A Beginning: Signification, Story, and Discourse in Joyce's "The Sisters"[1]

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Just as beginnings in fiction delimit possibilities, they simultaneously awaken expectations; in beginnings the signifying structures of art and life are surely similar. A number of narrative beginnings have become signatures in our memories of the literary landscape: "Mother died today" or "Happy families are all alike" or "riverrun, past Eve and Adam's." How beginnings become beginnings is an equally compelling question for life as well as art. It is perhaps arbitrary to call "The Sisters"a beginning and confine one's discussion only to the beginning of the story at that, for its composition in its various stages was not Joyce's initial creative activity. Yet "The Sisters" is surely a beginning in Joyce's lifework: in this story in its final version Joyce's major importance as a writer is initially revealed. Its exploration of the resources of language and its method of construction and intention also reveal, if only in embryonic form, the direction not only of Joyce's art but on of the formative stages in the unfolding of modern literature. "The Sisters" is important as the beginning of an entire trajectory of literary accomplishment in prose from *Dubliners*, *A Portrait*, *Ulysses*, and finally to *Finnegans Wake*; therefore, it is worthwhile to explore more precisely a few aspects of this beginning.

There are only subtle indications to the contrary that during the planning and in the first published version of "The Sisters" Joyce was not predominately concerned with his subject matter, both personal and historical—Dublin, Dubliners, and his own personal attitude toward the city and its subjects.[2] His letters reveal that wounds done to him both real and

1. From Tzvetan Todorov and the Russian Formalists, I draw partially my distinctions: *story* comprises a logic of actions and a syntax of characters, and *discourse* comprises the tenses, and aspects and modes of the narrative. These are discussed in much more detail in Todorov's *The Poetics of Prose* (Ithaca, New York, 1977).

2. The most comprehensive discussion of the various versions of "The Sisters" is in Florence. L. Walzl's essay, "Joyce's 'The Sisters': A Development," 112, 10(1973), 375–421; see especially page 376. *The James Joyce Archive*, Garland Press, contains reproductions of the Cornell and Yale manuscripts as well as a photographic reproduction of the story as it appeared in *The Irish Homestead*. Throughout I will cite from The Viking Critical Library edition of *Dubliners*, ed. Robert Scholes and A. Walton Litz (New York, 1969), when referring to the final version as it appears in *Dubliners*.

imagined were very much on his mind. It is only in the later stages of the genesis of the stories that we get a strong sense that Joyce shared the modernist aspiration of Flaubert that subject and author be refined out of existence. *Dubliners* was not to be a work of "almost no subject," "depen dent," as Flaubert said, "on nothing external, which would be held together by the strength of its style." Joyce indicated that these stories of Dublin life would be told with "scrupulous meanness," and written in "tiny little sentences," phrases which addressed economy of language more than tone, but the subject was of foremost importance. His concern at this stage was primarily with "moral history," the world of Dublin and its people—Dublin because it "seemed to be the centre of paralysis." The title of the stories is itself a "synecdoche," as David Lodge has pointed out, in "that the book describes a representative cross-section or sample of the life of the Irish Capital."[3] There is, in short, little to indicate from Joyce's letters and the first appearance of "The Sisters" that the work would not fall primarily within the traditions of late nineteenth-century realism.[4] *Dubliners* in its final form, however, while retaining many of the conventions of this tradition, is a work of a different literary order. Like a new species in its evolution, it retains several of the more visible and commonplace characteristics but is essentially different. The various versions of "The Sisters," and especially the opening paragraph, reflect in their evolution not only the expanding dimensions Joyce gradually conceived for *Dubliners*, but the increasingly mature vision of his art.

Lodge sees *Dubliners* as a transitional work, lying between the metonymic and metaphoric poles of Roman Jakobson's scheme: "the stories do not quite satisfy the criteria of intelligibility and coherence normally demanded of the classic readerly text."[5] Lodge's language seems itself schematized, but he is working within an important and cogently rendered argument. He carefully supports and expands his point by citing Barthes' definition from S/Z where Barthes contends that in the readerly text, the dominant nineteenth-century model governed by metonymy, "everything holds together." As Barthes goes on to explain, "the readerly is controlled by the principle of non-contradiction, but by multiplying solidarities, by stressing at every opportunity the *compa tible* nature of circumstances, by attaching narrated events together with a kind of logical 'paste,' the discourse carries this

3. David Lodge, *The Modes of Modern Writing* (London, 1977), p.125. I am generally indebted to Lodge's study, and I feel his work is an important bridge between recent European and Anglo-American criticism.

4. The Viking Critcal Library Edition conveniently reproduces the first complete manuscript version of "The Sisters" which is a similar version to the one published in *The Irish Homestead* (Yale ms.)

5. Lodge, p.125.

principle to the point of obsession."[6] Barthes' own text turns from here to an almost strident argument against the readerly text. Later, this essay will look at several other features of Barthes' arguments, but there is another aspect of this transition to mention and that is the literary—historical context of Joyce's generative process. Herbert Schneidau has made observations similar to Lodge's concerning *Dubliners* as a transitional work within this context of the general development of modernist writing.

> As we all know in Joyce's later writings Dublin, including the associated themes of betrayal and paralysis, remained the "subject" while the aims of the portrayal were universalized in almost unprecedented ways. Consequently the notion of "subject" mutates almost beyond recognition; no one had ever used a city in such ways before. In the *Dubliners* stories Joyce had been willing to risk severe attenuation of apprehensible plot, story, action. Obviously he anticipated with some relish complaints that these stories were not "about" anything. He knew what they were about. But even Joyce's friends were nervous. Ezra Pound felt himself obliged to come to the defense of "Araby" as "better" than a story: "it is a vivid waiting." In *A Portrait* and *Ulysses*, subjects are specificially much more in evidence, but Joyce is so evasive about climaxes, "big" scenes, and othe standard developments as to make convention—minded readers very uneasy. The hesitant and patronizing reader's report on *A Portrait* by Edward Garnett is probably typical.
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> Joyce is supposed to have said, in later years, that he wrote about Dublin because "if I can get to the heart of Dublin I can get to the heart of all the cities of the world. In the particular is contained the universal."This is a highly ingenious statement of a rationale that carries the Western theory of representation as far as it will go, but in some ways it is misleading and fails to reach into the heart of the Modernist strategy of particularization. For one thing, Joyce was not portraying some essence of *civitas* in his work, though that aspect enters into his ironies. And even though Pound chimed in with a quotation from an unnamed Belgian who said that *A Portrait* was"as true of my country as of Ireland," Joyce cannot be said to have chosen as subject peculiar parochialisms of modern culture. The reverence of Modernism for precise renderings of particulars demands still further rationalization.[7]

Somewhere between the original conception of the *Dubliners* stories and their completion, Joyce moved along a path similar to the one that was to transform the manuscript *Stephen Hero*, a prose work in the tradition of late nineteenth—century realism and naturalism, into *A Portrait*, a novel that retains many conventions of the realistic text, such as the Christmas dinner scene, but is dominately a modernist text. *Dubliners* is itself a beginning, and the opening paragraph of the final version of "The Sisters" makes clear that for Joyce, although preserving the facade of this tradition, the stronger impulse was to take seriously the overture of John's Gospel, "In the begin-

6. Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, trans. Richard Miller (New York, 1974), p.156.

7. Herbert N. Schneidau, "Style and Sacrament in Modernist Writing," *The Georgia Review*, 31 (1977), 433—34.

ning was the word." (This "beginning" itself echoes the opening line of Genesis that reveals how God brough an orderly universe out of primordial chaos.) Among other things, the beginning of "The Sisters," while not rashly innovative, places radical emphasis on language and in turn on the text as text. In *Dubliners* Joyce begins to give priority to the world over the world.

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

Upon reflection, while attending a Greek Mass in Trieste, the first reader of "The Sisters" thought its early version "remarkable."[8] Once it was finally written, Joyce almost left it at that, content to smile cunningly and pare his fingernails, but not so subsequent readers; by and large those who have written about it affirm the work's imaginative inconsistencies, curious ambiguities, gaps in the discourse, and the general uncertainty it casts on every level rom beginning to end. And if the beginnig of a text is, as Edward Said has so eloquently told us, "the entrance to what it offers and the first step in the intentional production of meaning,"[9] readers need to explore sufficiently these initial codes, the ensemble of rhetorical markers (the code of connotations), the stylistic codes, the conventional structures—in other words, the full range of the linguistic activity of the text.

The most apparent conclusion, among many, that can be drawn from a study of the evolution of "The Sisters" in its progressive versions is its movement away from the "readerly" text. In reworking "The Sisters" Joyce became increasingly aware of the potential of language itself. This awareness was to change the course of his writing, and, although this point is

8. Letter to Stanislaus Joyce, 4 April 1905 in *Letters of James Joyce,* Vol. II, ed. Richard Ellmann (New York, 1966), 86.

9. Edward Said's brilliant work, *Beginnings* (New York, 1975), has brought the whole idea of literary beginnings to mind with such force and possibility that I have yet to assimilate the work's impact on my thinking, but it is considerable.

obvious when we read *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*, his larger assumptions concerning language are clearly visible in *A Portrait*. As Richard Poirier has observed, "the cultural implications of Stephen's language are from first to last what concerned Joyce."[10] From Stephen's early preoccupation with words, to his later posturings in the style of Pater, the reader is drawn constantly to a wide range of implications of the language of the text as it calls attention to itself.

Much has been made of the opening paragraph of "The Sisters" because there is so much to engage and perplex, so much more suggested by the language than the events and circumstances of the text seem to reveal. The first paragraph of "The Sisters" is more than the narrative event which opens the story; it draws the initial line of a larger narrative enclosure, and is every bit as much the beginning of the first movement in the orchestration of *Dubliners* itself. It has already been noted that the various versions of "The Sisters" evolved with Joyce's expanding aims, but some were more immediate, such as his desire to integrate the stories thematically as well as chronologically. Following the collective title of the stories is the slightly foregrounded title of the first, "The Sisters,"which he retained throughout all the versions because of its special importance. Initially the title seems ironic in its reference to the vestal virgins Eliza and Nannie, but in the final version it becomes more prominently the first instance of the verbal playfulness of the text in its Elizabeth—Ann, Beth—Annie, Bethany, Lazarus, death associations.[11] There is a persistent self—consciousness in the language of the entire text. The language, too, shadows and alludes to biblical and liturgical references which generate further signification and meaning in the narrative, and these will be discussed later.

Without carrying this first association too far, we can at least see that the title itself offers the first indication of the self—conscious nature of the text. Perhaps it is more obviously so in another way—negatively, for the title is curiously inappropriate for a story that ostensibly narrates the mysterious relationship and the effects of old Father Flynn's death on the young boy narrator. The title signals us away from the traditional slice of—life, naturalistic sketch that one could expect from the realistic collective title of the stories. Critics who have read "The Sisters" as a realistic text have had enormous difficulty accounting for the title. Even those who declare it as a signaled break from the realistic mode and a gesture of the story's symbolic portent, find the title awkward and even unsatisfactory. The enigmatic title of the first story conflicts with the precise naturalistic title of the collection. From the start "The Sisters" begins to reveal meaning in ways that go

10. Richard Poirier, *Robert Frost* (New York, 1977), p.33.

11. The biblical possibilities of this associatin were first pointed out by Peter Spielberg in his brief article, "'The Sisters': No Christ at Bethany," 112, 3 (1966), 192—95.

beyond the consistencies of a readerly text. Further, it is Joyce's intention to combat the assumptions of such a text. He would write in a mode that would reflect the realities of a new century and create what we have come to call the modernist text which depended upon a new set of cultural assumptions and has been open to charges of obscurity. With "The Sisters" Joyce has just begun a deconstructive process, and the title is the first announcement of a new awareness of the potentiality of language.

To acknowledge the opening paragraph as an overture for the themes, conflicts, and tensions that were to be evoked and stated again and again, not only in the story itself, but throughout all of *Dubliners*, has been critical commonplace.[12] That this final version of the beginning is more than an introduction or overture to the story and the collection has come more slowly to assert itself on the critical consciousness. The virtual nature of the work pointed to so consciously by the text only slowly reduced the certainty and compulsion of critics to assign meanings and thus ultimately abridge the range of possibilities.[13] In these early readings with their rigid and frequently fanciful assignment of symbolic meanings, the potential of the language field itself was abridged, and the fuller range of the text's amplitude was ignored.[14] The asymetrical activities of the text were excluded, too, in the interest of finding exact correspondences. Much of the criticism of "The Sisters" in its desire to account for an exact relationship between symbolic and realistic elements fails to construct a grid which allows for the interplay of the various levels of the text, both horizontal and vertical.[15]

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12. The most suggestive article on the language of "The Sisters," and still one of the most provocative generally, is Fritz Senn's "'He was too Scrupulous Always,' Joyce's 'The Sisters,'" 112, 2(1965), 66–71. His article is based on the conviction "that even in his earliest published prose Joyce wrote in a most complex, heavily allusive style, different from its later convoluted intricacies in *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake* in degree only" (p.66). For articles which discuss the previous criticism see especially: Donald T. Torchiana, "The Opening of *Dubliners*: A Reconsideration," *Irish University Review*, 1 (1971), 149–60; Bernard Benstock, "'The Sisters' and the Critics," 112 4(1966), 32–35.

13. Although I am not in full agreement with Wolfgang Iser's views, his discussion of the virtual nature of the literary text I find illuminating; see *The Art of Reading* (Baltimore, 1978).

14. It is pointless here to list those critics to whom I am referring. Rather, the following discussions of "The Sisters" I find most illuminating and interesting and not necessarily so because I am in accord with their views: Lodge and Senn have been previously cited; Charles Peake, *James Joyce: The Citizen As Artist* (London, 1977); Therese Fischer, "From Reliable to Unreliable Narrator: Rhetorical Changes in Joyce's 'The Sisters,'" 112, 9(1971), 85–92. Arnold Goldman's of the story in his *The Joyce Paradox* (Evanston, 1966) is especially revealing in its argument that the boy is not permanently ensnared by the paralysis that pervades the adult world.

15. This point obviously needs further development because of the assumptions it makes regarding the nature of the text and the relationship of the reader to the text, but

Serveral recent critics of *Dubliners* stories, such as Robert Scholes in his essay on "Eveline," have attempted to account for the wider potential of the texts by their use of different theoretical models. Scholes's essay, for example, is as much a small—model demonstration of the critical resources in the theories and methods of Todorov, Genette, and Barthes as it is a reading of the story. His application of Barthes'codes is an attempt to demonstrate the deeper and more various levels of the text and their associations both within and outside the text, especially as they relate to language, mode, genre and culture relationships, and assumptions of the author.[16] The present essay avoids Barthes' terminology and does not attempt to apply his codes rigidly to the beginning of "The Sisters," nor does the writer ascribe to their frequently arbitrary application in *S/Z*. Nevertheless, the reader of Barthes will recognize in this essay an agnostic's imperfect debt along with the measure of doubt: Barthes's work does provide important avenues of adventure in his engagement with a text. And it is Barthes who also cautions us to refrain from structuring a text in large masses and not to delegate a text to a final ensemble, to an ultimate structure.

Given the special importance Joyce assigned to beginnings, the heightened role of the beginning as part of the fundamental boundary and frame in a verbal artistic text, and the beginning as a defining and modeling function, it is worthwhile to confirm this theoretical significance. Jurij Lotman, for example, has assigned crucial importance to the coding function of the beginning of the narrative text:

> When a reader starts reading a book or a spectator watches the beginning of a film or play, he may not know for sure, or may not know at all, into what system the proffered text has been encoded. He is naturally interested in getting a total picture of the text's genre and style and those typical artistic codes which he should activate in his consciousness in order to comprehend the text. On the whole, he derives such information from the beginning.[17]

The beginning paragraph of "The Sisters" not only propels the reader into the various levels of the text and the special network of codes it generates, but it functions as a model for the entire story; the paradoxical realism, the hint of an extravagant presence of the artifice, the allusive tracery of the architectonics which calls attention to the text as text—all of this as though

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to do so here would require extended discussion. An extreme position on the nature of this relationship can be found in Maria Corti, *An Introduction to Literary Semiotics* (Bloomington and London, 1978).

16. Robert Scholes, "Semiotic Approaches to a Fictional Text: Joyce's 'Ev eline,'" 112, 16(Fall 78/Winter 79), 65—80. Briefly, Barthes' codes are proairetic, the code of actions; hermneutic, code of enigmas; cultural, the text's references to things already known; connotative, the location of themes; and symbolic fields.

17. Jurij Lotman, *The Structure of the Artistic Text* (Ann Arbor, 1977), p.216.

reality itself were dependent upon artful consciousness—a mode that forecasts an entire avenue of discourse as well as story. The responses to this kind of text have, of course, been varied, but it has been generally agreed that from this beginning the work hovers between the two fundamental modes of writing, the metaphoric and metonymic.[18] To see the balance Joyce achieves between these two modes has been the principle aim of the best criticism of this work. Rather than reconcile these two metaphysical orders, it is a more open and far richer experience to ponder their interplay in Joyce's text. Our response comes through engagement not conclusiveness—suspension, rather than closure; suggestion rather than assertion. It comes from situating itself at a beginning of the crossroads of the two fundamental modes of writing. As Colin MacCabe has pointed out, from the earliest stages of his career, Joyce gave special attention to the correspondence between word and world, and the many languages or discourses of the text. MacCabe cites the early paper, "Drama and Life," where Joyce draws such distinctions:

> Joyce sets himself against a drama which comes complete with its own interpretation and caught within the stereotype of its age, a drama which Joyce describes as purveyor supplying plutocrat with a 'parody of life which the latter digests medicinally in a darkened theatre.' For Joyce, real drama is to be found in works, like those of Ibsen, which give us the pleasure'not of hearing it read out to us but of reading it for ourselves, piecing the various parts and going closer to see wherever the writing on the parchment is fainter or less legible.' The contrast between a text which determines its own reading and a text which demands an *activity* of reading was central to Joyce from an early age.[19]

The first sentence of "The Sisters" turns us to the thought of death: "There was no hope for him this time: it was the third stroke."With its tone of finality and certainty, this opening begins the circle of death for *Dubliners*, a circle clear enough from the last lines of the final story,"The Dead,"and clearer still from the pulpit rhetoric of the priest that closes "Grace," which at one stage in Joyce's plan was to be the final story, when he advises his audience to set right their accounts with God. Besides the emphasis on the word "time" in the first half of this sentence, the rhetorical arrangement and the colon give added emphasis to the temporal where death and dying are in the order of things, and fro mthe beginning of the story priesthood and death are aligned in some seemingly immutable way.

In the second sentence the boy narrator states that "night after night" he had passed the stricken priest's house (we, of course, do not yet know that the victim and object of his compulsive concentration is a priest; this

18. For an extended discussion of these two poles of writing, see David Lodge's work, cited earlier.

19. Colin MacCabe, *James Joyce and the Revolution of the Word* (London,1975), p.28.

information is inferred later in the paragraph). The intensity of his gaze narrows his focus to the "lighted square of window." The house with its lighted window begins to fill his imagination and memory. As Bachelard tells us, "in the most interminable of dialectics, the sheltered being gives perceptible limits to his shelter. He experiences the house in its reality and in its virtuality, by means of thought and dreams."[20] Because of the priest's illness, the narrator is excluded from the house, a house now protected and presided over by the two sisters, where the priest lies dying. A perspective both imaginary and actual begins to take place and will be sustained throughout the text; the levels of discourse are expanded. The antithesis of outside and inside is thus initiated, and it governs certain other textual arrangements and strategies which will be developed. From the outside, the narrator keeps his own vigil and studies the faint and even light from the window to look for a sign, "the reflection of candles on a darkened blind." Although we have had the religious foregrounding in the title, the candles and their part in the ritual of death offer the first overt suggestion of a religious element on any level.

Appropriately the religious significance is tied in with death from the first—here the candles would act for the boy, at least, as sentinels for the priest's death—and all forms of religious connotation, object, sacrament, and symbol are clustered and bonded. But equally important is the context of this overt religious association: the narrator says "I knew that two candles must be set at the head of a corpse." The word "must" alerts us from the first to a world where religious form will be mandatory and religious forms control behavior. This fact has already penetrated the boy's consciousness—a religion that places form over substance is to become a central theme of the story. Religious practices will be associated with malevolent paralysis, which with its symptom of perversity is an apt metaphor for a religion whose sacraments rather than outward signs of grace seem to have become not only arid rituals, but signs and gestures of a neurotic abandoned people. In rich detail the text plays almost systematically on the perversion of the Church's sacraments and rituals as a sympton of neurosis and haunting fear, but the very decadence of these church rituals and mysteries have drawn the boy compulsively to the priest. And this mysterious conversion of an almost metaphysical order is what attracts the power of the text's language, the force of its signs and meaning. The language associated with the boy and his descriptions of the priest, with its richness of connotation and possibility, stands in bold contrast to the pedestrian dialogue of the other characters.

The narrator also gives special emphasis to the frequency of the boy's visits to the lighted window—visits which seem to take on their own

20. Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (Boston, 1969), p.5.

repeated ritual: "Every night as I gazed up at the window I said softly to myself the word *paralysis.*" Each time he gazes upon this scene his memory and imagination go to the fears and secrets that the priest had evoked and passed on to him. The word "paralysis" is the first of a cluster of signifiers which begins within the hermeneutic code, whose meanings are not fully clarified either individually or collectively by the text. This signification, however, extends to other levels of the text. Colin MacCabe has observed that "the reader is introduced to a set of signifiers for which there is no interpretation except strangeness and an undefined evil."[21] The relationships of the words, "paralysis," "simony," and "gnomon," however, seem to foreground each other, by their arrangements as well as meaning, so that beyond the strangeness and undefined evil, there is also a bonding of religious practice with maleficence and perversion. This triad of words produces in the boy the emotions of fear and longing, and, if as MacCabe contends, the words are part of an opening which displays a "certain excess of the power of signification,"[22] they also support the inexplicable power over the narrator who is unable to assimilate in his consciousness their deadly charm and attraction for him. It is the confluence of meaning, only dimly understood by the boy and the reader, of these three words as much as their individual signification that generates their mystery, a mystery that sets up the mood and tone of the dream sequence which takes the boy "into some pleasant and vicious region." Words themselves not only have seductive power over him, but they signal the boy's separation from all of the other characters in the story and his alignment with the priest.

No matter how divergent their conclusion, those who have written about "The Sisters," and *Dubliners* generally, have sought to codify the various ways in which this first paragraph of the story generates meaning in its introduction of the various codes for the entire story and the collection itself. Primarily the discussions have centered on these three crucial words of the paragraph, "paralysis," "simony," and "gnomon." Because the words emerge from the boy's consciousness, many of the interpretations have centered their discussion exclusively on the significance of the words for the boy, hence confining their reading to only one level of the text's meaning. But the boy is only the figural medium of the fictional world. Seen only on the one level the words remain incomplete and illusive and in their shadowy significance for the boy they become so for the discourse as well. But beginning from different assumptions there are other possibilities for the reader to explore. It is, of course, in the boy's consciousness that the vague and mysterious connection between "paralysis," "simony," and "gnomon" begins, but their connotations as well as their clustering bring additional

21. MacCabe, p.34.
22. MacCabe, p.34.

semantic elements to the text, thus extending their significations.

The boy murmurs "paralysis" to himself each night as he gazes up at the window until it becomes almost a part of his nightly ritual, which gives the first clue that the sounds of words are as important to the boy as their semantic connotations and referential meanings. The two latter words are also triggered in his consciousness, initially at least, as much by their sounds as by their strange meaning for him. The word "gnomon," for example, seems to confirm the eminence of sound, and sound as meaning, for the word has only remote lexigraphical signification for the boy. But because of its remoteness it calls attention to the power of the word as word, and its geometrical meaning establishes another tracery throughout the text, but one independent of the boy's consciousness.

The emphasis on all three as words is enforced syntactically in that each is preceded by the same word, "word." But their signification extends to cultural and connotative codes as well as the hermeneutic. We draw them into a relationship by virtue of their syntactical locations as well as through the common strangeness they have for the boy, but more than this we are able from them to begin to "thematize" the text. Already alerted to the potential playfulness, extended ironies, and the latent verbal resources of this text, we are able to recognize as many critics have, that "simony" and "paralysis" when run together, as they are nearly so in the boy's mind, suggest the word "syphilis" and broaden the associative power of the vague air of corruption that undergirds the entire story and becomes thematic throughout *Dubliners*. Richard Ellmann first offered the hint of this disease, known as it was at the turn of the century as the general paralysis of the insane, and Burton A. Waisbren and Florence L. Walzl have concluded that Joyce deliberately implied that Father Flynn had central nervous system syphilis,[23] which is now described medically as "paresis." Their extreme interpretation takes suggestiveness to finality, but their analysis reveals the persistent strength of the associative possibilities and latent significations that the text renders. Mystery and suspicion are part of the language itself as well as the narrative it unfolds. Further, and equally important, is the way in which these three words initiate and establish, as the narrative eventually makes clear, a bond between the priest and the boy—a bond of fear and longing but nevertheless a union is initiated. This union lies submerged as well in the narrative and establishes something far more suggestive than the boy's own confused and vague association with the priest.

It can be mentioned at this point that the entire language of the opening paragraph also has a seminal foregrounding function which we realize retrospectively. The passage is immediately followed by the most trivial

23. Burton A. Waisbren and Florence L. Walzl, "Paresis and the Priest, James Joyce's Symbolic Use of Syphilis in 'The Sisters,'" *Annals of Internal Medicine*, 80 (1974), 758–62.

dialogue between Old Cotter and the boy's uncle as they reveal their vapid imaginations and verbal incapacities in contrast to the careful verbal ordering of the first paragraph, which, among so many other things, displays the boy's rich if puzzled fluency. The richness of language is not displayed again until the boy is alone in his room lying in bed between sleep and dream imagining the priest confessing to him. Richard Poirer, in contrasting the modernism of Frost to Eliot's and Joyce's, makes a broad and an important point about the form of a modernist text and cites this contrast in the language of "The Sisters" as an example:

> In saying that Joyce and Eliot were compelled by historical conditions while Frost, for the most part, was not, I do not mean that the form of their writings was predetermined by historical circumstances except as they and their readers came to *imagine* that this was the case. Temperamental or psychological alienation played a crucial part, so did a disenchantment with inherited literary forms, but both feelings preceded those broader encounters with historical plights which in the later works seem to be the source and justification for these feelings. "Modernist" skepticism about "any small man-made figure of order and concentration" is apparent in the earliest, least historically rooted and least allusive writings of Joyce and Eliot. Joyce's "The Sisters," in the contrast it establishes between the poetic elegance and balance of the young boy's language when he is alone in his bedroom as against the fracturing banalities of all other conversation in the story, could be a case in point.[24]

The long scene that concludes the story, dominated by the attenuated dialogue between the boy's aunt and Eliza with the latter's account of her brother's strange fate, reflects the same incapacity for language as the earlier dialogue. These sharp linguistic contrasts point not only to the text's emphasis on the language field, but contribute to the meaning of the larger cultural and thematic structure of the story.

The multiple dimensions of this beginning paragraph and the course that it sets for the entire verbal structure of the story derive in part from Joyce's obsessive autobiographical notions regarding the relationship of priesthood and artist, a relationship of central significance in *A Portrait.* Throughout his discussions in *Portrait,* Stephen constantly refers to the artist and his creation in religious and liturgical language and imagery. In a sense art was the performance of the artist of a sacred rite similar to the priest's at Mass. It is more than merely an analogy, it was partially an aesthetic source for what Joyce would come to define as the priesthood of art. The deeply religious and specifically Roman Catholic saturation of Joyce's texts have particular functions on various levels. All of his texts, in a way, are rooted in the assumption that art replaces religion in a fundamental way—not that art dissolves religious constructs, but that it uses them by reconstructing them. Joyce did not want to remove God from the cosmic structure, but he wanted

24. Poirier, pp.40–41.

for the artist God's power of creation.

In the same letter to Stanislaus in which he begins by telling his brother about attending the Greek Mass and recalling "The Sisters," Joyce is referring to the version of the story with the following beginning:

> Three nights in succession I had found myself in Great Britain Street at that hour, as if by providence. Three nights I had raised my eyes to that lighted square of window and speculated. I seemed to understand that it would occur at night. But in spite of the providence which had led my feet and in spite of the reverent curiosity of my eyes I had discovered nothing. Each night the square was lighted in the same way, faintly and evenly. It was not the light of candles so far as I could see. Therefore it had not occurred yet.
>
> On the fourth night at that hour I was in another part of the city. It may have been the same providence that led me there—a whimsical kind of providence—to take me at a disadvantage. As I went home I wondered was that square of window lighted as before or did it reveal the ceremonious candles in the light of which the Christian must take his last sleep. I was not surprised, then, when at supper I found myself a prophet.[25]

In this version the beginning of both story and discourse is much closer to the conventional mode of the realistic text, but the nexus between the boy and the priest is not nearly so clearly drawn. The boy is led to the priest's house by "providence," but the mystery and attraction that suffuses the language of the final version of the beginning is notably far less intense. A phrase of special interest in this earlier version is "I found myself a prophet." It is given an added measure of significance by a revealing passage in this same letter to Stanislaus when Joyce details the actions of the priest at the Greek Mass he was observing that brought his story to mind:

> The altar is not visible but at times the priest opens the gates and shows himself. He opens and shuts them about six times. For the Gospel he comes out of a side gate and comes down into the Chapel and reads out of a book. For the elevation he does the same. At the end when he has blessed the people shuts the gates: a boy comes running down the side of the chapel with a large tray full of little lumps of bread. The priest comes after him and distributes the lumps to scrambling believers. Damn droll! The Greek priest has been taking a great eyeful out of me: two haruspices.[26]

Whether or not he recalled this experience in the later rewriting of "The Sisters" we do not know. But the union Joyce draws between himself and the priest in his letter becomes far more pronounced and important in the final version of the text, especially the beginning. It is in the priest's performance of the ritual Greek Mass, a ritual Joyce found exotic and even flambouyant, that Joyce identifies himself with the priest with the word "haruspices." The roles of artist and priest are joined in the word which means one who foretells events through observations of natural phenomena,

25. The Viking Critical Edition, pp.243—44.
26. *Letters*, II, 86—87.

a prophet. As the simple bread through the priest's power becomes the body of Christ and retains the appearance of bread as he offers it to the people, so, too, does the artist transform life to art through language. The priest gives significance to the most mundane, so, too, for Joyce does the artist. Language has the same resources and power of the sacraments such as the Eucharist. Herbert Schneidau has commented that: "The characteristic Joycean strategy, embodying the sacramentalist ideal, is expanison: a bare nugget or kernel is transformed, by a kind of explosion of the stylistic potentialities latent within it, into a many membered, multilayered construction. For from collapsing levels of significance, Joyce seeks constantly to add to them."[27] This trategy of development in Joyce's texts is apparent in the beginning of "Th Sisters," especially in the final version where we begin to see this attempt to create a text of multilayered construction through the emphasis on the resources of language itself. The style of the entire story, for example, not only reinforces the themes, it also discovers and manifests them.

As Hugh Kenner has told us, Joyce's earlier fiction is filled with discarded portraits of himself, portraits he might have been or had the potential to become. The first of these is the boy narrator who is simultaneously enchanted and repelled by the priest and his office, an office in which the priest is a failure, for the priest is the leader of ritual and a community's ritual functions to support and draw it together. For the priest the burden, however, is to heavy; the sacrament becomes a perverse sign of his enfeeblement, his incapacity to perform the rites and rituals of his office. Joyce the artist, the creator of form through the medium of language, views the boy through a retrospective prism which generates not only a figural medium, but an authenticity of focus from which to view the fictional world. Such a perspective, once realized, forged a new beginning for his art and what was to become a dominate art of the century.

The changes that took place in Joyce's progressive versions of "The Sisters" represent an initial and tentative movement—and it is no more than that when considered in light of *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*— from the metonymic to the metaphoric, from the "readerly" to the "writerly," from the realistic/naturalistic to the modernist text, but we are able to see from this development a growing and abiding concern on the part of the author for the nature and potentiality of language itself. Joyce saw language not only as a vehicle but as the informing structure for art in all of its communicative capacities. In "The Sisters" he was writing language over a dead ritual, a dead communion of people, but, at the same time, he was using the motive power of the sacrament as sign analogously to the power of the word as sign in art. However much the boy in this story is a victim,

27. Schneidau, p.441.

he has escaped the fate of the adult world and the priest, because he is attuned to the potential and transforming power of the word itself, and this story can be read at one level as the fulfillment of Joyce's own conversion. The beginning of "The Sisters is, then, as we noted earlier, an embryonic stage, or maybe only an imperfect impulse, in Joyce's mature development, but it, nevertheless, signals the direction his art would take in its own radical restatement of the natue of art and language. If the reader of *Ulysses* must differentiate constantly between the linguistic possibilities of style and the possible nature of the world, the reader of *Finnegans Wake* is aware from the beginning, wherever the beginning is, that the world has become the word, hence with *FinneganstWake* the beginning is only in the world.