in the novel allows for developments that might nonetheless imbue the novel form with a critical or illuminating charge. Thus, the condition of transcendental homelessness generates "a basic structure of the novel", a set of vectors or tendencies inherent within the novel form with which individual works have to contend. These tendencies are most clearly manifested in the *Bildungsroman*, which according to the essay "bestows the most brittle justification" on the social order "by integrating the social process with the development of the person";

¹³ *SW3* 155. In effect, the essay draws out possibilities within Lukács' theory of the novel which have been almost entirely ignored within English speaking criticism. For an account of the philosophical complexity of Lukács' theory of the novel see J.M. Bernstein, *The Philosophy of the Novel. Lukács: Marxism and the Dialectics of Form* (Brighton: Harvester, 1984).

thus, “the unattainable is event” (*SW3* 146-7).

However, the essay invokes a roll call of apparently quintessential novels—from *Don Quixote* to *Wilhelm Meisters Wanderjahre*—which are understood in fact to work against these tendencies by distorting the novel form. The point here is not that such works escape the limits of the novel in the sense of standing outside the condition of transcendental homelessness, but rather that they are able to offer insights into this very historical condition precisely by revealing the temporal specificity of their own configuration of meaningfulness. Elsewhere, Benjamin locates this illuminatory potential in the “death of intention” and “the mortification of works”—that is, in the process of ruin or disfigurement which marks the “afterlife” of an apparently integral configuration.¹⁴ For Benjamin, such instances offer an insight that exceeds the limits of the novel form, precisely because in distorting its parameters they bring into view something of its conditions of possibility.¹⁵ Seen from within the ineluctable march of events towards their conclusion, the novel’s freezing of lived experience imbues it with a meaningfulness that bears the appearance of necessity; but when seen from “without”, this freezing works to crystallize a particular structuring of meaning, whose configuration emerges in its incompatibility with other contexts of interpretation.

Rather than understanding the novel form in terms of the rendering of lived experience, “The Storyteller” argues that we should understand it in terms of an “after-life” that follows death. For at the moment of death, the essay reminds us, a “sequence of images is set in motion inside a man” which grants to him “views of himself in which he has encountered himself without being aware of it” (*SW3* 151).

IV

While “The Storyteller” approaches the novel form through the historicity of death, Joyce’s short story “The Dead” invites a reassessment of the conventions of prose fiction through its oblique invocation of the remembered dead. But if in retrospect there appears to be an affinity between Joyce and Benjamin here, “The Dead” has increasingly come to be seen as bearing witness to the ethical dimension of poststructuralist practices of reading. Joyce’s text therefore provides an opportunity for examining the contemporary significance of Benjamin’s critical framework.

¹⁴ Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. J. Osborne (London: Verso, 1977), 36, 182.

¹⁵ For a fuller account of the dynamics of Benjamin’s thinking here see G. MacPhee, *The Architecture of the Visible: Technology and Urban Visual Culture* (London: Continuum, 2002), 186-193.

In “Joyce’s ‘The Dead’: The Dissolution of the Self and the Police”, John Riquelme sets out to refute the charge that Joyce’s short story enacts an irresponsible dissolution of the self in “the free play of language [celebrated] by poststructuralists” such as Jacques Derrida and Julia Kristeva.¹⁶ He argues instead that “the dissolution of the self” described by the text does not entail the loss of political agency but “the exposure of delusion” (Riquelme 124). “The Dead” therefore performs an ethical deconstruction, a performance which involves the reader in a process of dissolution and exposure elicited by the recognition of the inevitability of death. As such, Riquelme writes, the text “provides the opportunity for a recognition of human limits that can help make freedom, with all its risks and uncertainties, possible” (139).

Riquelme’s reading conceives of “The Dead” as tracing two parallel trajectories of dissolution that move from plenitude to vacuum. The first centers on the figure of Gabriel Conroy, who “encounters the inevitability of his own death” in hearing his wife Gretta’s story of lost love, and so “loses [...] his sense of being at the pinnacle of multiple hierarchies” (Riquelme 132). This moment of crisis “creates a vacuum where previously there seemed to be a plenitude”, a process described as “the emptying out of the previously full image” of the self that enables “the potential transvaluation of everything [Gabriel] thought he knew” (Riquelme 139). The second trajectory, which shadows the first, involves the narrative’s shifting positioning of the reader. The reader begins with a “deluded sense of stability [that] corresponds to Gabriel’s pose of knowing and controlling” (Riquelme 135), a stability that is progressively undermined by “the increasing use of the free indirect style” in the final moments of the short story (Riquelme 125). This process reaches its apogee in Gabriel’s final repetition of the phrase from the newspaper spoken earlier by Mary Jane—that “the snow was general all over Ireland”.¹⁷ This repetition is understood as “a choral speaking” which “involves a blurring of the boundaries of the individual speaking self” and the articulation of “a group speech whose content implies the equality of all members” (Riquelme 138). For Riquelme, “the dissolution of the character’s self is communicated and transferred [to the reader] through free indirect style”, so that “our own stance as the spectator who possesses knowledge and control is destabilised” (139, 135).

The ethical force identified by this reading depends on its understanding of the text’s figuring of death. For Riquelme, death is conceived in opposition to “the culturally generated shapes and boundaries of hierarchical

¹⁶ John Riquelme, “Joyce’s ‘The Dead’: The Dissolution of the Self and the Police”, in R.M. Bosinelli & H.F. Mosher (eds.) *ReJoycing: New Readings of Dubliners* (Lexington: UP of Kentucky, 1998), 132.

¹⁷ James Joyce, *Dubliners* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1956), 220. All subsequent references will be to this edition, with page numbers given in parentheses in the body of the text.

difference”, as a “lack that resists being rationalised” (138-9); its recognition therefore constitutes a “truth that strenuously resists being eradicated by deluded self-representations and by self-perpetuating social hierarchies” (134). As such, the moment of crisis that accompanies Gabriel’s sudden awareness of mortality at the end of the short story is “not [...] an experience of undecidability but [...] a) decidedly unambiguous recognition of eventual death” (Riquelme 132). In these terms, Riquelme’s reading deploys the premonition of certain death against the ambiguity of appearance that characterizes the world of social differences, and consequently death comes to function as a principle of equivalence or indifference. For Riquelme, Gabriel’s recognition of “the mortality he shares” with the women he had earlier sought to dominate and master enables him to understand that in the dance of death “all partners are equal” (131, 139).

In the light of Benjamin’s essay, what is perhaps most striking about this account is its untheorized assumption of an individualized conception of death—“the obvious fact”, as Riquelme puts it, “that the survival of the individual is limited” (139). Such a conception of death—as a “vacuum” or point of indifference that stands in opposition to the differentiated appearance of the social world—adopts the standpoint of the isolated subject, for whom death looms as the cessation of meaning, an emptiness that is undifferentiated and absolutely unknowable. As Riquelme concedes, although without exploring its consequences, the critical perspective that governs his reading is located “*this side of death*”, and so its outlook remains centered on the journey from delusion to knowledge performed by the dominant consciousness of the narrative, Gabriel Conroy (138; emphasis added). Read from within the drama of isolated consciousness, the events of the short story—no matter how apparently inconsequential or arbitrary—assume a meaningfulness in relation to this overarching trajectory, forming an abbreviated *Bildungsroman* in which interiority finds its truth in the unfolding course of the world (*SW3* 150). Thus, despite its claim to base its ethics in an analysis of the performativity of the text, Riquelme’s reading restricts the short story’s formal dynamics within an individualized conception of death—as a *Bildungsroman* of dissolution.

In fact, the dynamics of Joyce’s text exceed the parameters of the *Bildungsroman* in terms that anticipate Benjamin’s critique of the novel form in “The Storyteller”.¹⁸ Although Riquelme claims that Gabriel’s journey from delusion to certainty is accompanied by “an increased use of free indirect style” in the final moments of the short story, it is very difficult to identify any such gradient, or to chart a *progressive* destabilization or distancing of the reader (Riquelme 125). Rather, free indirect discourse is deployed throughout

¹⁸ The text repeatedly ironizes the congruence of inner and outer meaning dreamed of by the *Bildungsroman*: thus, just before Gretta’s disclosure, Gabriel muses that “perhaps her thoughts had been running with his”, and then proclaims “I think I know what is the matter” (*D* 214, 215).

“The Dead”—as Riquelme’s own reading in fact indicates—and we are never allowed to assume the reliability of any narrative viewpoint or align our interpretation with a neutral, authoritative narrative voice. This uncertainty is demonstrated at the outset when Gabriel and Gretta arrive to be greeted by the maid Lily: the disjunction between the rendering of Gabriel’s surname in reported speech (“Is it snowing again, Mr Conroy?”) and his internal recognition of Lily’s “non-standard” pronunciation (“Gabriel smiled at the three syllables she had given his surname”) underlines the unreliability not simply of narration, but even of direct discourse, which presents itself as a neutral medium of report (*D* 175). The accumulated effect of this pervasive destabilization is to generate an awareness of the text as a particular configuration of meaningfulness, rather than simply pursuing the meaning(s) available within the unfolding of the narrative. Or, in terms of our discussion of “The Storyteller”, while we inevitably read “The Dead” from *within* the drama of Gabriel’s consciousness—so following the journey from delusion to recognition—the text constantly invites us to examine from “*without*” the structuring of apperception which underlies this drama.

The parameters of this configuration begin to obtrude in moments of anxiety, when Gabriel projects a fantasy world whose comforting co-ordinates correspond to the patterns of his own consciousness in a way that the experiential world of other consciousnesses does not. So, after his uncomfortable conversation with Miss Ivors, who jokingly accuses him of being a “West Briton”, Gabriel takes refuge in the imaginary landscape of a Phoenix Park dominated by the obelisk commemorating Arthur Wellesley, Duke of Wellington:

How pleasant it would be to walk out alone, first along by the river and then through the park. The snow would be lying on the branches of the trees and forming a bright cap on the top of the Wellington Monument. How much more pleasant it would be than here at the supper-table! (*D* 189)

Again, just before his after-dinner speech, Gabriel calms his nerves by transporting himself back to the park, where “the Wellington Monument wore a gleaming cap of snow that flashed westwards over the white field of the Fifteen Acres” (*D* 199). The fantasies to which Gabriel’s consciousness retreats at such moments of anxiety provide glimpses into its apperceptive configuration, the co-ordinates of space and time which underpin perception and meaning. In the cartography of Gabriel’s consciousness, the symbolic power of the “Iron Duke”—a native Dubliner who more than any other came to embody the military and political dominion of the British Empire—coincides with the monumental architecture of the obelisk, whose domination of the surrounding landscape reduces it to a uniform and undifferentiated blankness.¹⁹ So, when confronted by orders of experience which exceed its

¹⁹ For a suggestive analysis of the architecture of the obelisk and its role in the

own parameters of understanding—moments which significantly culminate in the playful but pointed charge of his succumbing to an unmanly colonial subservience by a woman who is both modern in her anti-imperial feminism, yet proud of an Irish culture that recalls the premodern (however problematically)—the fabric of Gabriel’s consciousness is restored by the recall of the idealized spatio-temporal configuration embodied in the monument to the imperial Irishman par excellence—Arthur Wellesley, victor of Waterloo, British Prime Minister, and first Duke of Wellington.

Throughout the short story, Gabriel maps the physical and semantic geography of Dublin through the triangulation of three significant monuments: alongside the Wellington Monument, the statues of William of Orange and Daniel O’Connell also feature as key reference points in Gabriel’s negotiation of his social world.²⁰ But more than this, the parameters of his imagination and understanding *are imperial and monumental*, in that the heterogeneity of lived experience—in which the modern and premodern, the Irish and British, the Protestant and Catholic, the masculine and the feminine, are continually both demarcated and conflated—is fixed and ordered as a uniform panorama radiating from the central pinnacle of his own consciousness. This is a consciousness that sees itself at once as modern and therefore beyond national identification (figured by the abstract geometry of the obelisk), and yet as somehow secretly and properly British (architecturally trumping the Oriental obelisk brought by Napoleon to stand in the Place de Concord, just as Wellington humbled the French Emperor at Waterloo). And as such, it is a configuration of consciousness that can assert its own integrity and dominance through resort to a violence which does not need to be justified, for what falls within its purview becomes inert material awaiting refashioning and entry into the fullness of the present and the modern. Thus, Gabriel’s fierce projection of his own anger and sexual desire during their journey back to the hotel renders Gretta as a stiff and lifeless stage property within his fantasies of romantic love and sexual conquest; and so he fails to register what is made increasingly clear to the reader—namely that Gretta is mourning her lost love, the dead boy Michael Furey.

The apperceptive co-ordinates of Gabriel’s consciousness emerge most clearly in the doubled and interrupted nature of his final “epiphany”. For Gabriel initially assumes that Gretta’s thoughts are directed towards the living, an assumption that betrays an imagination which restricts possibility within the

constitution of the modern nation-state see Georges Bataille, “The Obelisk”, in *Visions of Excess*, trans. Alan Stoekl (1938; Manchester: Manchester UP, 1985), 213-22.

²⁰ See Joyce, *Dubliners* 205 and 211-12. The Anglo-Irish Wellington (1769-1852), victor of Waterloo and subsequently British Prime Minister, seems to symbolize the settlement that would in Gabriel’s eyes reconcile Protestant Unionism and Catholic Ireland—that is, through the imperialist identification of political authority and military force.

opposed poles of presence and absence—just as the visible world is reduced to the homogenous substantiality of the monumental. What unsettles Gabriel is not this first revelation—that Gretta might love another—but rather the second—that her love might be extended to one among the dead. The endurance of Gretta’s love for Michael Furey within a world in which he is absent introduces a prospect that exceeds the parameters of Gabriel’s imagination—the persistence of a different possible future within a present in which it was not actualized, and so cannot appear.

V

Rather than remaining within the terms of the narrative of Gabriel’s consciousness, Benjamin’s critique of the novel form focuses attention on the fragility of the *Bildungsroman*’s alignment of inner and outer meaning. As such, it draws attention to the text’s formal ironies and questions the very notion of “epiphany” or “revelation”. But furthermore, it extends the parameters of reading by asking not only how Gabriel’s consciousness is structured, but also how this structuring compares with other possible configurations.

Seen from within the drama of Gabriel’s consciousness, the moment of revelation marks the dissolution of delusion, and so constitutes a watershed in understanding; but seen from the perspective of the apperceptive co-ordinates of understanding, this moment does not mark a qualitative change. From the outset, Gabriel’s outlook assumes a uniform world of substantiality, an array of statues whose homogeneous solidity defines the self-presence of the living now. Such a perspective implies and takes shape from its corollary, a pure absence or vacuum that constitutes a realm of death uncorrupted by the social differences and hierarchies of the living. Thus, the netherworld of the dead that appears in the penultimate paragraph inhabits the same co-ordinates as his monumental vision of the living, “a grey impalpable world” that supplies the negative image for “the solid world itself”:

The tears gathered more thickly in his eyes and in the partial darkness he imagined he saw the form of a young man standing under a dripping tree. Other forms were near. His soul had approached that region where dwell the vast hosts of the dead. He was conscious of, but could not apprehend, their wayward and flickering existence. His own identity was fading out into a grey impalpable world: the solid world itself, which the dead had one time reared and lived in, was dissolving and dwindling. (*D* 219)

But it is not Michael Furey who appears here: what appears, in fact, is the imagined “form of a young man” who is one among many “other forms”, featureless and undefined. Just as Gabriel’s earlier fantasies solipsistically reduce Gretta to the parameters of his own imaging and desire—whether as the

sentimental image he titles *Distant Music*, or more brutally in his desire “to crush her body against his [and] overmaster her”—so this image reduces the myriad complexity of the relations between living and dead to an undifferentiated projection of his own anxiety (*D* 214). For although this fantasy imagines the dissolution of the ego in the recognition of shared mortality, it is Aunt Julia who joins the dead in Gabriel’s imagination, while Gabriel himself undertakes the onerous task of consoling the living, as much at the center of things as when he carves the goose at the dinner table.

Like the Wellington monument, whose imperial architecture reduces the surrounding landscape to a uniform and undifferentiated blankness, Gabriel’s conception of death smothers all differences among the dead, freezing and homogenizing their variegated and constantly shifting relationships with the living. Far from constituting a “choral speaking”, the final imagined scene of the snow “general all over Ireland” offers a complex image of the desires buried deep within the novel form. The harmony of interior and exterior dreamt of by the *Bildungsroman* may appear as old as nature, but as this image reminds us, it is in fact a function of a world split between the isolated subject and the disconnected events which confront it every morning in the newspaper.

If Benjamin’s critique of the novel form emphasizes the limits of Gabriel’s imagination, it also draws attention to an engagement with the dead that Riquelme’s reading neglects—one which unfolds not in Gabriel’s imagination, but in Gretta’s story of lost love. However, Gretta’s storytelling demands a complicated kind of double reading, since the text denies us access to her interior life and her story is available only through the mediation of Gabriel’s limited perspective. But this means that, in Benjamin’s words, Gretta’s account is stripped of “the psychological connections among the events”, leaving it “free from explanation”; and so it is “restored” to something that resembles—although *inauthentically*—the condition of the story (*SW3* 148). Though filtered through Gabriel’s point of view, the text suggests the lineaments of another configuration of experience in the temporal ambiguity introduced at the moment she recalls the image of her lost love. In contrast to the temporal consistency of Gabriel’s narrative viewpoint, Gretta’s account of her last encounter with Michael Furey is characterized by an oscillation of tenses:

I implored him to go home at once and told him that he would get his death in the rain. But he said he did not want to live. I can see his eyes as well as well! He was standing at the end of the wall where there was a tree. (*D* 218)

While Gabriel’s vision can see only “the solid world” of the living or the “grey impalpable world” of the dead, Gretta’s storytelling suggests a different configuration of experience. In shifting from the past tense of retrospective narration to the present tense—“I *can* see his eyes as well as well!”—Gretta testifies to the paradoxical living on of a moment that is dead and gone.

Gretta's storytelling, then, marks the appearance of a mode of experience that can no longer appear in the world of the novel—and so it appears *negatively*, in its *difference* to and incommensurability with the configuration of Gabriel's consciousness.

Despite its claim to center on the recognition of difference, Riquelme's reading inadvertently equalizes Gretta's memory of Michael Furey and Gabriel's undifferentiated world of shades—reducing them both to the homogenous multitude of “the dead”. But as the short story reminds us by placing Michael Furey—the “boy in the gasworks”—alongside that other representative of the departed—Arthur Wellesley, Duke of Wellington—the dead are *not the same*, and the differences and hierarchies that separate them do not simply fade away on their demise (*SW3* 216). Though Riquelme locates an ethical charge in the liquidation of social “boundaries of hierarchical difference” he sees at the story's conclusion (Riquelme 138), in doing so he erases the historical determinacy that exists not as a “content” to be “represented”, but embedded in its configuration of meaning. If British colonialism itself erases or overwrites other histories—as premodern, and as such nonsensical or without meaning—so that they cannot appear within the colonial text, such histories may leave their mark or imprint in the warps and distortions they produce in the very configuration of meaning which seeks to exclude them—as we have seen in the return of Greta's storytelling within the parameters of Gabriel's imperial and monumental perspective. In erasing the differences among the dead, Riquelme obscures *the determinate absence of what has been lost and so cannot appear*, the determinate history of erasure and loss which allows British imperial culture to present itself paradoxically as a modernity that is without nation yet always at home, a universality that is somehow particular to itself.²¹ In its ethical concern for an opening to futurity, Riquelme's deconstructive reading elides the historical determinacy of a past which has been lost and cannot appear, but which continues to organize the hierarchies and distinctions that underpin the postcolonial present. What this elision suggests, therefore, is that the differences which distinguish among the dead, and tie them to the fate of the living, are not static, but have their afterlife in the stratified and uneven space of transmission that patterns the conflict between individual and collective memory, and organizes the parameters of meaning.

Reading Joyce's text through the frame of “The Storyteller” is not merely an antiquarian exercise, since the interplay between the historicity of death and the configuration of meaning staged by these two texts has itself become a central issue for contemporary criticism. Our own critical moment has been powerfully defined by the recognition of the inherence of death in the

²¹ For a consideration of the paradoxes of British national identity see Graham MacPhee and Prem Poddar (eds.), *Empire and After: Englishness in Postcolonial Perspective* (Oxford and New York: Berghahn, 2007).

apparent fullness of meaning, where death is both the necessary condition of meaning—as repetition or iterability—and its inescapable undoing, its irrevocable openness to futurity. In “*Ulysses Gramophone*”, this doubleness is articulated as “the *yes* of memory, with its recapitulating control and reactive repetition”, and “the light, dancing *yes* of affirmation, the open affirmation of the gift”, a pairing which registers both the weight of memory and repetition, and the continual opening of this repetition to difference and futurity. But in order to avoid being caught up in a progressive dialectic, Derrida insists that these terms “refer to each other *without having any relationship* between them”.²² As such, death becomes the matrix of meaning and desire, yet it cannot be known in its historical determinacy, and so risks being hypostatized as an inert and empty vacuum, rather than being recognized in each moment of its constantly changing (dis)appearance in the present.

Riquelme’s reading of “The Dead” dramatizes some of the risks involved in attempting to locate an ethical charge in such a conception of the unchanging and unknowable certainty of death. For as our reading of Joyce’s text suggests, if we cannot trace anything of the relationship between memory’s return and the articulation of difference, then we are unable to register how the history of return reconfigures the conditions of articulation. In this case, the ethical concern for openness to futurity becomes, at best, little more than piety, and, at worst, a new mode of self-deception, since it cannot distinguish how the differences among the dead may in their afterlife come to reinforce and reproduce the hierarchies of the living.

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²² Derrida, “*Ulysses Gramophone*”, 308; emphasis added. For a critical questioning of Derrida’s conception of a “democracy yet to come”, see Matthias Fritsch, “Derrida’s Democracy to Come”, *Constellations* 9:4 (2002), 574-597.