

NEW DIRECTIONS IN IRISH AND IRISH AMERICAN LITERATURE



RETHINKING JOYCE'S
DUBLINERS

Edited by
**Claire A. Culleton and
Ellen Scheible**



New Directions in Irish and Irish American
Literature

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Rethinking Joyce's
Dubliners

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Introduction
Rethinking *Dubliners*:
A Case for What Happens in Joyce's Stories

Claire A. Culleton and Ellen Scheible

Almost twenty years ago, Fritz Senn asked us to reconsider the gnomon as a foundational critical tool for Joyce studies. His 1998 essay, “Gnomon Inverted,” appeared as the only piece in the “New Directions” final section of the critical collection *ReJoycing: New Readings of “Dubliners,”* positioning his argument both on the threshold of new approaches to Joyce’s stories and on the outer fringes of traditional Joyce criticism. Senn asks us to pay attention to how “the renewed perpetuation of incompleteness” in the canon of writing on *Dubliners* “though far from futile, has become a little worn and shows signs of diminishing perceptive invigoration.”¹ Seemingly hopeful that he can reinvigorate debates concerning Joyce’s collection, Senn offers this explanation of his essay: “Gnomon need not automatically or mechanically spell deprivation. This note then

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is nothing more than a descriptive possibility to see *Dubliners* on occasion as complexity brought about by unforeseen augmentations that can be disruptive and unsettling.” Those “augmentations” or supplementations, as Senn’s essay later suggests, lead him to point out that besides its focus on tropes like paralysis and gnomon, “*Dubliners* is also a series of gratuities” or a text that sometimes gives us a “gnomonic bonus,” a text where things happen, causing “changes that were not part of any original expectation.”² In *Rethinking “Dubliners,”* we take up the challenge that Fritz Senn gave us at the end of the twentieth century, hoping to put “descriptive possibility” not just on the critical periphery of writing about *Dubliners* but also at the front and center, as a necessary movement forward in scholarly approaches to Joyce’s famous stories.

James Joyce published *Dubliners* more than a century ago. Since then, readers, scholars, and academics have vigorously discussed and interpreted the stories and the collection from perspectives that have become by 2016, it seems to us, in need of reorientation. Readers have come not only to accept these readings but also to internalize them, understanding them as a kind of gospel truth. In Fritz Senn’s terms, they “automatically or mechanically” produce a formula for twentieth-century approaches to reading short stories.³ Teaching new readers how to think about the world of modern literature through the Joycean lenses of irony, parallax, chiasmus, gnomon, and other stylistic and discursive frameworks exemplified by Joyce’s writing has great pedagogical value. In fact, it has produced an archive of companion literature that most modernist faculty employ with excitement and vigor (including the editors of this collection). However, in the centenary year of the 1916 Easter Rising in Ireland and just over one hundred years after Joyce gave us our beloved short stories, we urge readers of *Dubliners* to reconsider the traditional tropes of paralysis and stagnation in favor of movement and change.

The readings and arguments that we have come to know and love deeply, as critics and readers of Joyce, have become so conventional that they risk turning into stock readings. For example, most essays on any given story in *Dubliners* will refer to the paralysis of its main character, or of its narrative, or to the congestion of the city of Dublin itself, and use the metaphor of paralysis as a starting point or platform from which to launch a new reading; but can the reading be new if it reinforces such an established point? What if readers were to focus not only on paralysis but also on movement and mobility in each of the fifteen stories? Imagine the new readings that such an approach might yield. In fact, before you go further into the introduction, you may want to read the second chapter of *Rethinking “Dubliners”* and see how Claire Culleton navigates such a rereading.

Culleton has previously written on *Dubliners* and returns to the text again to rethink the way movement might emerge as a contemporary lens of study. Margot Norris shows how, in “A Painful Case,” social convention keeps Mr. Duffy from creating the space he needs in the limited world of the story, but she then also argues that Duffy is a mobile character—moving through and around the geography of suburban Dublin. Jim LeBlanc underscores the dialectic between paralysis and liberation in *Dubliners* and points out that freedom and movement exist in the stories but are often stifled by the characters’ internal failure to accept the responsibility of that freedom. Likewise, Enda Duffy invites us to consider gesture as a counter-style to paralysis, where gesturing signifies inevitable change and, specifically in “Two Gallants,” produces versions of masculinity and Irishness that will emerge later in the century in Ireland.

Duffy’s approach brings to mind Anthony Burgess’s early canonical essay, “A Paralysed City,” where Burgess clearly endorses the tendency of his contemporaries to read *Dubliners* as an illustration of paralysis while also underscoring the energy of the text: “this rather mean city is spread before us, its timidity and the hollowness of its gestures recorded with economy and a kind of muffled poetry, its bouncing cheques of the spirit endorsed with humour but with neither compassion nor censoriousness.”⁴ Even as early as the 1960s, critics understood Joyce’s project as not just one concerned with paralysis and gnomon, but one of gesture and spirit, where, as Burgess emphasizes, “Dublin may be an impotent city, but Ireland is more than Dublin. Life may seem to lie in exile, ‘out in Europe’, but it is really waiting coiled up in Ireland, ready to lunge.” As we know, the Ireland that is waiting to lunge eventually becomes an Ireland on the brink of revolution.

THE IRISH QUESTION: ONE APPROACH

At this point, readers might ask what is at stake in flipping the traditional approach to *Dubliners* and reading the text as preoccupied with momentum and progress rather than overt stagnation. While many arguments come to mind and are presented in this critical collection, one stands out to us: Joyce’s ambivalent view of early twentieth-century Irish history is both diagnosis and prognosis, temporary paralysis on the brink of conscious awakening. You will see that some of the essays in this collection engage this topic directly, quoting from letters and archival materials that support Joyce’s competing claims that the Easter Rising would be a

useless moment in history and, yet, that he saw *Dubliners* as a necessary mandate for progress and change in Ireland. One approach taken is to weigh Irish history alongside traditional Joycean tropes and ask how those defining, early years of nation building in Ireland may have impacted the tense moments in Joyce's stories, where movement forward, sometimes as explosive as a bottle of beer about to pop open in "Ivy Day in the Committee Room," was inevitable.

Such approaches read Joyce's work as situated in a specific time and place: pre-1916 Ireland. Joyce was not alone in his unwillingness to fully support the Easter Rising. In fact, most of Dublin agreed with him. As R. F. Foster has noted, "1916 was made by a minority of a minority, and many of those involved were pitchforked into action with no notice whatsoever."⁵ While the cultural critique in *Dubliners* certainly maintains the sharpness of a pitchfork at times, Joyce's skepticism of the Revival puts him at odds with many Irish writers who were openly propagating nationalist sentiments. However, it would be difficult to divorce Joyce's writing from the time period that produced it. Andrew Gibson claims that Joyce "responded intensely" to the "mutation in cultural temper" in Ireland at the beginning of the twentieth century—a change marked by an unattainable quest for Home Rule.⁶ Gibson describes this change in temper as a "widespread and increasingly subdued awareness of unavoidable complication, and an ensuing and equally widespread sense of stagnation." He claims that Joyce's response to it was a lifelong inability to forget "the awareness of complication, the difficulty of any notion of a decisive historical leap forward, and the sense of irony that consciousness of the two of them tends to generate." Joyce shared with Ireland the same agitation: an irresolvable tension between an unavoidable confrontation with history and an internalized inertia. Many critics of Irish modernism, Gibson included, agree that Ireland's literary genius, driven by both disillusion and a desire for change, emerges most aggressively during the period that ultimately led to Irish independence, with James Joyce at the helm.

Specific moments in Irish history are important to this reading of Joyce. Before the Famine in the middle of the nineteenth century, Ireland was a British colony on the edge of a progressive, modern economy that would bring great prosperity for Anglo-Irish landowners and British absentee landlords. After the Famine, Ireland was left destitute. With almost half the population lost through either starvation or emigration, the small colony lost any claim to the modernity that seemed inevitable at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Consequently, Irish Catholicism and nationalism

developed as powerful cultural institutions and both sought to rebuild the nation through the commodification of tradition rather than the forces of European modernity that Joyce valued so deeply. In *James Joyce and the Question of History*, James Fairhall argues, “the theme of paralysis may be traced both to Joyce’s ambivalent nationalism and to his strong sense of identity as an Irish Catholic.”⁷ However, this new, fetishized, Catholic nationalism produced its own modernizing momentum, and the Irish nation that surfaces in 1922 is not only one half of a partitioned island, but also a culture contingent on the conflicted binary of modernist aesthetics and Irish national tradition.

One way of reconsidering Joyce’s project is to understand such tensions as laying the groundwork for rereading the stories in *Dubliners* as barometers of movement and change. Regardless of his chosen exile, we know from letters that Joyce stayed abreast of all political developments in Dublin. While the stories were published two years before the Easter Rising, we might see their evocation of a culture poised on the brink of explosion as a clear precursor to the irrevocable changes marking 1916 Dublin. On the other hand, we would not want to commit the egregious mistake that Fairhall warns us against: “It isn’t enough to rebut Joyce’s picture of a paralyzed city simply by citing, as if the facts spoke for themselves, the 1916 Rising.”⁸ Instead, the Rising becomes one symptom of the diagnosis Joyce gives us: an Irish subjectivity that must redefine selfhood and nationhood on its own terms, understanding the intricate tensions, both paralytic and revolutionary, that underscore the formation of a Free State.

Joyce might be the most famous Irish novelist of the early twentieth century, but he is not the most famous Irish writer of that time. William Butler Yeats is still better known throughout the world as the paradigm of Irish literature and thought during the foundational years of Ireland’s national development. Both Joyce and Yeats understood early twentieth-century Irishness to be a divided experience, but Yeats envisioned a one-day unified culture, albeit hierarchically stratified, based on an invented history, while Joyce emphasized difference and cultural diversity, although also based on elements of the past, both imagined and constructed. This is to say that two of the most respected literary minds of the early twentieth century approached a shared problem—how do we build an Irish nation—from different directions. But, they shared the same belief that art was the true medium for social change. Now, just over one hundred years after the 1914 publication of Joyce’s *Dubliners*, and one hundred years after the

1916 Easter Rising that Yeats so dramatically memorializes in his famous poem, “Easter 1916,” we are able to see how Irish modernist writers represented the development of the Irish nation in their writing and sought to envision a new, mobilized Ireland.

We hope that this collection underscores the subtle but present political and artistic momentum of change that Joyce illustrates in his writing. We wonder if paralysis in *Dubliners* marks the quiet before the storm of twentieth-century national violence in Ireland. If Joyce was not only writing about paralysis but also questioning the movements that transform colonies into nations, he had his finger on the pulse of a very real twentieth-century conundrum. To be a nation is often to enter into a global community that resists cultural difference and change in the name of economic prosperity. Perhaps one of our new challenges is to redefine the concept of nation as a moving and constantly changing space—one that is neither paralyzed nor homogenous; one that, like Gabriel Conroy at the end of “The Dead,” recognizes that “the time had come” to begin a new journey of self-definition.⁹

NOTES

1. Fritz Senn, “Gnomon Inverted,” in *ReJoycing: New Readings of “Dubliners,”* ed. Rosa M. Bollettieri Bosinelli and Harold F. Mosher Jr. (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1998), 250.
2. *Ibid.*, 252, 254.
3. *Ibid.*, 250.
4. Anthony Burgess, “A Paralysed City,” in *James Joyce: “Dubliners” and “A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man”: A Casebook*, ed. Morris Beja (London: Macmillan, 1973), 234.
5. R. F. Foster, *Modern Ireland, 1600–1972* (London: Penguin, 1988), 477.
6. Andrew Gibson, *The Strong Spirit: History, Politics, and Aesthetics in the Writings of James Joyce, 1898–1915* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 34.
7. James Fairhall, *James Joyce and the Question of History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 70.
8. Fairhall, *Question of History*, 71.
9. James Joyce, *Dubliners*, in Norton Critical Edition, ed. Margot Norris (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2006), 194.

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“The Thin End of the Wedge”: How Things Start in *Dubliners*

Claire A. Culleton

This chapter stems from my larger concern with teaching Joyce’s *Dubliners*. I began to focus my work on *Dubliners* last year, when the book turned one hundred years old, and I had committed to giving a paper at a conference in the Netherlands about rethinking *Dubliners* at one hundred. What the other panelists and I tried to focus on were new and exciting readings of *Dubliners*, readings that could change conversations about the book. So I focused my attention on the metaphors of paralysis that scholars invariably invoke when referring to the characters and events in Joyce’s book, because I thought that the metaphor of paralysis was at best no longer useful and, at its worst, was making the criticism on *Dubliners* susceptible to the same paralytic malady.

I began by focusing on an expression that captured my imagination in *Dubliners*, “the thin end of the wedge.” This, one of my favorite expressions in *Dubliners*, comes in “Ivy Day in the Committee Room,” when Old Jack implies to Mr. Henchy, after Henchy offers the young delivery boy a bottle of stout for his troubles, that this is how it all starts: “That’s the way it begins,” Jack says, to which Henchy adds, “The thin end of the wedge,” both men suggesting that this is the beginning of the young boy’s

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predictable alcoholism.¹ It is a relatively obscure expression in the United States, one derived from logging and forestry practices—the thick end of a wedge is hammered continuously and the thin end steadily widens the opening until the log falls apart, splits. Terence Brown explains the implication of this proverbial phrase in his 1992 Penguin edition of *Dubliners*, saying that once the first step is taken, “there is no going back.”² Eric Partridge, the godfather of hunting down clichés, word origins, and the meanings of underworld or slang phrases, says of “the thin end of the wedge” that it means “the beginning of an influence, the creation of a precedent,”³ the establishment of a pattern. When I started to consider the thin end of the wedge and its implication that “That’s the way it begins,” and that there is “no going back,” I wondered, “*Is there no going back in Dubliners?*” If the expression also points to the beginning of an influence and the establishment of a pattern, let me look, I said, to see what’s beginning, who’s being influenced, and what precedents and patterns are being created. In other words, how do things start in *Dubliners*?

We know the book starts with the sentence, “There was no hope for him this time: it was the third stroke,”⁴ and we know that due to his general paresis, the priest had suffered “the inexorable inroads of disintegration,” as Jack Morgan puts it in *Joyce’s City*, suggesting that Flynn was “a human subject becoming unmade”⁵ before the boy’s very eyes. In the early twentieth century, physical paralysis was a real problem for people living in Joyce’s Dublin, whether, like the priest, they suffered from sexually transmitted diseases, the later stages of which caused inflammation of the brain and led to dementia and paralysis, or whether they were afflicted with alcoholism or any of the other many diseases that affected the body and compromised or severely affected one’s mobility. Yet nineteenth-century Ireland, too, was plagued by symptomatic paralytic conditions brought on by surviving the Famine, conditions such as muteness, senselessness, and stupefaction. Andrew Gibson in *The Strong Spirit: History, Politics, and Aesthetics in the Writings of James Joyce 1898–1915* suggests that the stories in *Dubliners* reflect Joyce’s understanding of post-Famine pathology and writes that “At some level, Joyce knew that he was dealing with a culture still stupefied by an episode of historical psychosis”⁶ and that his stories expose “the ongoing seismic tremors of the Famine.”⁷

The trope of paralysis can also be linked with the “tired air” hardly circulating throughout Dublin, notes Saikat Majumdar in *Prose of the World: Modernism and the Banality of Empire*:

The musty, long-enclosed air in the houses in the blind street in ‘Araby,’ ‘the odor of dusty cretonne’ in Eveline’s nostrils, the sentences copied ad infinitum by the clerk Farrington, and the provincial Irish culture so feared by Gabriel Conroy all breathe the tired air held prisoner by the claustrophobic and iterative life of colonial Ireland, banished to the margins of modernity under the rule of Stephen’s ‘two masters’—‘the Imperial British state ... and the holy Roman catholic and apostolic church.’⁸

So yes, there was real paralysis evident and lingering in Joyce’s Dublin, and it was especially compounded by the slow, sclerotic responses of the Dublin Corporation to address dangerous housing situations, drainage problems, or street and tenement sanitation. The National Archives notes that “the death rate in Dublin per thousand was 22.3” according to the 1911 census, adding that in 1911, “nearly 26,000 families lived in inner-city tenements and 20,000 of these lived in just one room” that was “filthy, overcrowded, disease-ridden, and teeming with malnourished children.”⁹ Joyce’s stories maintain an organic aspect of this sort of paralysis, and his use of the clinical term *paresis* indicates the greatness of the stagnancy affecting his characters; but equally important, Joyce also emphasizes a tension between the stagnancy and the movement he saw afoot in Dublin. This is why I argue that insisting only on treating the paralysis in the stories discourages readers from seeing the incredible movement that was alive and moving about Dublin as Joyce wrote these stories.

For example, the young narrator keeps gazing up at the priest’s window, looking for a sign to indicate whether the priest has died yet. He says, “Every night as I gazed up at the window I said softly to myself the word *paralysis*,”¹⁰ but are we to assume that this book is a series of stories about hopelessness and paralysis simply because these words appear on the first page? The boy also focuses attention on the word *gnomon*, a geometrical figure of a parallelogram or rectangle that has a corner missing. Critical attention has fetishized this word, too, leading readers to believe that in every story, a piece is broken off, something is missing, begging our compulsion to figure out what “it” is.

Typical students can get bored very easily reading the stories in *Dubliners*. Mine, at least, come to class complaining that “nothing happens” in these stories. “They’re sooooo boring!” they cry. Let us rethink these stories, and see if we are willing to consider moving away from interpretations that focus negative attention on character immovability and incompleteness;

because as we know, these stories are anything but boring, and instead of “nothing happening” in them, there is frenzied activity going on above and beneath the surface in each of them. Any reiteration in the classroom, then, to suggest that the pallor of paralysis hangs over each of these stories paralyzes the students’ imaginations, and blinds them (and us) to all of the excitement and vigorous action that is in each of the stories. But the trope of paralysis is trapped underneath all those sedimented layers of one hundred years’ of critical interpretation.

Another problem, when teaching Joyce, is compounded by the unimaginative, stock interpretations of *Dubliners* that students easily access on the Internet. Many of them come to class already terrified about reading Joyce—they have heard so much about how difficult he is, how “symbolic” all of his works are—that they are compelled by that fear to search out information about the stories in anticipation of class discussions, or sometimes, to replace having to read the stories themselves. So they go to websites that supply helpful, but entrenched, interpretations about the stories that supposedly make reading *Dubliners* easier to comprehend: sites like sparknotes.com or cliffnotes.com, and so forth, that normally focus discussion on the themes of escape, paralysis, hopelessness, and Joyce’s contempt for Dublin and for the Catholic Church, among other things. The sites are rarely updated and represent canonical readings at their worst. For example, simply Googling the terms “paralysis dubliners” in lower case letters brings back 130,000 results in 0.59 seconds.¹¹ Indeed, the Internet is littered with information on *Dubliners* that links the work to paralysis. Our students come to accept these interpretations as a kind of gospel truth—they internalize them—and so these age-old readings become pedestrian, conventional, stock. That is a big problem. Most sites on any given story in *Dubliners* will refer to the paralysis of its main character, or of its narrative, or to the congestion of the city of Dublin itself, and use the metaphor of paralysis as a starting point or a platform from which to launch readings. But the reading cannot be new or engaging if it proceeds from such an established point. I’d like to see these readings destabilized and dismantled.

The book opens with the narrator of “The Sisters” recalling the influence Father Flynn had on him as a young boy. “He had taught me a great deal,” he says.¹² He had taught him how to pronounce Latin properly. He had told him about the catacombs and Napoleon Bonaparte and explained the different vestments worn by the priests and the meaning of the different ceremonies of the Mass. He used to “put [him] through the responses

of the Mass,” which he had made him learn by heart.¹³ This certainly establishes the beginning of what would be Flynn’s steady influence on the boy—his hammering away at the thick end of the wedge—to instruct and to indoctrinate the young boy toward the priesthood. After all, the boy’s uncle, Jack, notes that Father Flynn “had a great wish” for the boy.¹⁴

Just as Father Flynn instructed the young boy, Joyce instructed his future readers on ways to interpret *Dubliners*; and for little more than one hundred years now, readers have been connecting Joyce’s *Dubliners* stories with paralysis, tipped off not only by the book’s opening line about the priest’s stroke, but also by Joyce’s early, 1904 letter to Constantine Curran where he wrote of his book, “I call the series *Dubliners* to betray the soul of that hemiplegia or paralysis which many consider a city.”¹⁵ The word *paralysis* also appears on the first page of the opening story, “The Sisters.” Yet for all the declarations and assertions made by critics and readers about paralysis in *Dubliners*, it is really remarkable that at the beginning of each of the fifteen stories, something is starting, something is beginning, something is about to happen; and it is this start—the thin end of the wedge prying through to something and getting hammered and hammered as each story develops—that “determine[s] the whole aftercourse” of each character’s life, as Joyce would later write in *Ulysses* when Stephen Dedalus is asked to come up with an original story, “something with a bite in it.”¹⁶

As Stephen imagines the start of his story, he is distracted by the dramatic pause that J.J. O’Molloy inserts into his story, the one about Seymour Bushe’s speech on the law of evidence. Stephen makes note of the pause, thinking, “Pause. J. J. O’Molloy took out his cigarette case. False lull. Something quite ordinary.”¹⁷ The “false lull” apparently inspires Stephen to open his story with a similarly ordinary lull: “Messenger took out his matchbox thoughtfully and lit his cigar.”¹⁸ Stephen’s story starts badly, yet it determines everything that follows.¹⁹ Colm Tóibín also discusses the “aftercourse” of characters’ lives in his 2012 introduction to *Dubliners*, noting that of Eveline, “Her life will *turn* on the thing which did *not* happen, which might have been,”²⁰ meaning, she never got on that boat with Frank. She never eloped with Frank. She chickened out. She was “paralyzed” by her own fear, critics have argued for decades. In her case, the thin end of the wedge that would pry her away from her home, her job, and her family begins hammering in once Frank elbows his way into her life and offers her an alternative one. That is the start of something, an influence, a precedent.

If we focus on the beginnings of each story, how things start, we might be surprised to see that each of the main characters is starting something in each story, a discovery that in itself contradicts the standard readings that focus on paralysis in *Dubliners*. This was one of the things I noticed in my rereading the book last year: in each story, something is beginning to get underway, something is starting. In “The Sisters,” Father Flynn is starting to die. In “An Encounter,” the boys are starting their day of adventure seeking. In “Araby,” the young boy is starting to fall in love with Mangan’s sister. In “Eveline,” the evening is beginning to invade the avenue. Eveline has finished writing her letters and is about to meet Frank at the North Wall. She is starting to consider another life for herself. “Everything changes,”²¹ she notes. In “After the Race,” the race is over, but the night’s festivities are just beginning. In “Two Gallants,” Corley and Lenihan set into motion their final exploitation of the slavey. In “The Boarding House,” Mrs. Mooney is planning her afternoon’s maneuvering of Bob Doran. She is beginning, in fact, to get her daughter off her hands. Things are starting for Bob Doran, too: Doran is beginning to think he’s being had, and at the thick end of *that* wedge is marriage: “Once you are married,” his instinct told him, “you are done for.”²² Mrs. Mooney, Polly, and the pugilistic Jack are sure to hammer the wedge in deep, leaving Doran stuck with only one tenable position from which to meet Mrs. Mooney’s demands for reparations: marrying Polly. In “A Little Cloud,” the story begins with movement, too. Chandler is starting off on his trip to meet up with Gallaher, whom he’d been thinking about since lunchtime. “For the *first time* in his life,” we are told, “he felt himself superior to the people he passed” on his way to Corless’s. Gallaher will get Chandler all “liquor[ed] up,”²³ and Chandler will go home and start to hate his life. “Counterparts” begins with Farrington being summoned—the start of his being scolded for not having the Bodley-Kirwan contract ready by four o’clock. In “Clay,” the women have finished their tea, and the cook and the dummy begin to clear away the tea-things. This indicates that Maria can go change her clothes and start off on her trip to Joe’s house. In “A Painful Case,” Mr. Duffy “finds himself sitting beside two ladies in the Rotunda.”²⁴ So begins his fraught relationship with Emily Sinico and her daughter, Mary. “Ivy Day in the Committee Room” opens as we see the men beginning to wait restlessly for their “spondulics” and the basket of stout. In “A Mother,” Mrs. Kearney starts to court Hoppy Holohan and begins inserting herself into the management of the musical program. She arranges the program carefully so that it hastens and highlights the start

of her daughter Kathleen’s musical triumph in Dublin, but it is actually the start of Kathleen’s mismanaged and fleeting career. In “Grace,” Tom Kernan is just beginning to come around after his mysterious fall down the stairs. And finally, in “The Dead,” the Misses Morkans’s party is starting, and Lily is already beginning to lose her breath. Instead of paralysis, then, what we have at the beginning of each story in the collection is incredible movement.

All of the action, all of the beginnings, counteract arguments readers have been making for decades about character paralysis, stasis, and paralytic tension in Dublin, because there is a lot of movement, lots of things happening, at the start of each story. By continuing to frame *Dubliners* as if it were a still life, as Oona Frawley describes the collection in her Introduction to *Memory Ireland*, calling the book “a purposeful still-life (governed by paralysis after all),”²⁵ we disservice the book. Once we embrace the reality that the city and its characters are filled with movement, we find ourselves in a new Dublin imaginary, one not crippled or stalled by moral and intellectual paralysis but one rife with possibilities, optimistic, even. Morgan cautions, “This affirmative dynamic is notable in *Dubliners* ... but is lost sight of if we see the book only as so many narratives of paralysis.”²⁶ “Eveline,” he writes, “a narrative of inertia if any is, turns on Eveline Hill’s yearning for a decent life: ‘Why should she be unhappy?’ she asks herself.”²⁷ “An Encounter,” too, promises optimism and excitement, for example, even as the boys plan their day of hooky the night before. Determined to “break out of the weariness of school-life for one day at least,”²⁸ the narrator, with Leo Dillon and Mahony, makes “the last arrangements,” and then he reports that by the time they broke away from each other for the night, they “were all vaguely excited.”²⁹ The next morning, as he waits for his friends at the Canal Bridge, his mood continues to climb, and he describes himself as “very happy,” drumming his fingers, even, as he waits:

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. The granite stone of the bridge was beginning to be warm and I began to pat it with my hands in time to an air in my head. I was very happy.³⁰

It is difficult to trust this boy’s optimism because it seems the product of overacting, as if he were trying to deflect attention away from what would be obvious to many passersby: that he is a young boy, alone, and