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# Context-Free and Context-Sensitive Literature: Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* and James Joyce's *Dubliners*

Andreas Fischer

## I

In an essay entitled "Focus, Scope, and Lyrical Beginnings" Randolph Quirk sets out "to explore the strategies we may adopt to show that we have made a beginning. Or rather to *pretend* we have. Because I am particularly interested in our effective awareness that beginnings do not exist: we have only continuations."<sup>1</sup> The process of writing and reading is characterized by both: by the pretence of a beginning and by an awareness of and a need for, continuations (or contexts, as we may also call them). What does a writer do when he starts a poem or a work of fiction? How does he reconcile (or not reconcile) the conflicting demands of having to start from scratch and at the same time to create a context that gives his work coherence, depth and plausibility? And how does a reader deal with such beginnings?

Different strategies are possible, some stressing the fact that a start is being made, others putting more emphasis on continuation and context. The beginnings of two short stories may serve as examples:

Upon the half decayed veranda of a small frame house that stood near the edge of a ravine near the town of Winesburg, Ohio, a fat little old man walked nervously up and down. Across a long field that had been seeded for clover but that had produced only a dense crop of yellow mustard weeds, he could  
5 see the public highway along which went a wagon filled with berry pickers

<sup>1</sup> In *Style and Communication in the English Language* (London: Edward Arnold, 1982) 121-32 (p. 121). The essay first appeared in *Language and Style* 11 (1978).

- returning from the fields. The berry pickers, youths and maidens, laughed and shouted boisterously. A boy clad in a blue shirt leaped from the wagon and attempted to drag after him one of the maidens, who screamed and protested shrilly. The feet of the boy in the road kicked up a cloud of dust that floated
- 10 across the face of the departing sun. Over the long field came a thin girlish voice. 'Oh, you Wing Biddlebaum, comb your hair, it's falling into your eyes,' commanded the voice to the man, who was bald and whose nervous little hands fiddled about the bare white forehead as though arranging a mass of tangled locks.
- 15 Wing Biddlebaum, forever frightened and beset by a ghostly band of doubts, did not think of himself as in any way a part of the life of the town where he had lived for twenty years. Among all the people of Winesburg but one had come close to him. With George Willard, son of Tom Willard, the proprietor of the New Willard House, he had formed something like a
- 20 friendship. George Willard was the reporter on the *Winesburg Eagle* and sometimes in the evenings he walked out along the highway to Wing Biddlebaum's house. Now as the old man walked up and down on the veranda, his hands moving nervously about, he was hoping that George Willard would come and spend the evening with him. After the
- 25 wagon containing the berry pickers had passed, he went across the field through the tall mustard weeds and climbing a rail fence peered anxiously along the road to the town. For a moment he stood thus, rubbing his hands together and looking up and down the road, and then, fear overcoming him, ran back to walk again upon the porch on his own house. ("Hands")<sup>2</sup>

The story "Hands" begins with the introduction of a place, two characters and a problem. At the very beginning the setting is built up with utmost care in a long adverbial phrase that starts with the most specific item (*veranda*) and then sets it in an ever widening frame (*of a house — near the edge — of a ravine — near the town — of Winesburg, Ohio*). The impression of meticulous care is intensified by a number of descriptive adjectives (*half decayed veranda, small frame house*) and *of*-genitives (*the veranda of a house, [near] the edge of a ravine, [near] the town of Winesburg*). Everything mentioned at the beginning of the story is introduced as new, and the newness of this information is further marked by the use of the indefinite article wherever this is possible (*a small frame house, a ravine*). The first character, too, is introduced with the help of an indefinite article and no less than three adjectives (*a fat little old man*),

<sup>2</sup> Sherwood Anderson, *Winesburg, Ohio* [1919]. [New Edition, with] Introduction by Malcolm Cowley (London: Jonathan Cape, 1967). All quotations from *Winesburg, Ohio* are from this edition.

and later in the same paragraph he is identified by name (*Wing Biddlebaum*). The second character is introduced first by his name (*George Willard*), but immediately afterwards this name is set into an "ever widening frame" with *of*-genitives (*son of Tom Willard, the proprietor of the New Willard House*), recalling the setting at the beginning of the story. In what is called "upward" or anaphoric reference all personal pronouns in the text clearly refer to people already introduced: *he* in line 4 thus refers to the *fat little old man* of line 2, and *he* in line 21 to the *George Willard* of line 18. The little piece of direct speech in line 11 also reinforces this impression of care and explicitness: it is grammatically correct and complete, although its function in the text is not altogether clear. The only other "riddle" presented by this beginning is the title "Hands," but it is partly solved already in the first paragraph, when Wing Biddlebaum is said to have *nervous hands* (taken up in the second paragraph by *his hands moving nervously about and rubbing his hands together*). From this point onwards the perceptive reader senses that the hands of the title are those of Wing Biddlebaum, and that they constitute the "problem" of the story to follow.

Here is the beginning of a second story:

There was no hope for him this time: it was the third stroke. Night after night I had passed the house (it was vacation time) and studied the lighted square of window: and night after night I had found it lighted in the same way, faintly and evenly. If he was dead, I thought, I would see the reflection of candles on the darkened blind for I knew that two candles must be set at the head of a corpse. He had often said to me: *I am not long for this world*, and I had thought his words idle. Now I knew they were true. Every night as I gazed up at the window I said softly to myself the word *paralysis*. It had always sounded strangely in my ears, like the word *gnomon* in the Euclid and the word *simony* in the Catechism. But now it sounded to me like the name of some maleficent and sinful being. It filled me with fear, and yet I longed to be nearer to it and to look upon its deadly work.

Old Cotter was sitting at the fire, smoking, when I came downstairs to supper. While my aunt was ladling out my stirabout he said, as if returning to some former remark of his:

— 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. My uncle  
25 saw me staring and said to me:

— Well, so your old friend is gone, you'll be sorry to hear.

— Who? said I.

— Father Flynn.

— Is he dead?

30 — Mr Cotter here has just told us. He was passing by the house. ("The Sisters")<sup>3</sup>

In the first 30 lines of "The Sisters" one can also make out places, characters and problems. A setting is indicated by *the house* in line 2 and *the fire* and *downstairs* in line 13. At this point in the story the reader, of course, knows nothing about either locality, but the use of the definite article (in this function sometimes called the "familiarizing article")<sup>4</sup> and the complete absence of descriptive adjectives and *of*-genitives seems to imply some foreknowledge on his part. The same is true, incidentally, for indications of time (missing in "Hands"): both the deictic *this time* and the enumerative *the third stroke* implicitly continue a chronological sequence that had its beginning before the actual story sets in. The same is true also for the way characters are introduced: *There was no hope for him* and *I had passed* contain two personal pronouns which are often called "referentless,"<sup>5</sup> because when the reader first encounters them he has no referents for them. In fact, there are referents, but they are only identified later in the story. Thus the *him* of line 1 turns out to be Father Flynn only in line 28, and the narrating *I* of line 2 slowly emerges as a schoolboy (*it was vacation time*) who lives or stays with his aunt and uncle. In contrast to the "normal," anaphoric beginning of "Hands," that of "The Sisters," is

<sup>3</sup> James Joyce, *Dubliners* [1914]. The Corrected Text with an Explanatory Note by Robert Scholes and fifteen drawings by Robin Jacques (London: Jonathan Cape, 1967). All quotations from *Dubliners* are from this edition.

<sup>4</sup> Franz K. Stanzel, *Theorie des Erzählens*. UTB 904. 2., verbesserte Auflage (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1982) 213.

<sup>5</sup> Stanzel, p. 210. On pronouns see also Roland Harweg, *Pronomina und Textkonstitution*. Beihefte zu Poetica 2. 2., verbesserte und ergänzte Auflage (München: Wilhelm Fink, 1979).

thus marked by cataphoric pronominal reference.<sup>6</sup> The presentation of direct speech in "The Sisters," confirms the picture gained so far: Old Cotter's tentative, unfinished sentences with their "continual leakage of implication and suggestion"<sup>7</sup> are in stark contrast to the directness and (linguistic) explicitness of the words that reach Wing Biddlebaum *over the long field*. The title "The Sisters," finally, also shows the lack of explicitness we have observed throughout. "Hands" soon turned out to be a clue to the "problem" of the story, but in the 30 lines here quoted the identity of the sisters remains as obscure as the role they play in the story. (Readers familiar with the full story will know that its title is only tenuously related to its "problem.")

Summarizing our brief analysis we could say that the beginning of "Hands" takes practically nothing for granted. It introduces the reader to place, characters, and the beginning of a plot in a step-by-step fashion, taking care that every bit of new information is introduced in its proper place. It is what Barthes has called a "readerly" (*lisible*) text in which "everything holds together" (*tout se tient*).<sup>8</sup> Such a readerly text is fully explicit in that it makes few or no presuppositions and does not rely heavily on the reader's knowledge of the world in general and of specific facts concerning place, time, characters, and plot. If we call such knowledge of the world and of specific facts that may have a bearing on a story, its context, then "Hands" is virtually context-free. The *in medias res*-beginning of "The Sisters," by contrast, appears to take a whole series of specific facts for granted and works on the pretense that the reader is familiar with the context in which the action takes place. In this sense "The Sisters" can be called an extremely context-dependent or context-sensitive text.

"Hands," I claim, represents an almost perfect example of an explicit or context-free story, while "The Sisters" could serve as a textbook

<sup>6</sup> On the various kinds of reference see M. A. K. Halliday and Ruqaiya Hasan, *Cohesion in English*. English Language Series 9 (London: Longman, 1976) 31-37. See also Andreas Fischer, "Linguistic Aspects of Interior Monologue in James Joyce's *Ulysses*," in *Anglistentag 1982, Zürich: Vorträge*, hrsg. Udo Fries und Jörg Hasler (Giessen: Hoffmann, 1984) 239-51 (p. 245).

<sup>7</sup> David Lodge, *The Modes of Modern Writing: Metaphor, Metonymy, and the Typology of Modern Literature* (London: Edward Arnold, 1977) 127. Lodge is referring to all unfinished sentences in the story, not just Old Cotter's.

<sup>8</sup> Roland Barthes, *S/Z* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1970) 161f. and 187f.

example of an implicit or context-sensitive one.<sup>9</sup> In itself this labelling of the two short stories may not seem very relevant, but it becomes important as soon as we take into account that each of them stands at the beginning of a thematically coherent collection of stories and thus may be read as a pointer to the whole work: what the beginning is to each story, the first story is to the whole collection. Moreover, the two collections, namely Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* and James Joyce's *Dubliners* are comparable in other ways: first published within the same decade (1919 and 1914 respectively), both deal with the inhabitants of a city or town mentioned in the title, and both present a disillusioned view of small-town lives.

The questions to be asked, then, are whether "Hands" and "The Sisters" are representative as parts of the whole, i.e. whether other stories in the two collections exhibit the same features (II), and whether the two collections as a whole can be characterized as context-free and context-sensitive (III). The last section (IV) will discuss the usefulness and critical potential of the two terms beyond the two texts discussed here.

## II

*Winesburg, Ohio* consists of twenty-four stories, each basically devoted to one inhabitant of the town. This fact is highlighted in the Table of Contents, where the title of each story is followed by the name of the protagonist as, for example, "Hands – concerning Wing Biddlebaum."<sup>10</sup> Since people, then, are so central to the stories, one expects them to be introduced early, and this is indeed the case. Readerly, explicit beginnings with a name followed by a physical description or a brief summary of the protagonist's past are frequent. Some examples:

Doctor Parcival was a large man with a drooping mouth covered by a yellow mustache. ("The Philosopher")

Alice Hindman, a woman of twenty-seven when George Willard was a mere boy, had lived in Winesburg all her life. ("Adventure")

<sup>9</sup> From now onwards the terms *explicit* or *context-free* and *implicit* or *context-sensitive* will be used synonymously.

<sup>10</sup> Twenty-two protagonists are mentioned in this way: Jesse Bentley is the protagonist in "Godliness I" as well as "Godliness II" and Doctor Reefy ("Paper Pills") and Elizabeth Willard ("Mother") re-occur in "Death."

The Reverend Curtis Hartman was pastor of the Presbyterian Church of Winesburg, and had been in that position ten years. ("The Strength of God")

Belle Carpenter had a dark skin, grey eyes, and thick lips. ("An Awakening")

In this way thirteen characters are introduced with their full names in the opening sentence of the story, and five more in the first paragraph (see "Hands" as an example). The titles, too, function in a fairly uniform, almost predictable way: some emphasize the role of the protagonist ("Mother," "The Philosopher," "A Man of Ideas," etc.), whereas the majority name a concrete thing ("Hands," "Paper Pills") or an abstract notion ("Godliness," "Adventure," "Respectability") which points to the central problem of the story. As a first story, "Hands" is thus typical of the whole collection, and the remaining twenty-three stories hold few surprises in terms of the way they begin. Just as the first paragraph of "Hands" prepares the reader for the rest of the story, so "Hands" as a whole prepares him for the rest of the collection.

The fifteen stories that make up *Dubliners* also deal with some inhabitants of the town mentioned in the title, but there is no simple one-to-one relationship between characters and stories. Some, like "Eveline" and "Clay," clearly have one protagonist, but with many others this question is not so easy to answer. Is "The Sisters" about Father Flynn, about the first person narrator, or perhaps about the two sisters of the title? Is "The Boarding House" about Mrs Mooney, her daughter Polly, or about Bob Doran? Is there a central character in "Ivy Day in the Committee Room"? We may take it as a sign of this indeterminacy that the characters in *Dubliners* are not revealed as openly and as uniformly as in *Winesburg, Ohio*. Joyce makes use of the whole range of possibilities from radically context-sensitive to traditional or readerly, context-free ones. The following is a selection:

Two gentlemen who were in the lavatory at the time tried to lift him up: but he was quite helpless. ("Grace")

The matron had given her leave to go out as soon as the women's tea was over and Maria looked forward to her evening out. ("Clay")

Mr Holohan, assistant secretary of the *Eire Abu* Society, had been walking up and down Dublin for nearly a month, with his hands and pockets full of dirty pieces of paper, arranging about the series of concerts. ("A Mother")

The grey warm evening of August had descended upon the city and a mild warm air, a memory of summer, circulated in the streets. The streets, shuttered for the repose of Sunday, swarmed with a gaily coloured crowd. Like illuminated pearls the lamps shone from the summits of their tall poles upon the living texture below which, changing shape and hue unceasingly, sent up into the warm grey evening air an unchanging unceasing murmur.

Two young men came down the hill of Rutland Square. One of them was just bringing a long monologue to a close. The other [ . . . ] ("Two Gallants")

The opening sentence of "Grace" is as radically implicit as that of "The Sisters." The beginning of "Clay" also shows the typical textual signals of context-sensitivity such as familiarizing articles (*the matron, the women's tea*) and referentless pronouns (*her*), but by mentioning Maria in the first sentence it is somewhat more explicit than the beginning of "Grace." The last two examples, on the other hand, are almost fully explicit: the only non-explicit items are *the 'Eire Abu' Society* and *the series of concerts* in "A Mother" and the easily decipherable *the city* in "Two Gallants," all three marked by the familiarizing article. The titles of the *Dubliners* stories, too, are so varied as to defy easy classification. Titles like "A Mother," "An Encounter" or "Grace" recall those of *Winesburg, Ohio*, but others range from the merely descriptive ("Eveline") over the metonymic-metaphorical ("After the Race," "Clay") to the fully metaphorical ("A Little Cloud").

We have seen above that "Hands" prepares the reader for the whole of *Winesburg, Ohio*. Does the same hold true for "The Sisters" and *Dubliners*? The answer is no, if it means that "The Sisters" provides a pattern for all *Dubliners* stories. It is yes, if it means that "The Sisters" is a radical departure from accepted norms that prepares the reader for similar departures, but does not exclude more conventional, context-free story-telling. The reader of "Hands" is thus prepared for one thing and one thing only, the reader of "The Sisters" must be prepared for anything.

At this point we may pause briefly to ask ourselves whether the different degrees of context-sensitivity of the *Dubliners* stories are motivated by the stories themselves, or whether they represent different stages in Joyce's artistic development. This question is worth a separate study, but the latter theory is certainly more likely in view of the way Joyce revised some of the stories. Twelve of the fifteen stories, it is important to remember, were written in the years 1904 and 1905, and three of these ("The Sisters," "Eveline" and "After the Race")



published in the journal *The Irish Homestead* in 1904.<sup>11</sup> The following is a comparison of two passages from "The Sisters" in their 1904 and 1914 versions respectively:<sup>12</sup>

I was not surprised, then, when at supper I found myself a prophet. Old Cotter and my uncle were talking at the fire, smoking. Old Cotter is the old distiller who owns the batch of prize setters. He used to be very interesting when I knew him first, talking about 'faints' and 'worms'. Now I find him tedious. ("The Sisters" 1904)

Old Cotter was sitting at the fire, smoking, when I came downstairs to supper. While my aunt was ladling out my stirabout he said [ . . . ].

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. ("The Sisters" 1914)

In both versions Old Cotter is introduced implicitly as a "known" character, and the words used are almost identical (*talking at the fire, smoking* 1904, *sitting at the fire, smoking* 1914). In the 1904 version, however, there follows the explicit, explanatory sentence *Old Cotter is the old distiller who owns a batch of prize setters*, which, in turn, prepares the reader for the "faints" and "worms" of the next sentence by contextualizing them as technical terms from the language of distilling or — possibly — dog-breeding. In the 1914 version the reader is not prepared in this way, and the uncontextualized words *faints* and *worms* with their possible connotations of weakness and decay sound strange and ominous, mirroring the effect the words *paralysis*, *gnomon* and *simony* have on the narrator. It is only afterwards, in the throwaway remark about Cotter's *endless stories about the distillery*, that they are contextualized, but it is

<sup>11</sup> The three stories as printed in *The Irish Homestead* in 1904 are reprinted in facsimile in James Joyce, *Dubliners: A Facsimile of Drafts and Manuscripts*. Prefaced and Arranged by Hans Walter Gabler. The James Joyce Archive (New York and London: Garland, 1978) 3-3d. All quotations from the 1904 edition of "The Sisters" are from this facsimile. Note that ten of the *Winesburg, Ohio* stories were also first published in magazines.

<sup>12</sup> Others have compared the 1904 and the 1914 versions of "The Sisters" before, though for different purposes. See, for example, Therese Fischer, "From Reliable to Unreliable Narrator: Rhetorical Changes in Joyce's 'The Sisters'," *James Joyce Quarterly* 9 (1971) 85-92, or Jack Burman, "'A Rhetorician's Dream': Joyce's Revision of 'The Sisters'," *Studies in Short Fiction* 16 (1979) 55-59.

easy to overlook this connection between *faints*, *worms* and *distillery*, especially since it is not explicit. Thus in both versions the immediate context contains clues for the interpretation of *faints* and *worms*, but the link of these terms with *distillery* in the 1904 version is anaphoric (*distillery* < *faints*, *worms*) and thus more explicit than in the 1914 version, where it is cataphoric (*faints*, *worms* > *distillery*).

Of course neither of his [i.e. Father Flynn's] sisters were very intelligent. Nannie, for instance, had been reading out the newspaper to him every day for years, and could read tolerably well, and yet she always spoke of it as the *Freeman's General*. ("The Sisters" 1904)

— There's poor Nannie, said Eliza, looking at her, she's wore out. [ . . . ] Only for Father O'Rourke I don't know what we'd have done at all. It was him brought us all them flowers and them two candlesticks out of the chapel and wrote out the notice for the *Freeman's General* and took charge of all the papers for the cemetery and poor James's insurance. ("The Sisters" 1914)

Even if the reader does not know that the newspaper mentioned in the two passages was really called *The Freeman's Journal*, the 1904 version makes it clear to him that something about the title *Freeman's General* is wrong. In the 1914 version, however, the two sisters' lack of intelligence (and presumably education) is shown — through Eliza's ungrammatical English — rather than just mentioned, and there is no hint as to *Freeman's General* being a malapropism: the unsuspecting reader may easily take it to be the correct name of the newspaper, for example as a shortened form of *Freeman's General Newspaper*.

This last example highlights a feature of the context-sensitivity of the *Dubliners* stories not yet discussed. On the textual level we have identified context-sensitivity mainly through three features, the referentless pronoun (*There was no hope for him this time*), the familiarizing article (*Two gentlemen who were in the lavatory at the time*), and the deictics (*There was no hope for him this time*). We have seen that the difficulty of these features does not lie in the fact that they have no referent, but that the referent is found later in the text rather than before, that it functions cataphorically rather than anaphorically. In the case of *Freeman's General* just discussed, however, there is no reference in the text whatsoever that might help the reader recover the true name of the newspaper. In order to understand the malapropism the reader also needs a context, but here



the necessary context is extra-textual, the reference exophoric. This extra-textual context could be defined as the world knowledge of an Irishman or perhaps a Dublin citizen in the early years of the twentieth century. Only when he is familiar with this extra-textual context does the reader recognize *General* as a malapropism for *Journal*. Only then, to give two more examples, can he supply the second verse from "I Dreamt that I Dwelt" that Maria (in "Clay") does not sing, and only then does he know what Mr. Lyons (in "Ivy Day in the Committee Room") refers to when he asks "Do you think now after what he did Parnell was a fit man to lead us?"<sup>13</sup> If the missing items were nothing but Irish trivia the (modern) reader could live with his ignorance of the extra-linguistic context, but of course they are much more than that, namely pointers to the essence of the stories in question. The omitted second verse of Maria's song refers to marriage, her secret, unfulfilled wish, and thus provides a link to the Halloween game just played and to the title of the story. Mr Lyons' remark, on the other hand, hints at Parnell's adultery with Kitty O'Shea, which ruined his career as a politician, and it is in this way that Mr Hynes' patriotic poem on "The Death of Parnell" is revealed in its desperate hollowness.

Individual *Dubliners* stories are thus context-sensitive in two ways. They are, firstly, characterized by cataphoric rather than anaphoric reference, in that they presuppose a context which is revealed in the text only belatedly and perhaps vaguely and incompletely. They are, secondly, characterized by exophoric rather than endophoric reference in that they presuppose an extra-textual, i.e. cultural, historical and political context which is not recoverable from the text at all. The individual *Winesburg, Ohio* stories, by contrast, are fairly explicit and practically context-free: they unfold in a straightforward way and rely little if at all on cataphoric or exophoric reference.

### III

Having looked at the individual stories we may now ask ourselves whether *Winesburg, Ohio* and *Dubliners* as collections may be called, respectively, context-free and context-sensitive. Obviously this can only be

<sup>13</sup> Note, however, that in these additional examples there are explicit pointers to the extra-textual context.

determined by looking at those features that serve to make the two collections something more than the sum of their parts: namely their thematic coherence as well as the way it is signalled to the reader, and the way their stories are arranged (as expressed in the Table of Contents).

*Winesburg, Ohio* does not actually begin with the story "Hands," but with a short text entitled "The Book of the Grotesque" and a small map of the town of Winesburg. "The Book of the Grotesque" tells of an old writer who looks back on his life and sees the men and women he has known as people who have *snatched up* one of the many *truths* there are in life and who have turned into *grotesques* by making that one truth the guiding principle, the obsession of their lives. "The Book of the Grotesque," the reader is told, was written but never published, but it is clear that *Winesburg, Ohio* is, in fact, that very book or at least a version of it.<sup>14</sup> Starting with Wing Biddlebaum of "Hands" each character portrayed has become a grotesque by embracing (or by being forced to embrace) one particular truth. All of them are stunted, emotionally maimed people, and together they form the gallery of grotesques that George Willard encounters and, finally, escapes from as the only sane survivor. "The Book of the Grotesque" thus serves as a guide through the collective psyche of Winesburg just as the little map serves as a guide through its geography. Thus in a way "The Book of the Grotesque" and the map, both strategically placed at the beginning of the book, explain the individual stories before the reader encounters them. In other words, they have the same introductory, explanatory function as the careful, readerly beginning of the story "Hands." In their deliberate explicitness they are somewhat strained and sometimes even tautological: the layout of the small town of Winesburg, for example, is so simple that no map is needed to visualize it. Moreover, not a single story crucially depends on the reader's knowledge of geographical facts, and he can read *Winesburg, Ohio* even if he does not know the exact location of the office of the *Winesburg Eagle* or of the railroad station.

A further link between the introductory matter and the stories themselves is provided by the fact that the nameless writer of "The Book

<sup>14</sup> "The first printing appeared under the imprint of a courageous publisher, B. W. Huebsch, after the book had been rejected by John Lane, who published Anderson's first two novels. It was Mr. Huebsch who called it *Winesburg, Ohio*, with the author's consent; Anderson's original title had been *The Book of the Grotesque*." Malcolm Cowley, "A Footnote for Bibliographers," p. 16.

of the Grotesque" is probably to be seen as the old George Willard, as the aged self of the young reporter who serves as a kind of unwitting guide through Winesburg's gallery of grotesques. In many of the stories he is a listener and confidant, and the last three stories of the collection, according to Malcolm Cowley, were even "written with the obvious intention of rounding out the book. First [in "Death"] George Willard is released from Winesburg by the death of his mother; then, in "Sophistication," he learns how it feels to be a grown man; then finally [in "Departure"] he leaves for the city on the early-morning train, and everything recedes as into a framed picture."<sup>15</sup> So *the grotesque* is a kind of password (explicitly announced at the beginning) into the world of Winesburg, and George Willard is the reader's guide through and out of it.

*Dubliners*, needless to say, has no prefatory matter whatsoever, no foreword or map, but begins directly with "The Sisters." And yet on closer inspection it also contains a guide through its own psyche and geography. In the first paragraph of "The Sisters" we find the famous reference to the word *paralysis*. Although mentioned only in passing together with the two equally strange words *gnomon*<sup>16</sup> and *simony*, it soon turns out to be the key (or password) to most of the characters in the stories. Physical as well as spiritual paralysis is the cause of Father Flynn's death, and most central characters down to Gabriel Conroy in "The Dead" are afflicted by it. *Paralysis* is thus to *Dubliners* what *the grotesque* is to *Winesburg, Ohio*, but — characteristically — it is slipped in silently rather than announced loudly. The physical geography of *Dubliners* is, of course, that of the city of Dublin, and unlike that of Winesburg it plays an important role in a number of stories. The reader needs it to understand the *Wild West* journey of the truant boys in "An Encounter," he needs it to understand Lenehan's wanderings in "Two Gallants," and he needs it to understand Maria's trip into the centre of the city and out again in "Clay" (to give only three examples). However, no street map of Dublin is prefaced to editions of *Dubliners* and the reader has to piece it together himself. Thus *Dubliners* as a collection is as context-sensitive as any of the individual

<sup>15</sup> "Introduction," p. 14.

<sup>16</sup> The "*gnomon* in the Euclid," according to the *OED* is, "[t]he part of a parallelogram which remains after a similar parallelogram is taken away from one of its corners." Fritz Senn points out to me that it is thus a figure of omitted (or: implicit) context, i.e. a key to the narrative method employed in "The Sisters."

stories: its psychic geography is provided intra-textually and cataphorically through the word *paralysis*, its physical geography extra-textually and exophorically by the streets and squares of the existing city of Dublin.

We find the same difference between explicitness and implicitness when we look at the Tables of Contents of the two collections:

*Winesburg, Ohio*

CONTENTS

THE TALES AND THE PERSONS

*The Book of the Grotesque*

HANDS-concerning Wing Biddlebaum  
 PAPER PILLS-concerning Doctor Reefy  
 MOTHER-concerning Elizabeth Willard  
 THE PHILOSOPHER-concerning Doctor Parcival  
 NOBODY KNOWS-concerning Louise Trunnion  
 GODLINESS, a Tale in Four Parts  
     Part I-concerning Jesse Bentley  
     Part II-also concerning Jesse Bentley  
     Part III:*Surrender*-concerning Louise Bentley  
     Part IV:*Terror*-concerning David Hardy  
 A MAN OF IDEAS-concerning Joe Welling  
 ADVENTURE-concerning Alice Hindman  
 RESPECTABILITY-concerning Wash Williams  
 THE THINKER-concerning Seth Richmond  
 TANDY-concerning Tandy Hard  
 THE STRENGTH OF GOD-concerning the Reverend  
     Curtis Hartman  
 THE TEACHER-concerning Kate Swift  
 LONELINESS-concerning Enoch Robinson  
 AN AWAKENING-concerning Belle Carpenter  
 "QUEER"-concerning Elmer Cowley  
 THE UNTOLD LIE-concerning Ray Pearson  
 DRINK-concerning Tom Foster  
 DEATH-concerning Doctor Reefy and Elizabeth  
     Willard  
 SOPHISTICATION-concerning Helen White  
 DEPARTURE-concerning George Willard

*Dubliners*

CONTENTS

THE SISTERS

AN ENCOUNTER

ARABY

EVELINE

AFTER THE RACE

TWO GALLANTS

THE BOARDING HOUSE

A LITTLE CLOUD

COUNTERPARTS

CLAY

A PAINFUL CASE

IVY DAY IN THE COMMITTEE ROOM

A MOTHER

GRACE

THE DEAD

The "Contents" of *Winesburg, Ohio* lists titles and main characters of the stories, that of *Dubliners* titles only. The stories in Anderson's collection are not arranged in any particular order except that the last three were "written with the obvious intention of rounding out the book" (see above) and that the final story is entitled — explicitly — "Departure." Now

*Dubliners* ends in a similarly explicit fashion with the story "The Dead," but furthermore we know from Joyce himself that originally he had a very specific scheme in mind for the arrangement of the whole volume. In a letter to the publisher Grant Richards, dated 5th May 1906 and accompanying the twelve original stories, he wrote:

My intention was to write a chapter of the moral history of my country and I chose Dublin for the scene because that city seemed to me the centre of paralysis. I have tried to present it to the indifferent public under four aspects: childhood, adolescence, maturity and public life. The stories are arranged in this order.<sup>17</sup>

With originally three stories per "aspect" this arrangement was quite explicit and completely symmetrical,<sup>18</sup> but its symmetry was disturbed by the addition, in 1906 and 1907, of three more stories, namely "Two Gallants" (1906) in the adolescence section, "A Little Cloud" (1907) in the maturity section, and "The Dead" (1907) as a coda. In the 1914 edition, moreover, neither the Table of Contents nor any preface announces this division into four "aspects."<sup>19</sup> Originally the intention behind the arrangement of the *Dubliners* stories was thus explicit, but by the time they were published it had become implicit.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>17</sup> *Letters of James Joyce*. Vol. II, edited by Richard Ellmann (New York: The Viking Press, 1966) 132-35 (p. 134).

<sup>18</sup> Childhood: "The Sisters," "An Encounter," "Araby."

Adolescence: "Eveline," "After the Race," "The Boarding House."

Maturity: "Counterparts," "Clay," "A Painful Case."

Public Life: "Ivy Day in the Committee Room," "A Mother," "Grace."

The three stories of the childhood section are further marked and thus set apart from the others by being first person narratives.

<sup>19</sup> In Joyce's early schemas of *Ulysses* the eighteen chapters or episodes have titles ("Telemachus," "Nestor," "Proteus," etc.), but in the printed editions they are simply numbered. This, too, may be seen as a step from explicitness to implicitness. On the two schemas (one given to Carlo Linati in 1920, the other, i.e. the one eventually published by Stuart Gilbert, to Valery Larbaud in 1921) see Richard Ellmann, *Ulysses on the Liffey* (London: Faber and Faber, 1972) xvif. and 187f.

<sup>20</sup> One might even go so far as to say that the basic difference between the two collections is reflected in their titles: *Winesburg, Ohio*, which places the town in a state, is more explicit than the simple *Dublin[ers]*. However, this is more a matter of convention than of authorial preference.



## IV

How useful are the terms context-free and context-sensitive beyond the two texts used here for illustration? It is worth pointing out, first, that they have proved to be very flexible, capable of handling the "narrow," linguistic analysis of the beginnings of individual stories as well as the "wider," more literary interpretation of *Winesburg, Ohio* and *Dubliners* as collections. They have also been useful in distinguishing different stages in a writer's development. This analysis, begun with a comparison of the two versions of "The Sisters," could be pursued further, and it could be shown that the early Joyce, author of the stories in *The Irish Homestead* and of *Stephen Hero*, is relatively context-free, whereas the Joyce of the middle years, author of *Dubliners* and of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, is more context-sensitive. It could, further, be shown that Joyce's artistic development continued in the same direction, that *Ulysses* is more context-sensitive than *Portrait* and that *Finnegans Wake* is more context-sensitive than *Ulysses*.

The two terms can also be used to characterize literary periods: as Max Nänny has shown,<sup>21</sup> premodernist writing in general may be called context-free by comparison with modernist writing which is context-sensitive (with Joyce, among others, marking the transition!).

Context-free and context-sensitive, in short, are categories that can be applied to any literary work and that can be used to bring out the characteristics of and the differences between, the periods of a writer's development, different writers, different periods, and so on. They should not be taken as absolutes, but as the end points of a scale which allows any number of gradations in between. There is probably no such thing as a completely context-free or context-sensitive text, but every text can be assigned a place on the scale between the two poles.

By using the terms *context-free* and *context-sensitive* I may have obscured the fact that the dichotomy I have been discussing is both older and more universal than I have indicated. I should like to conclude,

<sup>21</sup> "Vom Klischee zum Kontext: Die modernistische Wende in der Literatur," in: *Erstarrtes Denken: Studien zu Klischee, Stereotyp und Vorurteil in englischsprachiger Literatur*, hrsg. Günther Blaicher (Tübingen: Gunter Narr, 1987) 272-83. Nänny's concept of context deletion ("Tilgung des Kontextes," pp. 280-83) is especially relevant. See also his essay "Modernism: The Manipulation of Context" in this volume.

therefore, by making good for this omission and by showing how others have used the same distinction in other, sometimes wider, areas.

In a seminal article entitled "Language Evolution and Speech Style" Paul Kay makes a distinction between what he calls *non-autonomous* and *autonomous* systems of communication. Kay is concerned with spoken language as a means of everyday conversation, and he defines non-autonomous speech as a form of language which is "dependent upon simultaneous transmission over other channels, such as the paralinguistic, postural, and gestural," but which is also "dependent on the contribution of background information on the part of the hearer."<sup>22</sup> To illustrate this with a simple example: when two friends get together and talk informally, they can understand each other easily because they receive and decode para- and non-linguistic signals such as body language and gestures, and because they share a fair amount of background knowledge which helps them fill in whatever is not expressed in words.<sup>23</sup> When, on the other hand, a stranger overhears such a conversation from a distance he is all but lost, because he receives no help from either paralinguistic cues or from a shared background. To inform such a stranger we need autonomous speech, which

packs all the information into the strictly linguistic channel and places minimal reliance on the ability of the hearer to supply items of content necessary either to flesh out the body of the message or to place it in the correct interpretive context. Autonomous speech is suited to the communication of unfamiliar or novel content to someone with whom one has little in common.<sup>24</sup>

I would now like to claim that Kay's pair *non-autonomous* vs. *autonomous* is similar to but not identical with, my own *context-sensitive* vs. *context-free*. In fact, it will help us to see a particular aspect of the dichotomy more clearly. Kay's first criterion is valid mainly for informal spoken language, and since written literary language is at issue here it

<sup>22</sup> In: *Sociocultural Dimensions of Language Change*, ed. Ben G. Blount and Mary Sanches (New York: Academic Press, 1977) 21-33 (pp. 21-22).

<sup>23</sup> Non-autonomous speech can thus be equated with Robert Browning's "brother's speech"; see Nänny, p. 281.

<sup>24</sup> Kay, p. 22.



need not concern us at this point.<sup>25</sup> Kay's second criterion, however, is of central importance, because what he calls background information is what I have called context. Using his own words and replacing only the words *hearer* and *message*, one could say, for example, that a story like Anderson's "Hands" "places minimal reliance on the ability of the [reader] to supply items of content necessary either to flesh out the body of the [story] or to place it in the correct interpretive context." This being the case, how is it possible then for the reader to understand a story like "The Sisters" which depends so crucially on background or context which is not there? The answer is, of course, that the context is there when the reader knows or has learnt how to find it, when he is tuned in to the possibilities of cataphoric and exophoric reference to construct the "world" of the text he is reading. The author of a context-sensitive text thus "enlists the reader[s] as collaborator[s]," giving him some information, but forcing him to actively look for more and thus to take part in the "game of the imagination"<sup>26</sup> and to create the context necessary for understanding. Note that this "game of the imagination" is encouraged but at the same time controlled by the cues in the text. The reader thus cannot create any context but only the one contained (however secretly) in the text.

Nobody has expressed all this more clearly and succinctly than an author who, writing about art rather than literature, coined yet another pair of terms closely related to the ones I have used. This author's dichotomy is *open* vs. *closed*, and the following is his own definition except that the word *picture* is replaced by *text*:

What is meant [by closed form] is a style of composition which [ . . . ] makes of the [text] a self-contained entity, pointing everywhere back to itself, while conversely, the style of open form everywhere points out beyond itself and purposely looks limitless, although, of course, secret limits continue to exist, and make it possible for the [text] to be self-contained in the aesthetic sense.

<sup>25</sup> This is, of course, a simplification. A written text, too, may be transmitted simultaneously over several channels, as is evidenced by concrete poetry or by prose texts like *Tristram Shandy* or *Alice in Wonderland*. On this topic see, for example, Balz Engler, *Reading and Listening: The Modes of Communicating Poetry and their Influence on the Texts*. The Cooper Monographs 30 (Bern: Francke, 1982), and Max Nänny, "Iconic Dimensions in Poetry," in *On Poetry and Poetics* (SPELL 2) ed. Richard Waswo (Tübingen: Gunter Narr, 1985) 111-35.

<sup>26</sup> Margaret Rader, "Context in Written Language: The Case of Imaginative Fiction," in *Spoken and Written Language: Exploring Orality and Literacy*, ed. Deborah Tannen. *Advances in Discourse Processes* 9 (Norwood, New Jersey: Ablex, 1982) 185-98 (p. 192).

The author is Heinrich Wölfflin, and *open vs. closed* is one of his five pairs of *Kunstgeschichtliche Kunstbegriffe* (or: *Principles of Art History*).<sup>27</sup> This is not the place to enter into a detailed comparison of *open vs. closed* as against *context-sensitive vs. context-free* or even to discuss the aesthetic principles underlying art and literature. Let us just note that Wölfflin's *Grundbegriffe*, like the terms I have suggested, are typological as well as historical: they can be used to characterize any work produced at any time, but they can also be used to characterize period styles (Renaissance art is more closed, Baroque art is more open; Classicist art is more closed, Romantic art is more open, etc.). Wölfflin also takes us beyond literature<sup>28</sup> and thus reminds us that our dichotomy, whether we call it *context-sensitive vs. context-free*, *non-autonomous vs. autonomous*, or *open vs. closed*, may be a truly universal one in the widest possible semiotic sense, applicable to any system of human behaviour and communication.

Throughout this essay I have stressed the fact that *Dubliners* and *Winesburg, Ohio* were published in 1914 and 1919 respectively, i.e. on the threshold of Modernism. Wölfflin was concerned not with Modernism but with the Renaissance and the Baroque, but it may nevertheless be more than coincidental that his *Grundbegriffe* were first published in 1915, i.e. at a time when the modernist revolution in art and literature had created new ways of painting and writing, of seeing and reading.

<sup>27</sup> Heinrich Wölfflin, *Kunstgeschichtliche Grundbegriffe: Das Problem der Stilentwicklung in der neueren Kunst* [1915]. Dreizehnte Auflage (Basel und Stuttgart: Schwabe, 1963) 147:

Gemeint ist eine Darstellung, die mit mehr oder weniger tektonischen Mitteln das Bild zu einer in sich selbst begrenzten Erscheinung macht, die überall auf sich selbst zurückdeutet, wie umgekehrt der Stil der offenen Form überall über sich selbst hinausweist, unbegrenzt erscheinen will, obwohl eine heimliche Begrenzung immerfort da ist und eben den Charakter der Geschlossenheit im ästhetischen Sinne möglich macht.

The English translation is from Heinrich Wölfflin, *Principles of Art History: The Problem of the Development of Style in Later Art*. Translated by M. D. Hottinger (London: G. Bell and Sons, 1932) 124.

<sup>28</sup> However, *open vs. closed* has also proved a useful distinction in the analysis of dramatic texts. See Volker Klotz, *Geschlossene und offene Form im Drama*. 4. durchgesehene und überarbeitete Auflage (München: Carl Hanser, 1969).