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Identity Crisis in James Joyce's *Dubliners*

Mark Corcoran, NUI Galway

The crossover between French and Irish culture has a long history and could be discussed on a number of levels. This article is concerned with a general similarity: the struggle to form an identity which could be considered the “right” identity. From the politics of Éamon de Valera to Henri Bergson's *élan vital*, this struggle is apparent in the political histories of France and Ireland, in their civil wars, and in their colonial experience, whether as coloniser or colonised. These crises of identity are no less perceptible in the rich and shared artistic and literary outputs of Irish and French culture, particularly in the modernist period. As Peter Childs puts it, “[m]odernism has [. . .] almost universally been considered a literature of not just change but crisis” (Childs 2000, 14).

Paris was a hotbed of modernist activity, and home of many renowned Irish artists in the first decades of the twentieth century. The crisis of identity that I will examine in the work of James Joyce, however, lies not in the works completed in France—*Ulysses* (1922) *Pomes Penyeach* (1927), *Finnegans Wake* (1939)—but in *Dubliners*, his first major work, much of which was written by Joyce following his first trip to Paris in 1903. I will read *Dubliners* as a book that depicts and explores the dominance of universal paradigms such as religion and the family in the formation of identity, and the crisis of the individual in coming to terms with the expectations of a given society. Specifically, *Dubliners* depicts an Irish society which is trying to come to terms with its own historical crisis. *Dubliners* was first published in 1914, the year that brought the First World War and the greatest material and spiritual crisis Europe had faced. The stories in *Dubliners* were written when Irish nationalism was raging in its drive for a new, independent identity. This fight for Irish identity also required a reinvention, and I will argue that this necessity is captured by Joyce in his use of the “epiphany.” The stories of *Dubliners* tend to end with a moment of clarity or self-

understanding regarding a compulsion, a comprehension of an action or desire, or an awareness of a necessary course of action. That notwithstanding, I will argue that *Dubliners* goes deeper than metaphors for a war for independence or the search for a collective national identity. I will argue that Joyce identifies, through everyday examples, the root structures in society which contribute to a crisis in identity.

These are problems which are dealt with extensively by French theorists such as Lacan and Derrida, who theorise the psychological structures behind language and identity. Lacan is greatly concerned with the process of individual identity-formation. He describes the illusoriness of this identification in his account of the mirror stage:

[T]he total form of his body, by which the subject anticipates the maturation of his power in a mirage, is given to him only as a gestalt. [. . .] [T]his Gestalt [. . .] symbolises the *I*'s mental permanence, at the same time as it prefigures its alienating destination. (Lacan 2006, 2)

The child perceives his/her body in a reflection and recognises in confusion his/her self as an exterior form, just as he/she struggles with his/her controlling of the body. In this process the self becomes identified both as an object in the external world and as that which must be controlled and commanded internally. The objectification of the self is typified by its later association with the personal pronouns. This objectification becomes incorporated psychologically so as to form an operative component not separable from the total of its divisions.

It is this physical experience of the optical apparatus of an object in a reflection which provides a sense of a self trapped in a body and struggling to control it: the logic of a self is associated and bound to the form of the body, with a reflection in the mirror as object. There is never hard evidence for an operating dominant self or indeed many selves; however, there is a problematic link between the optical perception/experience of the body as object, where the

associations become something separate, the self a single perceiving object rather than something transient and rapidly changing.

Lacan's "big Other" describes an ideological structure in society which, though removed and constituted by unexplainable elements, stands as an integral part of identity. These big Others have forms of representation as objects in reality, yet their definition and wholeness can never be understood beyond subjective association in the human mind. Similarly, the individual is never able to accurately view or articulate the "I". The influence of a perception of the optical apparatus and of the perceived perception of others dominates the individual throughout life. Practicality dictates that we seek to adopt the historically dominant or prevalent views of society—themselves steeped in illusion—in an effort to be acceptable in society and share the burden.

There is a distinction in Lacanian theory between the little other (the other) and the big Other (the Other) (Evans 1996, 134). The little other is a reflection and projection of the ego, a counterpart and specular image existing in the imaginary. The big Other, by contrast, "is usually conceived as the impersonal symbolic order, the structure that regulates symbolic exchanges" (Žižek 1991, 199). As Evans points out, Lacan stresses that the big Other signifies radical alterity:

Lacan equates this radical alterity with language and the law, and hence the big Other is inscribed in the order of the symbolic. [. . .] The Other is thus both another subject, in his radical alterity and unassimilable uniqueness, and also the symbolic order which mediates the relationship with that other subject. (Evans 1996, 135)

Language and Law are never set definitions but are constantly changing and being redefined, taking on new forms. Therefore they exist in the symbolic realm, existing in and beyond human consciousness, just as the Catholic Church—and, for that matter, the family—exists as a tradition that the individual is born into. They are apparently built upon the facts of the past, but, since these

cannot be affirmed or disaffirmed, they take place mentally, beyond the material, in the psychologically symbolic order.

An example of these complex ideas can be found in Joyce's story "Ivy Day In The Committee Room." In this story, Old Jack laments the character of his son, whom he considers a layabout, showing no understanding of what might have caused him to end up this way. He complains that he sent his son to the Christian Brothers school, and that he "done what I could for him" in an effort to make him "decent" (Joyce 1914, 116). It is left to the reader to imagine exactly what it was that Old Jack "done" for his son, and of course his idea of what is "decent" is never defined. The big Other provides a safe standard of acceptability; Old Jack says nothing more than that he followed the generally accepted practice: "I done what I could for him." Likewise, Old Jack falls back on religion to release himself from responsibility: he has a blind and unquestioning faith in the Christian Brothers.

The mother is the first big Other of the child's life: it is the mother who responds to the calls of the child and first gives them a meaning. This special relationship is demonstrated by Joyce in "A Little Cloud." Little Chandler's identity crisis impacts upon his child, and his failure to calm the baby is compounded by the ability of the child's mother to assure the child. In the climax of that story, Little Chandler's ideal self slips from him along with the illusions of his ambition:

It was useless. He couldn't read. He couldn't do anything. The wailing of the child pierced the drum of his ear. It was useless, useless! He was a prisoner for life. His arms trembled with anger and suddenly bending to the child he shouted: "Stop!" (Joyce 1914, 92-93)

Little Chandler is a husband and father, and the responsibilities of these positions hinder the implementation of his vision of the artistic self—for which he still, however, pines. Little Chandler is the first character in the collection whose familial responsibilities appear to have come of his own

free will; it is not a family he is born into. However, he has nevertheless fulfilled the societal expectation of the creation of a family through parentage. The responsibilities of his roles as husband and father are socially constituted, and it is by these social requirements that he feels trapped.

The cries of the child impact only as a noise upon the action and ambition of Little Chandler. The child is not thought to have a self by this male, but exists only as a hindrance: the child must stop so he can think. There is no attempt to try to understand the child. This unfeeling communication is captured in Chandler's reaction to the baby's incessant wailing after being frightened by his father: "What if it died!" (Joyce 1914, 93). Little Chandler does not use the child's name, but the impersonal pronoun "it." By contrast, the baby's mother has only one concern: "What is it? What is it?" she cried. The child, hearing its mother's voice, broke out into a paroxysm of sobbing" (Joyce 1914, 94). There is a special connection between mother and child. She attempts to understand what the child needs or is upset by. She imparts meaning upon the child's cries, and gives that meaning the utmost importance. She speaks to the child and acknowledges his self and perception:

My little man! My little mannie! Was 'ou frightened, love? ... There now, love! There now!
... Lamba-baun! Mamma's little lamb of the world! ... There now! (Joyce 1914, 94)

The Freudian castration complex comes into play upon the realisation that the Other (mother) is not total for the young child, but removed, limited and—like the child—contingent upon a chain of events which are beyond the mother; they too must act in accordance with the governing laws of the symbolic order of the big Other of society. Žižek writes: "the big Other is always-already here; by means of our very act of speaking, we attest to our 'belief' in it" (Žižek 1991, 153). The individual must bend to the pre-existing rules of society's big Others or face alienation. Yet to

become part of the signifying chain is also to insert subjective meaning. The individual interprets and gives a meaning to the discourse he/she enters, producing the delusion of a determined meaning.

Joyce employs a technique of narration within *Dubliners* which I will term “a Mirror-ring of Mirrors.” This technique collects characters, actions, names, words, colours, images and metaphors in its reflection, reflecting upon the mirror of the reader as the ultimate other of the book. The text/author is a mirror for the reader, as the reader’s imagination tries to recreate and finish the picture and logic of the story in their mind’s eye, and the reader is a mirror for the author/text; both are dependent upon each other for perspective. The mirrors continually reflect upon each other into infinity. Joyce anticipates the reader, cultivating, leading and shaping him/her through ellipses and allusion. Joyce as the writer is very conscious of the reader as other, as mirror, and is determined to place himself and his text in the mind of the reader: to make an impact.

The delusion of a determined meaning is again illustrated by the words of Old Jack of “Ivy Day in the Committee Room”:

Only I’m an old man now I’d change his tune for him. I’d take the stick to his back and beat him while I could stand over him—as I done many a time before. The mother, you know, she cocks him up with this and that. [. . .] And little thanks you get for it, only impudence.

He takes th’ upper hand of me whenever he sees I’ve a sup taken. (Joyce 1914, 133-4)

Old Jack fails to see the role he might have played in his son’s current state. He reveals that he beat his son many times. The young man’s childhood with Old Jack as an abusive parent has led to his boozy, layabout self; as his abusive family institution has limited and pared his self, his identity has developed in crisis. The lack of communication, the failure to create any positive meaning to bring rewarding growth to the relationship, is evident in the relationship between father and son. Just as in

“A Little Cloud,” there seems to be at work a paradigm which renders difficult the father-son relationship, and portrays a special tie between child and mother.

The author leads the reader to thematic places where the reader must complete the story and even challenge the narrative—and the reader’s own previous conception of the theme at work, whether that is the practice of the family, or of the Catholic institution. He achieves this by placing an onus on the reader in his/her role as interpreter: the reader must work imaginatively to piece the story together. The allusions and ellipses planted by Joyce anticipate and fashion the mirroring between author, text and reader, who must ask more than usual just what the narrative signifies. In finishing the story imaginatively, the reader must ask questions not just of the author but of themselves: they must compare their reading with those of other readers and critics, or work creatively to piece together other possible interpretations.

This narrative approach both allows and requires perspectival flexibility in the reader, who must remain conscious of the collective reading, of what is acceptable and of what steps beyond the norms of *Zeitgeist*. The reader too might feel compelled to challenge the *Zeitgeist*: the reader as the writer has that option in such a text. The reader in this way mirrors the actions of an author, just as the writer must position himself as reader in order to gauge the practicality and impact of his work. In the extensive use of ellipses to exploit ambiguity, Joyce anticipates the understanding and reaction of the reader, presenting the reader with the experience of paralysis and crisis at work within Irish society. This consciousness of audience is of a piece with the techniques developed even further in *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*—works which, as John Nash has pointed out, “demonstrate an acute concern for the social expectations that conditioned their own reception” (Nash 2006, 27). To state the point simply, Joyce constructs his narrative in such a way as to recreate a crisis of perspective in the reader; the ambiguity of Joyce’s narration opens up an unusual multiplicity of interpretative possibilities.

Joyce's work suggests that a critique of culture and its structures is crucial, as family and religious structures are shown to be maintaining a religious and ethical paralysis in individuals. The characters of *Dubliners* strive to imprint a believable truth on their lives; as with Old Jack's blind affirmation that he did all he could for his son, Joyce suggests that these "truths" are for the most part illusions. Social conformity commands that the individual employs the established beliefs of society. Consequently, the attainment or practice of knowledge is itself established upon illusion. Regardless of its sensible drive to cushion an individual in the practical necessities of the world, one of the chief apparatuses of illusion is language. Language and illusion are merged and practised for the purpose of ideology, particularly that of the big Other. Old Jack places belief in the Christian Brothers (big Other) to furnish his son with a decent character, and disavows the consequences of his abusive parenting (the failing family structure also a big Other). Old Jack's ability to repress his own part played in his son's circumstances is illustrative of the use of language and subjective logic to maintain illusion. Old Jack claims he does not know what has caused his son's character despite his knowledge of the abuse that he has perpetuated. He believes it to be natural and right: this is his belief and illusion.

Lacan outlines in *Écrits* the world to which the infant must learn to adapt: "This moment at which the mirror stage comes to an end inaugurates [. . .] the dialectic that will henceforth link the I to socially elaborated situations" (Lacan 2006, 6). There are certain expectations in society that are anticipated from one other to the next in order for society to function or develop and this is evident in the traditional use of a certain language, spelling or grammar. There are also forms of titles in society, especially in the family that an individual is born into, which demand specific behaviour codes. Terms such as "Father" and "Mother" define the relation of other as son or daughter, husband or wife. An expected code of behaviour is imposed, a set system of conduct or performance which is expected of other from other. There are ideological structures in place which guarantee the perpetuation of such practices across generations, such as the concept of a nationality

or morality, which usually take the form of a state or a religion—Capitalism, Marxism, Catholicism, Buddhism, and so on. These structures pre-exist the entrance of the individual/other, slowly changing from generation to generation, and therefore play a vital role in shaping and determining the identity of an individual. As Louis Althusser puts it, “individuals are always-already interpellated by ideology as subject” (Althusser 1971, 164).

In *Dubliners*, Joyce alludes to actions, thoughts, feelings, and characters laconically; their import remains cryptic. In “The Sisters,” the young narrator’s friendship with an old priest, Father James Flynn, dominates the action; the effect of the death of the priest upon the young boy’s recent past comes to dominate the child’s life. As the narrative opens, Father Flynn has endured three paralysing strokes, and is a faint image of his former self. His fall from grace, typified by his laughing episode alone in a confession box in a locked church at night, indicates insanity. It is never explained exactly what caused the priest’s mental disintegration, despite several allusions made by different characters. Joyce employs a technique of allusion where neither the fine detail nor the summation is ever provided; he suggests and alludes, but never commits the narrative to any definitive conclusion. This technique stages the plight of the narrator of the story, of the self. There is no totalising grasp of the experience of the events of one’s personal life; the self of the character struggles to encompass what is happening all around him, just as the reader will fight to capture and understand all the allusions of the story. This leads to a crisis of self in terms of how the self should perform around the other.

R. B. Kershner describes “The Sisters” as a story in which “the child encounters an adult or group of adults who speak a different language” (Kershner 1989, 22). It would be more accurate to say that the child is aware of the language game at work, but that he is unable to compete. The young narrator does speak the same language, and still cannot identify what is happening to him; the adults, however, are privy to a world of information that he is not. The boy does not have access to the information and gossip of the adult social world. It is the partial revelations of Mr. Cotter,

who uses such normative words as “queer” and “uncanny” about a figure of authority, which brings about the inner turmoil in the young narrator. This figure of authority—a priest, a mentor—has suddenly been removed; his character is now dismissed without him being able to defend himself. The young narrator witnesses the harshness of the adult world and moves into survival mode, a state of quietness where he offers no words of his own for judgment by others. His innocent faith in authority has been damaged, and the boy is no longer a trusting child; however, he lacks the agency and understanding which he sees staged by the adults around him. He exists in a purgatory before adulthood. He has no identity as an immediate son—he lives with his uncle and aunt, and his parents are not mentioned in the story—but also possesses no identity as a child or adult. The state of being outside this world of adult information heightens for the young narrator his sense of a lack of identity. This is his crisis.

In “The Sisters,” Joyce portrays the self as a construction, both of the self and of the perception of the other. The characters’ conceptions of themselves and of others, particularly those of the young narrator and Father James Flynn, are repeatedly undercut. The first example of this, in terms of James Flynn’s character, comes on the first page, as the young narrator relates Mr. Cotter’s opinion of his recently deceased acquaintance: “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” (Joyce 1914, 7).

Mr. Cotter makes no explicit reference to James Flynn; however, it soon becomes clear in the text who is the subject of Mr. Cotter’s perorations when the young narrator is informed by his Uncle Jack that his “old friend” had died. The first association with the character of James Flynn is that of “queer” and then “uncanny”. Uncle Jack’s method of breaking the news of the death of the priest to the young narrator is neither comforting nor careful: “Well, so your old friend is gone, you’ll be sorry to hear” (Joyce 1914, 8). There is no identification in sympathy or mourning revealed in the statement: Uncle Jack distances himself from James Flynn by depicting him as

“your friend” and “you’ll be sorry to hear,” leading the reader to assume that the uncle is at best indifferent to the news of Flynn’s death. This use of deictics is an important part of the stylistic distancing and isolation of the young narrator in the story.

While Uncle Jack initially gives a mitigated defence of the boy’s friendship with Fr. Flynn, he soon brings his position closer to Mr. Cotter’s: “That’s what I’m always saying to that Rosicrucian there: take exercise. [. . .] Education is all very fine and large” (Joyce 1914, 8-9). The young narrator’s own opinion of the character of Fr. Flynn is now questioned. He is caught between two competing aspects of the big Other: the Catholic church embodied by the priest, and the “commonsensical” or societal wisdom led by Mr. Cotter and Uncle Jack. The young narrator is an identity in formation, open to the influences that surround him as the patchwork family and priest, representative of state and religion, seek his loyalty and compliance. The young narrator is at a crucial crossroads in terms of his development, and the male figureheads in his environment try to coerce him towards their own conceptions of the big Other.

It is typical of unquestioned big Other ideology that Old Cotter gives no justification for his assumptions about the conflicting Father Flynn: “I have my own theory about it, he said. I think it was one of those ... peculiar cases ... But it’s hard to say ...” (Joyce 1914, 8). A straightforward interpretation of this statement is that he finds it difficult to express his theory in the presence of a woman and a child, yet the ellipses are entirely consistent with his other comments about Father Flynn:

—I wouldn’t like children of mine, he said, to have too much to say to a man like that.

—How do you mean, Mr. Cotter? asked my aunt.

—What I mean is, said Old Cotter, it’s bad for children. My idea is: let a young lad run about and play with young lads of his own age and not be ... Am I right, Jack?

(Joyce 1914, 8)

The disturbing dreams of the young narrator reveal the impact that the ideological conflict between Mr Cotter and Father Flynn are having upon his sense of identity:

In the dark of my room I imagined that I saw again the heavy grey face of the paralytic. I drew the blankets over my head and tried to think of Christmas. But the grey face still followed me. It murmured; and I understood that it desired to confess something. I felt my soul receding into some pleasant and vicious region; and there again I found it waiting for me. (Joyce 1914, 9)

James Flynn has lost his personal identity in the mind of the young narrator: he now refers to the priest as “it” and “the grey face.” The young narrator is losing grip upon his previously firmly held convictions.

The switch into the third person narrative in “Eveline,” the fourth story of *Dubliners*, and the first to move away from the depiction of childhood protagonists, confirms the impression that Joyce has used the first three stories to portray crises in identity formation. The ostensibly omniscient narration of the stories that follow dramatises the restrictions of human knowledge and the multiplicity of self in adult identity, as is suggested in “After the Race”:

He had been seen by many of his friends that day in the company of these Continentals. At the control Segouin had presented him to one of the French competitors and, in answer to his confused murmur of compliment, the swarthy face of the driver had disclosed a line of shining white teeth. It was pleasant after that honour to return to the profane world of spectators amid nudges and significant looks. (Joyce 1914, 44)

The paragraph begins with an objective sentence providing the reader with factual information: Jimmy's experience has been witnessed by others. The next sentence reveals that the narrator is not privy to everything: Jimmy's "murmur of compliment" is not explained, and neither does the narrator seem privy to the meaning behind the driver's smile, which is presented as a mystery, suggestive but obscure. We are led from an apparent omniscient narration into an example of limited perspective and knowledge, and then, in the final sentence of the paragraph, to a line which could very well have come from the lips of Jimmy himself: "It was pleasant after that honour to return to the profane world of spectators amid nudges and significant looks." The final sentence throws us into the biased world of the character's thoughts and perception itself. Within one paragraph the reader is run through a gamut of narrative styles—an experience reflective of the plight of the human self, the limited state of human epistemology.

As Jimmy is not, unlike the young narrator of "The Sisters", the principle conductor of the narrative, his voice reflects the extent to which he is enslaved to the perception of the other. This originates in his enthrallment to, and identification with, his patriarchal father, to whom he is financially and morally subservient. Jimmy does not have the understanding to question his father's outlook or actions, or indeed his own; indeed, one implication of the narrative is that Jimmy lacks the independence to carry the narration of his life by himself. There is no consciousness of how he might positively view himself. This lack of awareness or control is typical of the later stories of *Dubliners*. As the individuals within *Dubliners* depart from childhood, their selves become more closely trapped within the pre-existing arrangement of society. As the reader moves through the later stories, he/she become more aware of the paradigms arresting free will and choice, just as the characters' selves are more closely tied to unchanging shapes of thought and expression. Joyce captures this restriction stylistically by removing the first-person narrative in favour of a type of free indirect discourse, where glimmers of the different selves of the characters struggling to attain individuality can be witnessed by the reader in the often ambiguous personality of the narrator.

Derek Attridge describes this effect concisely: the narrative's "equal insistence on the reality of historical Dublin life and on the constitutive powers of language and style, both heightens and undermines referentiality" (Attridge 2000, 48-49).

The potential of Joyce's free indirect discourse to unsettle assumptions of narrative and character has long been recognised, as with Hugh Kenner's famous description of the "Uncle Charles Principle" (Kenner 1978, 17-18). The subject of Joyce's narration influences the style of the narrative, which employs plausibly characteristic linguistic markers of their sense of self and personality. We shall go a step further than Kenner. These characterisations of the narrative function to obliterate the reader's fantasy of possessing omniscient and impartial insight into the lives of the characters. Someone is guiding us through the activities of Jimmy, but it is neither exactly an omniscient authorial voice, nor unequivocally the voice of the central character. The reader must work imaginatively to piece together a necessarily subjective understanding into the text. Joyce uses this style of narration to exemplify the limits of human knowledge. The narrator reveals what may have been seen or heard, describing to the reader the expressions, whispers, and words of certain characters.

Far from being a single-voiced narration, then, *Dubliners* stands as a hall of linguistic mirrors, where the narration comes to envelop at different points different characters' viewpoints and positions, continually reflecting upon the position of the other. I suggest that the ellipses and allusions of the narrative of *Dubliners* have something in common with Jacques Derrida's idea of "hauntology." Hauntology describes a kind of absent influence: a concept constantly shifts in and out of different subjective selves, both gathering meaning and alienating itself from its initial concepts, not just between individuals but also between generations. Through the technique of allusion, Joyce captures several mirrors/others at work within the narration, revealing the self of character, author and reader as tied to the perception of other and the perception of the perception of other.

Joyce's form of hauntology skilfully lures the reader into several thematic realms through allusive but elusive narrative descriptions. Through the technique of allusion, Joyce, it would seem, reveals the family and the structures of society as defective but irresistible big Others which enmesh the over-determined victims he portrays. From their removed cultural and historical formations, then, the Irish writer Joyce and the French theorists Lacan and Derrida demonstrate a fundamental similarity in their representations of epistemology and the formation of identity. In this sense, their works testify to the common experience of human culture in crisis.

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