

Zeitschrift: SPELL : Swiss papers in English language and literature
Herausgeber: Swiss Association of University Teachers of English
Band: 33 (2016)

Artikel: "Scrupulous Meanness," Joyce's gift, and the symbolic economy of Dubliners
Autor: MacDuff, Sangam
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-632502>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. [Siehe Rechtliche Hinweise.](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. [Voir Informations légales.](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. [See Legal notice.](#)

Download PDF: 05.05.2025

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

“Scrupulous Meanness,” Joyce’s Gift, and the Symbolic Economy of *Dubliners*

Sangam MacDuff

In 1906 Joyce informed his publisher that he intended to write “a chapter of the moral history” of Ireland “in a style of scrupulous meanness” with “Dublin for the scene.” *Dubliners* is famously economical, if not miserly, and Joyce treats his subjects somewhat harshly, but the sparseness of the stories is complemented by richly symbolic passages in which Joyce’s poetic gifts shine through. This lyrical-symbolic mode would seem to run counter to the “scrupulous meanness” of *Dubliners*, but Mark Osteen argues that Joyce reconciles spendthrift habits with bourgeois thrift to create an aesthetic economy of the gift, where loss is gain. This analysis suggests that Joyce’s poetic gifts are compensated, both artistically and financially, by putting literary language into circulation. Osteen, Ellmann and others have demonstrated the importance of Joyce’s circulating systems, but I will argue that breaks in circulation are equally significant, and that, paradoxically, it is the gaps where language breaks down that put the signifying system into motion. Analysing “Two Gallants,” I will suggest that this paradox provides the key to Joyce’s symbolic economy, where the withholdings of textual lacunae become portals of unlimited growth, while the riches of symbolic proliferation always contain a Midas touch of loss.

He was too scrupulous always

In December 1905 James Joyce sent a collection of twelve stories to the Dublin publisher Grant Richards. No doubt surprised at receiving a manuscript entitled *Dubliners* from Trieste, Richards was nevertheless impressed, and accepted *Dubliners* on 17 February 1906, signing a contract in March. Meanwhile, however, Joyce had sent Richards an addi-

Economies of English. SPELL: Swiss Papers in English Language and Literature 33. Ed. Martin Leer and Genoveva Puskás. Tübingen: Narr, 2016. 181-197.

tional story, "Two Gallants," which precipitated a protracted dispute, delaying publication for eight years. Despite the difficulties this caused Joyce, the delay was in some ways felicitous, for in the interval he added "A Little Cloud" and "The Dead," substantially revised his earlier stories, and in a lengthy correspondence with Richards, Joyce formulated some of the key aesthetic principles which would govern his later work.

Perhaps the most famous of these statements occurs in a letter dated 5 May 1906:

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 of its aspects: childhood, adolescence, maturity and public life. The stories are arranged in this order. I have written it for the most part in a style of scrupulous meanness and with the conviction that he is a very bold man who dares to alter in the presentment, still more to deform, whatever he has seen and heard. (*Letters* II 134)

The idea that Dublin represents "the centre of paralysis" echoes Joyce's explanation to Constantine Curran: "I call the series *Dubliners* to betray the soul of that hemiplegia or paralysis which many consider a city" (*Letters* I 55), and I will come back to this notion of paralysis in the symbolic economy of *Dubliners*. Likewise, there is more to be said about Joyce's moral history and the structure of *Dubliners*, but first I want to focus on his "style of scrupulous meanness."

The *OED* defines "scrupulous" as "[t]roubled with doubts or scruples of conscience; over-nice or meticulous in matters of right and wrong" (1a), which would appear to be the sense Eliza has in mind when she says that her late brother, Father Flynn, was "too scrupulous always" in "The Sisters" (*Dubliners* 9). But the word has several meanings, including "[m]inutely exact or careful, [. . .] strictly attentive even to the smallest details" (*OED* 5), which tallies well with Joyce's "conviction that he is a very bold man who dares to alter [. . .] whatever he has seen and heard," and would thus seem to be the predominant sense in the letter, defining Joyce's style as one of scrupulous realism. The word can also mean "characterised by doubt or distrust" (1b), which fits *Dubliners* perfectly, while Joyce's stories had a nasty habit of "causing or raising scruples" and to this day they remain "liable to give offence" (2a), so that the phrase suggests several key aspects of *Dubliners*: social realism as an aesthetic and moral concern; the unsettling nature of a text characterised by doubt and distrust; and the propensity of these uncertainties to raise readers' scruples.

"Meanness" is similarly ambivalent, hovering between miserliness and nastiness. Any reader of *Dubliners* knows that Joyce's stories are highly economical; many would complain they are downright stingy, withholding key facts which would enable interpretation. As I intend to show, though, this apparent incompleteness is only one side of the coin, the flip side of the endless interest they generate. Similarly, although Joyce's early reviewers frequently condemned *Dubliners* for insisting on "the sordid and baser aspects" of life, full of "such scenes and details as can only shock,"¹ and Joyce himself admitted that "the odour of ashpits and old weeds and offal hangs round my stories" (*Letters* I 64), conceding that at first glance the book is "somewhat bitter and sordid" (*Letters* I 70), he also told Richards of his belief that "in composing my chapter of moral history in exactly the way I have composed it I have taken the first step towards the spiritual liberation of my country" (*Letters* I 62-3).

It is no accident that the furor over *Dubliners*' publication was ignited by "Two Gallants," nor that the letter in which Joyce describes his "style of scrupulous meanness" begins with a question about that story:

Dear Mr Grant Richards, I am sorry you do not tell me why the printer, who seems to be the barometer of English opinion, refuses to print *Two Gallants* and makes marks in the margin of *Counterparts*. Is it the small gold coin in the former story or the code of honour which the two gallants live by which shocks him? I see nothing which should shock him in either of these things. (*Letters* II 132-33)

Despite Joyce's protestations, even today, when virtually every taboo has been broken, the story still has the power to shock readers, and it is interesting to consider why.

Like all of Joyce's stories, the tale is deceptively simple. Two men, Lenehan and Corley, conspire to extract a gold sovereign from a young slavey, or maid of all work. The apparition of this coin at the end of the story offers an enigmatic epiphany, but one which is just as likely to provoke outrage as wonder, for it would appear that the young woman, perhaps duped by the promise of marriage, has been defrauded of approximately two months' wages by the unscrupulous young "gallants,"

¹ Anonymous review, *Athenaeum*, 20 June 1914, 875 (qtd in Deming 61-62). See also the unsigned review of *Dubliners* in *Everyman* (3 July 1914, xc, 380): "Two Gallants" reveals the shuddering depths of human meanness" (qtd in Deming 64; compare Deming 58-65).

who, it goes without saying, are anything but chivalrous.² With some justice, “Two Gallants,” has been called “the nastiest story” in *Dubliners* (Reizbaum and Ellmann 126), as can be seen from the range of critical interpretations: Corley has been viewed as a pimp, a prostitute and a perambulating phallus, with Lenehan the leech as his homosexual hanger-on; the slavey has been likened to a prostitute, a slattern and a slave; while the entire story has been read, with good reason, as an allegory of Ireland’s servitude and submission to her colonial masters.³ Yet Joyce considered it “one of the most important stories in the book,” the story, after “Ivy Day,” which pleased him most (*Letters* I 62) and it remains a favourite among readers – a kind of ugly duckling in the collection. The source of this fascination, and its capacity to shock, is not that the story says all, or even any, of these things directly, but rather that Joyce is scrupulously mean in withholding information, while simultaneously sowing seeds of doubt, so that as Reizbaum and Ellmann put it, “the story confronts us with our own dirty minds, mirrored in Joyce’s ‘nicely polished looking-glass’” (128).⁴

Several features contribute to make “Two Gallants” a scrupulously mean text. First, the story has a double-blind structure. It begins *in medias res*, just as Corley is “bringing a long monologue to a close.” We soon realise that this monologue foretold how Corley would obtain the gold coin, so that the story we read in “Two Gallants” is presented as

² According to Joyce, “the code of honour which the two gallants live by” is based on Guglielmo Ferrero’s “moral code of the soldier and [. . .] gallant” (*Letters* II 134-35), possibly referring to a passage in *Il Militarismo* which describes how “officers, being short of money to pay for the dissolute lives they were leading, tried [. . .] to become the lovers of rich middle-class ladies, getting money out of them as a recompense for the honour conferred upon those ladies by condescending to make them their mistresses” (qtd in Reizbaum and Ellmann 132 n5). But Stanislaus Joyce reports that “the idea for ‘Two Gallants’ came from [. . .] the relations between Porthos and the wife of a tradesman in *The Three Musketeers*, which my brother found in Ferrero’s *Europa Giovane*” (*Letters* II 212), and this source suggests that the young men’s “gallantry” is tied (ironically, perhaps) to the motto “all for one and one for all,” pointing to a third aspect of the homosocial code which governs Lenehan and Corley’s behaviour: the unspoken promise of loyalty, solidarity, and secrecy, as well as material aid (through the precarious liquidity provided by such customs as the standing of drinks or the offer and repayment of small loans in a debt-ridden economy), all of which take precedence over the relations between men and women (see Norris 40-42).

³ See Boyle; Epstein; Walzl; Torchiana; Leonard; Norris; Reizbaum and Ellmann.

⁴ The reference is to another of Joyce’s well-known letters to Richards: “I seriously believe that you will retard the course of civilisation in Ireland by preventing the Irish people from having one good look at themselves in my nicely polished looking-glass” (*Letters* I 64).

the reenactment of a tale concluded at its opening, the very tale which would explain its significance. Moreover, at the key point in the reenactment, when Corley heads off with the slavey, the narrative switches to Lenehan, and the second half of the story is focalised through him, although he does little more than eat peas and drink ginger beer,⁵ which explains why the dazzling coin itself becomes a kind of narrative blind at the end, occluding the enigmatic nature of Lenehan's hold over Corley. The mystery surrounding what Corley does with the woman, and more precisely, how he gets the coin out of her, is accentuated by Lenehan's vague, but increasingly insistent questions: "I suppose you'll be able to pull *it* off all right, eh?, [. . .] Is she game for *that*? [. . .] are you sure you can bring *it* off all right? [. . .] Did you try her?" (*Dubliners* 46-47, 54; my emphasis). Since we are told that Lenehan "had the habit of leaving his flattery open to the interpretation of raillery," and that he begins his interrogation "dubiously" but ends with "a note of menace" in his voice (46, 54), the tone of these exchanges is not easy to gage. In the same way, Corley's braggadocio casts serious doubt over the reliability of his narration, particularly following his characterisation as a police informer,⁶ who was "fond of delivering final judgments," though "he spoke without listening to the speech of his companions." Yet this too is rendered problematic when the narrator lets drop that in Corley's solipsistic accounts of "what he had said to such a person and what such a person had said to him and what he had said to settle the matter," he "aspirated the first letter of his name after the manner of the Florentines" (45) – which is to say, (w)Horley – raising doubts about the reliability of Corley and/or the narrator, for it is difficult to know whether the irony of Corley's self-appellation is supposed to be deliberate. Indeed, tonal ambiguity afflicts the story as a whole, leading to diametrically opposed readings, from the perverse pleasure of collusion in the two gallants' success, to shock and outrage at their base exploitation, and this uncertainty is codified by a series of puns and ambiguities in the text.

⁵ This detail is glossed amusingly by Terence Brown: "Lenehan's repast must be one of the most dismal in all of literature" (*Dubliners* 264 n53). Beneath the grim humour, though, the meagre sum of "twopence halfpenny" Lenehan spends on dinner, having eaten nothing all day except a few biscuits cadged off a bartender, clearly represents his "poverty of purse and spirit" (51-52).

⁶ "Corley was the son of an inspector of police [. . .]. He was often to be seen walking with policemen in plain clothes, talking earnestly. He knew the inner side of all affairs" (45).

For instance, Corley first refers to the woman as “a fine young tart,” which has led some critics to conclude that she is a prostitute, although “tart” was originally applied, often endearingly, to a young girl or woman, especially a wife or girlfriend (*OED*; *Dubliners* 44).⁷ Similarly, when Corley says she used to “go with a dairyman,” presumably he means she went out walking with him, a common Hiberno-English expression, but the phrase is calculated to induce the suspicion that she slept with him, particularly when Corley admits – or feigns – his fear that she would “get in the family way” (44). The full stop which follows this is typical of Joyce’s art of insinuation, allowing a short pause to open up a grammatical gap that admits alternative readings – here, the phrase “up to the dodge” suggests not only that she takes contraceptive measures, but also that she willingly participates in Corley’s criminal dealings. Indeed, if Corley can be trusted, she has already filched a couple of cigars from her employer (44); and if the narrator can be trusted that Corley is a police informer, this places her in his hands, offering a quite different motive from Lenehan’s speculation that she hopes to marry (45).

These examples should suffice to show how Joyce cultivates doubt and distrust in “Two Gallants” through a series of ambiguities which simultaneously withhold certainty and invite speculation; seen in this light, puns like “tart” are both miserly and generous, employing one word to summon up multiple interpretations, and the same principle is amplified through Joyce’s textual hiatuses. Just as the boy in “The Sisters” puzzles his head to extract meaning from Old Cotter’s unfinished sentences (*Dubliners* 3), Joyce meticulously riddles *Dubliners* with holes, gaps, silences and ellipses for the reader to puzzle over, such as Lenehan’s euphemistic references to “it” and “that,” the grammatical gap opened by the dodgy full stop, or the narrative blinds in “Two Gallants.” As I have tried to show, through the story’s ubiquitous tonal ambiguity, which undercuts any certain meaning while opening up the text to multiple interpretations, Joyce creates a work that is scrupulous in its meanness, ready at any moment to dupe the reader.

⁷ Corley reports the woman as saying she is a slavey in Baggott Street, which seems to be confirmed when, at the end of the story, she goes into a house there, apparently returning with the gold coin. But even this is not straightforward, since she enters by one door and leaves by another, a notable crux, and the moment Corley receives the gold coin is not shown, leaving open the possibility that he does not in fact obtain it from her. Indeed, the woman never speaks directly in the story, remaining both nameless and voiceless, so that her motives remain as inscrutable as Corley’s, Lenehan’s, and the narrator’s.

The gift of easy and graceful verse

Yet, as I have also tried to suggest, there is richness in Joyce's hoarding. Returning to Joyce's letter, it is worth noting that Joyce doesn't say *Dubliners* is written in a style of scrupulous meanness; he says he has written the book "for the most part in a style of scrupulous meanness" (*Letters* II 134; my emphasis). The point is so simple that it is usually overlooked, but it is worth considering what that other part might be. Another letter, written to his brother Stanislaus in September 1906, gives an important clue:

Sometimes thinking of Ireland it seems to me that I have been unnecessarily harsh. I have reproduced (in *Dubliners* at least) none of the attraction of the city [. . .] I have not reproduced its ingenuous insularity and its hospitality. The latter 'virtue' so far as I can see does not exist elsewhere in Europe. I have not been just to its beauty: for it is more beautiful naturally in my opinion than what I have seen of England, Switzerland, France, Austria or Italy [. . .] And after all *Two Gallants* – with the Sunday crowds and the harp in Kildare street and Lenehan – is an Irish landscape. (*Letters* II 166)

Critics generally assume that Joyce sought to redress this harshness in "The Dead," where Gabriel celebrates his aunts' hospitality, humanity and humour (*Dubliners* 204), but Joyce is typically ambivalent about the "virtue" of Irish hospitality, and the last sentence in the quotation shows that he is equally equivocal about his portrayal of Dublin. "Two Gallants" is not unremittingly nasty after all, but an "Irish landscape"; the Sunday crowds Joyce refers to set the scene in the first paragraph of the story:

The grey warm evening air 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 illumined 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 air an unchanging unceasing murmur. (43)

The rhythmic rise and fall of Joyce's phrases is audible here, woven together through patterns of repetition and variation like "the grey warm evening air" which becomes "a mild warm air" and then "the warm grey air" at the end of the paragraph, or the runs of alliteration and assonance which link the memory of summer circulating in the streets to the unceasing murmur of the crowd. The simile of the pearly lamps and the

living texture of the crowd metaphor advertise themselves as poetic language, yet this doesn't mean they are somehow cheapened, a kind of prose pornography, as Margot Norris argues; nor does it make the passage an epiphany, as Reizbaum and Ellmann suggest, although the style is derived from Joyce's lyrical Epiphanies.⁸ Rather, by flaunting its poetry, Joyce exposes the workings of lyrical language, simultaneously inviting cynicism and disarming critical resistance, which allows readers to enjoy Joyce's prose all the more. As Jonathan Culler argues, no matter how hairsplitting the analysis of aural and rhythmical effects, there are visceral *affects* that elude reason, which Culler likens to miniature versions of the sublime (133-85). This irrational, irreducible power of poetic language⁹ explains why Joyce's lyricism is actually enhanced by its openness to irony: tonal ambiguity multiplies the possibilities for interpretation, but it does not alter the body of the text. For example, there is rich irony in the "*gift of easy and graceful verse*" Little Chandler imagines a reviewer praising in a book of poems he is yet to write (*D* 69), yet Chandler's poetic reveries in "A Little Cloud" contain some beautiful vignettes of Dublin, so that the ironic distance afforded by Joyce's free indirect discourse enriches the poetry of the narrative. Set pieces such as these, or the Sunday crowd scene in "Two Gallants," are found throughout *Dubliners*, showing that, far from being mean or harsh, there is great pleasure in Joyce's style.¹⁰

This richness is not only a question of poetic language, but also of allusion and suggestion, as Joyce's second example shows:

⁸ As A. Walton Litz has observed, the two types of Epiphany, dramatic and lyrical, represent "the twin poles of Joyce's art," which Litz labels "dramatic irony" and "lyric sentiment" (Joyce, *Poems and Shorter Writings* 158). The "scrupulous meanness" of "Two Gallants" represents the first pole while its poetry is an expression of the second.

⁹ Jean-Jacques Lecercle calls this the "remainder," arguing that language is not only an abstract system of relations, but also a material product of the body whose sound and shape physically affect the reader (see Attridge 65).

¹⁰ Examples from "A Little Cloud" include the sunset scene (65-66), the street urchins (66), and the vista from Grattan Bridge (68). The more closely one reads *Dubliners*, the more these prose-poetic examples multiply: the collection is replete with alliteration and assonance (e.g., "All the branches of the tall trees which lined the mall were gay with little light green leaves and the sunlight slanted through them on to the water" [13]), rhyme and rhythm (e.g., "Every morning I lay on the floor in the front parlour watching her door" [22]), and the abundant imagery Chandler employs in his vignettes (compare, for instance, the beginning and ending of "Araby."

They [Corley and Lenehan] walked along Nassau Street and then turned into Kildare Street. Not far from the porch of the club a harpist stood in the roadway, playing to a little ring of listeners. He plucked at the wires heedlessly, glancing quickly from time to time at the face of each newcomer and from time to time, wearily also, at the sky. His harp too, heedless that her coverings had fallen about her knees, seemed weary alike of the eyes of strangers and of her master's hands. One hand played in the bass the melody of *Silent, O Moyle*, while the other hand careered in the treble after each group of notes. The notes of the air throbbed deep and full. (48)

As Boyle, Walzl and others have pointed out, the harp symbolises Ireland and its mythical past, popularised by poets like Thomas Moore, whose *Irish Melodies* include "Silent, O Moyle," originally entitled "The Song of Fionnuala." Moore notes that "Fionnuala, daughter of Lir, was by some supernatural power transformed into a swan" (qtd in *Dubliners* 262 n.33), which may recall Zeus's transformation in the Leda myth, strengthening the association between sexual subjugation and colonial domination in "Two Gallants." In any case, the harp, "heedless that her coverings had fallen about her knees" yokes Ireland to the abused women in the story, so that Joyce's prosopopoeia works on three levels: the personified instrument is weary alike of passersby and the harpist; the "girls off the South Circular" Corley "used to go with," at least one of whom is "on the turf" now (46-47), are weary of the prying eyes and hands of pimps and clients; and Ireland is equally tired of the "strangers" in its Isle (a traditional reference to the English) and the rule of the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy. Indeed, as Donald Torchiana has shown, the whole story is a tour through the Ascendancy, beginning at Rutland Square, seat of the Orange Lodge, and here traversing Nassau Street (Lord Henry Nassau fought for William of Orange at the battle of the Boyne) which runs along the south side of Trinity College (which, in the late nineteenth century, was intimately associated with Unionism, Anglicisation and Protestantism), to the Kildare Street Club, an exclusive gentlemen's club restricted to Anglo-Irish Protestants which "epitomized the religious, economic and social callousness" (Torchiana 116) of the Ascendancy.

We can see from this that, far from the pastoral scenes of the Celtic Twilight, Joyce's "Irish landscape" offers a complex, multifaceted portrayal of social, political, historical, cultural and religious conditions at the turn of the century. In one sense it is a scrupulously mean portrayal, both in its unrelentingly bleak vision of Dublin as a "centre of paralysis," and in the economy of its depiction, which only reveals the full depth of its perspective to those who know the background. Yet this

too is part of Joyce's gift, a meticulous attention to detail which ensures that every proper noun in *Dubliners* contains a wealth of allusion, a scrupulosity he would later extend to each word in *Finnegans Wake*.

The same combination of obliquity and complexity characterises the apparition of the coin at the end of the story. Pursued by Lenehan, Corley turns down a blind alley and halts under a lamp, recalling the lamps of the opening.¹¹ Framed under the light, there is a good deal of suspense, even for the savvy reader who suspects success, for Lenehan, at least, is anxiously expecting failure. Thus the scene offers a dramatic tableau which Corley milks for all it is worth:

Corley halted at the first lamp and stared grimly before him. Then with a grave gesture he extended a hand towards the light and, smiling, opened it slowly to the gaze of his disciple. A small gold coin shone in the palm. (55)

The theatrical quality of the scene makes it seem somewhat unreal, as though Corley had conjured the coin by sleight of hand, adding to the mystery of how he has obtained it, and what it represents. Under Lenehan's gaze, the shining coin both echoes and contrasts the poetic apparition of the moon earlier in the story, first when "Lenehan's gaze was fixed on the large faint moon circled with a double halo," watching "earnestly the passing of the grey web of twilight across its face" (46), and then when Corley "too gazed at the pale disc of the moon, now nearly veiled, and seemed to meditate" (46). In this way, each man's musings on the likely outcome of the meeting is linked to, and prepares for, the manifestation of the coin, contradicting Norris's reading of these scenes as mere trickery. In fact, given Lenehan's power over Corley, "disciple" is a better candidate for deception, as though the narrator had caught Lenehan's habit of irony, allowing "[a] shade of mockery" to "reliev[e] the servility" (46). At the same time, "disciple" clearly suggests religious significance, perhaps as an allusion to the parable of the rich man who entrusts ten servants with a gold coin each in Luke,

¹¹ They may also recall the "swinging lamp" of the boy's dream in "The Sisters" (6), the contrast between the "electric candle-lamps" and daybreak in "After the Race" (38-39, 42), or the gas lamps in "Araby" which both illuminate the object of the boy's desire, like Mangan's sister framed angelically under the light, and veil it ("I was thankful that I could see so little. All my senses seemed to desire to veil themselves. . .": 21-24). Lamps and streetlights constitute an important leitmotif in *Dubliners*, figuring prominently in "A Little Cloud," "Counterparts," "A Painful Case," and "The Dead."

chapter 19 (Reizbaum and Ellmann 135-36).¹² At the same time there is a faint echo of the "two men [. . .] counting money on a salver" at the end of "Araby" (27), which recalls the moneychangers in the temple (Matthew 21: 12-13). Announced on the first page, simony is a central theme in *Dubliners*, most obviously in "Grace," where Father Purdon preaches a sermon on the "Mammon of Iniquity," offering to be his congregants' "spiritual accountant," but it is also at work in "Araby," suggesting that the men in the bazaar are trafficking in the "prayers and praises" of "desire" (23-24, cf. 21-28), and in the same way, there is something simoniacal about the exchanges in "Two Gallants," trafficking in dreams of love and desire, or in the sacred myths of Ireland, like the harpist busking on the steps of the Kildare Street club, both of which Lenehan and Corley would readily sell for a sovereign piece stamped with the seal of an English monarch.¹³

Thus, the gold coin in "Two Gallants" offers rich possibilities for interpretation, but no guarantee that any will be repaid with certainty.¹⁴ Indeed, its richness as a symbol derives from the fact that it is repeatedly hinted at without ever being shown, accruing a good deal of unpaid in-

¹² Florence Walzl suggests "an ironic inversion of the agony in the garden, the betrayal of Jesus for thirty pieces of silver, and the kiss of Judas" (78), but the disparity between the single gold coin and the thirty pieces of silver attenuates the connection.

¹³ The coin is most likely a half-sovereign or gold sovereign minted during the reign of Queen Victoria or Edward VII. It could also have been a two or five pound gold coin, but only the Jubilee double sovereign of 1887 was minted in sufficient numbers to go into circulation.

¹⁴ For instance, a Marxist interpretation might discount the magical, fetishistic quality of the coin as concealed alienation and exploitation, uncovering its true value as labour-time. Yet Joyce's hints about the two gallants' labour complicate this discourse: Corley, as a police informer, and Lenehan, as a purveyor of betting tips (44), both live off their wits. Hungry and broke, when Lenehan anticipates having "to speak a great deal, to invent and to amuse," merely for a drink, talk is commodified as the fulfilment of desire. And if Corley has convinced the woman to give or lend him a pound, then this is exactly what the gold coin represents: "Frozen Desire," in James Buchan's phrase. This reading of "Two Gallants" can readily be extended from sexual to political power: for instance, Marc Shell traces the connection between the invention of coinage and the development of dialectic in ancient Greece, both concurrent with the rise of tyranny (11-62). However, I am indebted to an anonymous reviewer for pointing out an equally ancient connection between money and the underworld: in Greek mythology, Charon must be paid an *obolus* to ferry the dead to Hades. Given that the opening words of *Dubliners* ("There was no hope": 1) echo *Inferno* 3.9 ("*Lasciate ogne speranza, voi ch'intrate*": "abandon all hope ye who enter"), and that Father Flynn, the late "paralytic" (3), represents a synecdoche of Dublin as "the centre of paralysis" (*Letters* II 134, above), the coin in "Two Gallants" might symbolise passage to the land of the dead, which is to say, a "[portal] into the unknown" (Joyce, *Portrait* 123).

terest as the unseen object of two loaded exchanges: first between Corley and the woman, then between the two gallants. Withheld until the final line, the shiny gold coin provides the climax of the story, a narrative pay-off which is both highly gratifying and utterly empty, for its provenance and significance are never adequately explained. It is precisely this ambiguity that transforms it into a symbol which can, in theory, be exchanged for anything, becoming a symbol of the symbol itself.¹⁵

He gave me back that sovereign I lent him and I didn't expect it really

In *The Economy of Ulysses* Mark Osteen provides a compelling analysis of monetary circulation and the textual economies of *Ulysses*, arguing that Joyce sought to reconcile spendthrift habits with bourgeois thrift through an aesthetic economy of the gift, where loss is gain; as I have tried to demonstrate, the same holds true for *Dubliners*, whose scrupulous meanness generates endless interest. Similarly, Maud Ellmann shows how “[t]he city in *Ulysses* takes the form of a gigantic body circulating language, commodities, and money, together with the Dubliners whirled round in these economies” (55), and the same could be said for the text she alludes to: consider “the cars careering homeward” in “After the Race,” with Jimmy feeling “the machinery of human nerves str[iving] to answer the bounding courses of the swift blue animal” (35, 38), the physical anxiety provoked by Maria’s circuitous tram ride in “Clay” (97-99), or Lenehan’s circular walk in “Two Gallants.”

Although less prominent than the periodicals and throwaways of June 16 1904, *Dubliners* is characterised by the circulation of information, from the card on the Drapery door which convinces the boy in “The Sisters” of Father Flynn’s demise to Lenehan’s association with racing tissues to Gabriel’s reviews in “The Dead.” Blood also circulates as a recurrent trope in the collection, linked significantly to language, money and desire: the name of Mangan’s sister acts “like a summons to all [the narrator’s] foolish blood” in “Araby” (22); the “thin stream of blood trickl[ing] from the corner of [Kernan’s] mouth” forms a “dark medal” on the floor in “Grace”; and the rhythmic descriptions of Gabriel’s desire pulsate at the end of “The Dead”: “the blood went

¹⁵ Rereading Freud and Marx, Žižek provides a brilliant account of money as a sublime object of exchange whose “immaterial corporality” gives form to the symbolic order (11-19). See also Jean-Joseph Goux, “Exchange Value and the Symbolic,” in *Symbolic Economies* (122-33, esp. 127).

bounding along his veins; and the thoughts went rioting through his brain, proud, joyful, tender, valorous" (214). Indeed, the symbolic economy of the collection as a whole is governed by circulation; it has often been remarked that the titles of the first and last stories, "The Sisters" and "The Dead," could be exchanged, but the circular structure of beginning and ending is more striking still: *Dubliners* begins with a boy looking up at a lighted window for a sign that the old priest had died, and ends with an aging man looking out of a darkened window thinking of a dead youth. Adding to this sense of circularity and closure, just as many of the characters from *Dubliners* (including Lenehan and Corley) are recirculated in *Ulysses*, characters like Kathleen Kearney from "A Mother" circle back into "The Dead," and in the same way, many of the most important themes and motifs from earlier stories return at the end, including Lily's bitter retort to Gabriel's lighthearted marriage banter ("the men that is now is only all palaver and what they can get out of you" [178]), and the pound coin Freddy Malins repays Gabriel which unexpectedly returns the gold sovereign from "Two Gallants" (218).

Yet *Dubliners* is also a collection of discrete short stories, and the breaks between narratives emphasise Joyce's breaks in circulation. This offers an important corrective to Ellmann, Osteen, and others who would make circulation a master trope for *Ulysses*. For instance, "Aeolus," the chapter which is most obviously about circulation, begins "in the heart of the Hibernian metropolis" where trams circulate citizens along Dublin's arteries, "vermillion mailcars" put letters into circulation, and "a great daily organ" pumps (mis)information into the collective bloodstream (M. Ellmann 55); but by the end of the chapter the tramcars stand motionless in their tracks, "becalmed in short circuit" (*Ulysses* 7.1043-7). In the same way, for all the circulating systems in *Dubliners*, the collection begins with the spectre of Father Flynn, whose circulation has literally stopped, and ends with Dublin's public transportation system at a standstill, for "the snow was general all over Ireland" (225). These breaks in circulation, where paralysis leads to literal or symbolic death, draw heightened attention to the encircling system, allowing the material quality of each paralysed element to be examined in isolation, like the eight lines of tramcars and trolleys individually enumerated at the end of "Aeolus" (7.1043-47). In doing so, these breaks reveal the conditions necessary to activate the circuit; or as Lacan puts it, "the hole in the real that results from loss, sets the signifier in motion" (38).

Hence, Joyce's scrupulous meanness consists in the meticulous care he takes to riddle his texts with holes, while at the same time bestowing all his poetic gifts to charge these holes with association, creating *resonant*

hiatuses. The gaps and silences in *Dubliners* become portals of imagination, putting symbolic associations into circulation; but no matter how many associations these symbols accrue, they can never be exhausted, because there is always a gap, an incertitude, at the heart of Joyce's gift. To find a figure for this form of exchange, we need look no further than the first paragraph of *Dubliners*, where Joyce's late additions include the famous triad, *paralysis*, *gnomon*, and *simony*. The "paralytic" priest in "The Sisters" has died of a stroke, and Joyce, we recall, chose Dublin for the scene because it seemed to him "the centre of paralysis" (*Letters* II 134), suggesting that the priest's demise offers a synecdoche of *Dubliners*; but we should not forget that the boy feels "as if [he] had been freed from something by [Father Flynn's] death" (4), and that the Greek root of paralysis means "a loosening aside" (Skeat; see Whittaker 190). The old priest is also labelled a "simoniac," and even in the Catechism, where it is defined as "the buying or selling of spiritual things" (2121), "simony" is derived from Simon Magus, an archetypal heretic traditionally held to be the founder of Gnosticism. Cognate with Gnostic, from the Greek root for *to know*, the strange word "gnomon" is perhaps most interesting of all. Usually it refers to the pointer on a sundial, but the word has many meanings, including a rule or canon of belief, a carpenter's square, and an indicator. The boy in "The Sisters" knows it from Euclid, who defines the figure as a parallelogram with a similar parallelogram missing from one of its corners (i.e., BCDEFG in Figure 1: see Euclid, *Elements* II, Def. 2).

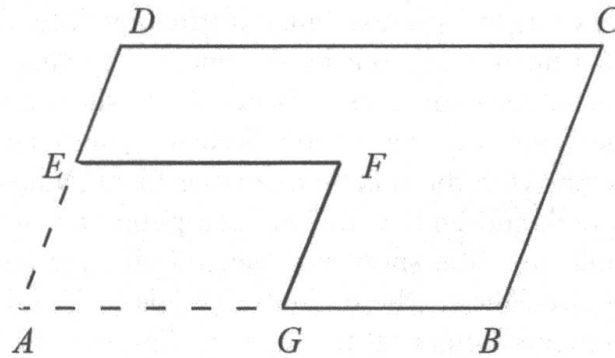


Figure 1: Euclidian gnomon

This figure, like an arrowhead, points towards something absent. As with the gnomon of a sundial, it can reveal hidden truths as intangible as time, but it does so through its shadow, for it is only by tracing back the lines of the gnomon that we can fill in the missing piece. Shaped like the carpenter's square, this sets the rule for the gnomonic repetitions of *Dubliners*: each one points back to a gap, a silence, a missing piece at its

origin, yet upon inspection, this missing piece turns out to be a shadow of the whole, supplementing the original figure even as it is the lack which generates it. As such, it provides an infinitely reiterable figure for Joyce's symbolic economy, where language is founded, "like the world, macro and microcosm, upon the void. Upon incertitude" (*Ulysses* 9.841-42), yet this spiralling uncertainty turns out to be a teeming, cornucopian void, capable of yielding endless returns for readers who invest in Joyce.

References

- Attridge, Derek. *Joyce Effects: On Language, Theory, and History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.
- Boyle, Robert, S. J. "'Two Gallants' and 'Ivy Day in the Committee Room.'" *James Joyce Quarterly* 1.1 (Fall 1963): 3-9.
- Catechism of the Catholic Church*. Part 3, §2, ch.1, art.1, 3.2121. Libreria Editrice Vaticana: Citta del Vaticano, 1993, 2003. http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_P7E.HTM. Accessed 20 January 2015.
- Culler, Jonathan D. *Theory of the Lyric*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015.
- Deming, Robert Howard, ed. *James Joyce: The Critical Heritage*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1986.
- Ellmann, Maud. "Ulysses: The Epic of the Human Body." *A Companion to James Joyce*. Ed. Richard Brown. Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2008. 54-70.
- Ellmann, Richard. *James Joyce*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959.
- Epstein, E. L. "Hidden Imagery in James Joyce's 'Two Gallants.'" *James Joyce Quarterly* 7.4 (Summer 1970): 369-370.
- Goux, Jean-Joseph. *Symbolic Economies: After Marx and Freud*. Trans. Jennifer Curtiss Gage. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990.
- Joyce, James. *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Ed. Seamus Deane. London: Penguin Books, 1992.
- . *Dubliners*. Ed. Terence Brown. London: Penguin Books, 2000.
- . *Letters of James Joyce*. Ed. Stuart Gilbert and Richard Ellmann. 3 vols. London: Faber and Faber, 1957-1966.
- . *Poems and Shorter Writings*. Ed. Richard Ellmann, A. Walton Litz and John Whittier-Ferguson. London: Faber and Faber, 1991.
- . *Ulysses: The Corrected Text*. Ed. Hans Walter Gabler. London: Random House, 1986.
- Lacan, Jacques. "Desire and the Interpretation of Desire in *Hamlet*." *Literature and Psychoanalysis: The Question of Reading: Otherwise*. Ed. Shoshana Felman. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989. 11-52.
- Leonard, Garry Martin. *Reading Dubliners Again: A Lacanian Perspective*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1993.
- Norris, Margot. "Gambling with Gambles in 'Two Gallants.'" *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction* 29.1 (1995): 32-44.
- Osteen, Mark. *The Economy of Ulysses: Making Both Ends Meet*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1995.

- Reizbaum, Marilyn and Maud Ellmann. "En Garde: 'Two Gallants.'" *Collaborative Dubliners: Joyce in Dialogue*. Ed. Vicki Mahaffey. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2012. 125-143.
- Shell, Marc. *The Economy of Literature*. London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993.
- Skeat, Walter W. *An Etymological Dictionary of the English Language*. 3rd ed. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1888. <https://archive.org/stream/etymologicaldict00skeauoft#page/n7/mode/2up>. Accessed 14 June 2013.
- The Thirteen Books of Euclid's Elements*. Ed. Sir Thomas Heath. Trans. J. L. Heiberg. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1908. <https://archive.org/details/thirteenbookseu03heibgoog>. Accessed 12 December 2012.
- Torchiana, Donald T. "Joyce's 'Two Gallants': A Walk Through the Ascendancy." *James Joyce Quarterly* 6.2 (Winter 1969): 115-127.
- Walzl, Florence L. "Symbolism in Joyce's 'Two Gallants.'" *James Joyce Quarterly* 2.2 (Winter 1965): 73-81.
- Whittaker, Stephen. "Joyce and Skeat." *James Joyce Quarterly* 24.2 (Winter 1987): 177-192.
- Žižek, Slavoj. *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. London: Verso, 1989.

