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Gnomon as a Narrative Strategy: Rereading "The Sisters"*

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I.

Ever since the original publication of *Dubliners*, the three signifiers at the beginning of "The Sisters," "paralysis," "simony" and "gnomon," have intrigued Joyce's readers. In the vast accumulation of research on the story, no one seems to deny the thematic significance of paralysis and simony in the collection because these key terms penetrate the negative aspects of Dublin life. Gnomon, the most inscrutable concept, however, still challenges daring readers, who struggle to unravel this striking, enigmatic term. Among them are Philip Herring, Sonja Bašić and David Weir, just to name a few. Herring says that Joyce's texts are essentially gnomonic because, he argues, Joyce tries to disguise his narrative through fragmentary language (Herring x). Bašić also points out the imperceptible uncertainties of *Dubliners* in which "characters, events, and motivations are fluid

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and finally unfathomable" (Bašić 335). Weir contends that, notwithstanding the thematic resonance, the three signifiers suggest certain types of narrative, and he seeks to categorize the whole collection into three narrative groups: narrative of stasis ("paralysis"), narrative of spiritual debasement ("simony"), and narrative of incompletion ("gnomon") (Weir 343-344).

II.

Of Greek origin, "gnomon," according to the *OED*, is "the part of a parallelogram which remains after a similar parallelogram has been taken away from one of its corners." If we note the geometric aspect of a "gnomon," we feel inclined to take the gnomon as Joyce's narrative strategy, rather than as its thematic function. Since a gnomon is an incomplete parallelogram, first, we naturally wish to fill the narrative gap, to make whole the narrative, which would otherwise be incomplete in its meaning. Second, we are also challenged to regard Joycean text as a positive dialogue between the part remaining and the part omitted. If Joyce arguably suggests a way of approaching the opaque, mystifying text by introducing the gnomon at the onset of the collection, why not read the first story through gnomonic imagination? This paper seeks to verify if such an exercise enriches a reader's experience and whether this concept applies to other texts in the collection since "The Sisters" rehearses the issues of the *Dubliners* stories that follow (Ingersoll 33).

Even readers equipped with gnonomic skills find the narrative of "The Sisters" arrogant. While the text strongly challenges the readers it never supplies enough hints for decisive meaning. The words stubbornly resist our signifying process. We start our journey this way or that, proceed for a time but never reach a meaningful and satisfying conclusion. What frustrates us? First, the boy-narrator is unreliable. Much narrative information is supplied via the boy's signification role. He himself is preoccupied with deciphering the cause and implications of Father Flynn's death.

For a young boy (actually, we do not know his name, age, family, and other key information), he is hyper-sensitive and intelligent. He can therefore, presumably, concoct a whole story out of the fragmentary data he culls from adult dialogues as well as his personal relations with Father Flynn in the priest's final days. However, he puts on such an act; he feigns ignorance of what we suspect he knows. While pretending to make the narrative parallelogram whole, the boy-narrator ironically places gnomons, large and small, before readers. He pretends to smooth the narrative but actually arrests its even flow. Why does he hide crucial information regarding his relationship with Father Flynn and the cause of his mental and physical decline? This is not easy to determine but, I would argue, it relates to the nature of the fellowship the boy-narrator obliquely suggests.

The narrative of "The Sisters" mostly consists of the boy-narrator's preoccupation with interpreting the disgraceful death of a priest, while the only narrative action, if any, is no more than a funeral attended by the boy-narrator and his aunt. Hence "The Sisters" can be categorized as static. The boy-narrator or, to be exact, the boy-interpretor busily collects data from Cotter's and Eliza's version of events, regarding the priest's mental illness and death. He seems annoyed at having to organize his own version of the story through overheard adult dialogue which is frequently broken by sudden silence, pause and ellipsis. Is he really angry with the meager data, half-concealed by adults? In truth, the boy-narrator already knows a great deal, and he supplies us a pretty large body of information from his own experience. He even adds his own perspective on Flynn's case. The boy-narrator simply pretends to extract meaning from Cotter's cautious explanation.

> —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 . . .
>
> —I have my own theory about it, he said. I think it was one of those . . . peculiar cases . . . But it's hard to say. (*D* 7)

Cotter's discourse, we see, is not only full of narrative suspension but also

employs such mystifying terms as "queer," "uncanny," and "peculiar." Instead of elucidating "[his] own theory" (*D* 7), he continues to smoke and utters a long, unsuitable speech about education: "My idea is: let a young lad run about and play with young lads of his own age and not be . . ." (*D* 8). Calling the boy-narrator a "Rosicrucian," his uncle supports Cotter's idea by introducing his own principle: "Let him learn to box his corner" (*D* 8). The two men's disorienting dialogue turns out to be another "gnomon" since it hints but it never reveals. The two men's dialogue teases but never satisfies the boy-narrator because they have no wish him "to have too much to say to a man like that [i. e. Father Flynn]" (*D* 8). This shows how they understand the boy. Their "idea," "opinion," "theory," "principle," however, doesn't catch the boy-narrator's level of comprehension, to say nothing of his unpleasant feelings toward them. The irony of the boy-narrator's attitude toward them is his anger at himself being ignored as an innocent young boy rather than at them for not supplying him enough information. Yes, Cotter's version barely helps the boy's signification process concerning the tentative causes of Flynn's death. But does it really matter to the boy? This is doubtful. The reason for so little data in Cotter's "theory" is not simply because Cotter hides his "theory" from the boy. Cotter is afraid the story might have "an effect" on the boy. Cotter never realizes, however, that the boy has already been "impressed" and his intuition about corruption has reached the point where Cotter's caution never can. Rather, the boy knows more than adults assume him. At this point, remember that the story is narrated by the boy who seems to interpret the secret of Father Flynn's death. The original data, i. e. Cotter's version, filters through the boy-narrator. Some of the narrative silence, pause, gaps could be there because the boy, I would argue, represses the original information.

Yes, a linguistic barrier between the boy-narrator and Cotter exists. Cotter's rhetorical devices are pause, ellipsis and repetition. Cotter's dialogue with his uncle betrays his linguistic ignorance as well as his stuffy conventionality. The incompleteness of Cotter's discourse is imputed to his verbal inability in contrast to the boy's fluency. If Cotter doesn't help the boy-narrator's signification process, the

boy-narrator resorts to his own understanding. In order to fill in the blanks in Cotter's elusive discourse, the boy looks to his own subconscious, i. e. his dream. Connecting Cotter's version with Eliza's, the boy's dream helps readers fill in the missing, gnomonic gaps. This supplies data for various interpretations but, again, complicates the reader's decoding process. The crucial action in the boy's dream is Father Flynn's confession. But we never know what the confession is. Yes, the inverted role-playing between the boy and the priest is shocking but the confession scene is insufficient. The scene simply implies that Flynn's sin may be connected to the boy, such as Father Flynn's "great wish for the boy" (*D* 8) or his sexual misconduct toward the boy, etc. Yet the task of this paper is not to determine the real cause of Flynn's breakdown and death or the nature of his relationship with the boy-narrator.

Worth noting here is Joyce's narrative strategy. He never supplies all the information needed. Rather, he teases us but never resolves our signification process, leaving crucial data out of the narrative surface and creating a gnomonic narrative. To work gnomonic structure, Joyce employs a boy-narrator in "The Sisters" and assigns him to unravel, on his own terms, the story's crucial issues. The boy-narrator seeks the missing parts, fill in the gnomonic gaps, thus making the story a whole. Following the boy's path, readers also learn of Father Flynn, a highly gnomonic character. The reading process, however, proves difficult because we cannot fully trust the boy-narrator. First, every report he delivers has filtered through him and been repressed or exaggerated. Second, the dream scene is shown by the language of night, the language of the subconscious, which portrays one's fear and desire with neither coherence nor causality. We must therefore decide which data to heed and which to throw away. We have to find our own way out of the dark, dense dream-narrative.

> It was late when I fell asleep. Though I was angry with old Cotter for alluding to me as a child, I puzzled my head to extract meaning from his unfinished sentences. 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. It began to confess to me in a murmuring voice and I wondered why it smiled continually and why the lips were so moist with spittle. But then I remembered that it had died of paralysis and I felt that I too was smiling feebly as if to absolve the simoniac of his sin. (*D* 9)

A dream reconstructs the world in surrealistic (il)logic and language, yet dreams certainly refers to the real world. The above quotation's rich layers of meaning are open to various interpretations. Ironically, the dream scene helps our interpretation process but also disorients us and prevents us from drawing a decisive conclusion. The dream carries its own (il)logical unity and coherence so well it even challenges us to hazard a Freudian interpretation.

The central action of the dream is Flynn's confession to the boy. In the dream, the boy is terrorized by the heavy grey face, continually following, and murmuring. Chasing and being chased, hiding and seeking is a typical formula for a nightmare (Werner 35). Such a breathtaking pursuit of Flynn suggests the urgency of his confession, while the boy's desperate escape betrays a reluctance to assume the role of confessor because of the stark reality. Still, the boy is fascinated by the deadly work of paralysis. We can say Father Flynn "governs the imagination of the story's boy-narrator" (Frawley 135). Such contradictory behavior by the boy, his ambivalent emotion, fear and longing, is vividly shown by such a phrase as the "pleasant and vicious" region he hides in. The binary feature of the place is no less than the replacement of the boy's split emotion toward Flynn's confession: enchantment as well as repugnance. In the dream confessional, the boy listens to Flynn's confession but the words are wrapped in murmuring. That the boy-narrator understands immediately Flynn's murmur but readers cannot is highly gnomonic. The boy enjoys the narrator's privilege and the content of Flynn's confession. He suggests that Flynn committed some sin but feels reluctant to betray specifically what it is. The boy enjoys the blissful moment when the signifier is aligned with the signified, i. e, when the gnomon becomes a parallelogram. That he enjoys this

kind of instant non-linguistic communication with Flynn reveals some sort of shared complicity between them. Again, readers are denied from the crucial data needed for their signification process.

That the full content of Flynn's confession cannot be delivered to readers makes sense because dream sequences cannot truly be converted into day-time language. Flynn's continual murmur is heard, therefore, not as definite words but as a "voice." I suspect, however, whether the boy-narrator wishes to monopolize the data and manipulate the reader's accessibility to the source. If he wants to erase the crucial part of the confession, thus rendering it another gnomon, the obscurity of the dream-scene is understandable. In that case, Flynn's sin might be too shameful to be articulated, even though the boy-narrator succeeds in decoding the enigma of his dream. If the boy-narrator is related in any way to Flynn's sin, if no one but the boy is eligible for absolution, he might well conceal the confession he pretends to decipher. Thus, readers cannot share full perspective of that the boy-narrator seems to enjoy. The readers' signification process is delayed once again, and we have no choice but to leave the cause of Flynn's dementia unclarified.

Though alienated from the full perspective of Flynn's case, we can make use of whatever circumstantial evidence is accessible. First, I would mention Flynn's manner of confession and the boy-narrator's attitude as confessor. Flynn's lips, "so moist with spittle," indicate one who has "died of paralysis" (*D* 9). Such a revolting image of Flynn, however, obliquely suggests the dubious, unspeakable nature of his sin. Second, Flynn's "continual smile" suits him because he has lost bodily control. Certainly, however, the image implies seductive, sexual connotations, and we suspect if Flynn's sin may be a child abuse. If we recognize the sexual function of the mouth as a genitalia-substitute, Flynn's moist, enlarged lips become a highly disturbing signifier.

The boy-narrator's recollection of his dream is no more than the process of gnomon-making. Scared by Flynn's pursuit, he resorts to Persia as an alternative to Dublin: "I felt that I had been very far away" (*D* 11). In Persia "where the customs [are] strange" (*D* 11), the boy-narrator feels free and assumes the role of a

confessor/priesthood he has taken over from Flynn, and his room is naturally transformed into a dark confessional with "long velvet curtains and a swinging lamp of antique fashion" (*D* 11). Note here that the boy-narrator hastily concludes he "could not remember the end of the dream" (*D* 11). His utterance sounds plausible: dreams usually lack neat endings. That he abruptly drops his interest in completing his version and leaves readers in a state of half-knowledge, however, seems tactical. I would suspect his curiosity has already been satisfied, as inferred from the exchange of smiles between him and Flynn: "I felt that I too was smiling feebly as if to absolve the simoniac of his sin" (*D* 9). It is not unwarranted to suppose that the boy-narrator successfully decodes the Flynn-puzzle in return for his acceptance of Flynn's request. A kind of complicity between them is confirmed here but the boy-narrator keeps his decoding from readers. Naturally, from this point on he assumes the role of a silent auditor from this point on, instead of that of an active, daring participant in the narrative. This more evidences that his curiosity about the deadly work of paralysis has fully been satisfied by his dream.

In the quotation in which the boy-narrator says he smiled reluctantly to forgive Flynn his sin, we again find evidence of gnomon-making. First, he distances himself from the situation by saying "I felt" instead of "I," and avoids his responsibility as a positive agent of absolution. Second, he tries to evade his culpability by inserting "too," and suggests that Flynn initiated the confession. Third, he says he smiled "feebly," which could mean he was not quite willing to accept Flynn's offer. The "shared" smile between them, however, betrays the conspiratorial nature of their transaction. The boy offers "absolution" to Flynn, who "sells" his priesthood which has become too heavy for him to bear. Fourth, the boy obscures his act of absolution by using the subjunctive, "as if," instead of the indicative mood. Such an ongoing filtering process climaxes when we find the most problematic signifier, i .e. "simoniac." By saying that Flynn's sin is not "simony" but something of a "simoniac" nature, the boy-narrator again obscures the exact content of Flynn's sin. Such use of an euphemistic signifier makes another gnomon, which in turn yields still other signifiers to be clarified. By manipulating the

narrative level, the boy-narrator succeeds in concealing any definite clue and evading any blame. Readers, however, succeed in deciphering, though partially, the text's hidden meaning by filling the gnomonic gap, i. e. missing parts of the parallelogram.

The whole narrative of "The Sisters" is concerned with reconstructing the absent, gnomonic character, Father Flynn. He remains totally outside the text yet haunts and exercises a terrifying supremacy over the characters, especially Eliza and Nannie. Worth noting here is that Flynn is never recognized in the dream-scene as a person but simply as an indefinite "it" or "the heavy grey face." Eliza's version of the story fails to advance the narrative action. Rather, their version looks far more opaque than Cotter's because they seem outside the world of language and in the world of silence. The sisters seem to communicate not with the outside world but with themselves. The boy-narrator again takes the role of a reporter as he and his aunt join Flynn's wake. Again, the dialogue between Eliza and his aunt, with great gaps, silence and ellipses, conceals rather than reveals the truth, thus making the narrative strategy consistently gnomonic.

> —Did he . . . peacefully? she asked.
> —O, quite peacefully, ma'am, said Eliza. You couldn't tell when the breath went out of him. He had a beautiful death, God be praised.
> —And everything . . . ?
> —Father O'Rourke was in with him a Tuesday and anointed him and prepared him and all.
> —He knew then?
> —He was quite resigned.
> —He looks quite resigned, said my aunt.
> —. . . No one would think he'd make such a beautiful corpse.
> —Yes, indeed, said my aunt. (*D* 13)

Yes, Flynn's "[d]eath is obscured by euphemistic language until the horror has been sanitized and fades into a static verbal icon" (Henke 15-16). The euphemism of their dialogue betrays the linguistic embarrassment they feel in talking about

Extreme Unction. Their scrupulous dialogue, however, subtly implies the unspeakable nature of Flynn's sin and subsequent death. If the Sacrament of Anointment could only be refused in exceptional circumstances (Brown 243), if the rite should ask God's grace for the dying person, we would suspect that Flynn's mysterious end was so disgraceful that he should be excluded even from the last Sacrament of the Church. If they doubt his redemption, then this is an absurd overthrow of the spiritual guidance he once gave them. Now we remember that Flynn asked the boy-narrator questions such as: "whether such and such sins were mortal or venial or imperfections" (*D* 10). Even if the boy-narrator reports that the priest asked him such delicate theological issues just for fun, the implications behind those casual references are clear. Flynn may arguably have struggled with his own sin. Interestingly enough, Flynn's questions turn out to be another version of the dream scene reenacted by Flynn when, we hear, he had locked himself in the confessional.

Despite Flynn's disoriented actions, for instance, breaking the chalice, dropping off a breviary, etc., Eliza tries so hard to whitewash his decline and fall that she sanitizes Flynn's death and even his corpse. She surmises that "the priesthood was too heavy for him," and that he "was too scrupulous always" (*D* 9). She connects, out of reverence or ignorance, his scrupulousness with his inability to carry out clerical obligation. However, that can hardly be the true case (Geary 305).

> —It was that chalice that broke . . . That was the beginning of it. Of course they say it was all right, that it contained nothing, I mean. But still . . . They say it was the boy's fault. But poor James was so nervous, God be merciful on him! (*D* 15)

Eliza's analysis sounds convincing but it prevents her from suspecting the primal cause of Flynn's failure as a priest. She precludes any possibility, out of ignorance or faith, that something may have led Flynn to break the chalice, accidental though it may seem. She makes a "neat" causality out of the accessible data because she can do no more. Her discourse therefore proves a tautological reproduction of the boy-narrator's dream-scene. Ironically, Eliza, in her effort to

make Flynn immune, makes a casual reference to the empty chalice. (She even imputes it to the altar boy's mistake.) She feels relieved that no wine is in the chalice, as it would be sacrilegious to spill consecrated wine. She is so preoccupied with the "empty" chalice that she fails to recognize how she unconsciously deconstructs what she believes. Confusing substance with form. and displacing Christ's blood with the chalice (Brown 244), she betrays the emptiness of her religion as well as the incapacity of the Irish Church.

Eliza's gnomon-making process, however, bumps against a barrier of suspicion raised by the aunt.

> —*And was that it? said my aunt. I heard something* . . . Eliza nodded.
> —That affected his mind, she said . . . (*D* 15, italics mine)

Here, narrative tension is strong because the boy-narrator's aunt refers to "something" Eliza would not mention. Eliza even nods. As a communication, this is acceptable. Otherwise, Eliza's nodding is meaningless, dozing at best. If so, Eliza is preoccupied, paying no heed to the audience in the room. Such a semantic gap, as well as stylistic ambiguity, remains unresolved, leaving the narrative disturbingly gnomonic.

The gnomonic nature of Eliza's version comes from her linguistic inability, i. e. her malapropisms, ellipses, and ungrammatical sentences. In Cotter's case, he substitutes smoking for utterances whenever he needs more silence in his speech. Similarly, Eliza lapses in and out of her own silence. She seems to commune with silence and even stops the narrative flow, "as if to listen" (*D* 15). She stays, it seems, more in the world of silence than in the world of language, continually connecting one with the other. She seems more comfortable in the world of silence in which she resides. Who else exists in the world of silence? Full time denizens include Father Flynn while Nannie and Eliza are temporary ones. Those truly are gnomonic characters. The worst is Nannie who stays totally in the world of silence: she never says a word in the whole narrative, as if she were dumb or deaf. When need be, she talks in sign language such as pointing, nodding and beckoning, and

Eliza connects Nannie to the world of language where the boy and his aunt reside.

Flynn's sisters are of little help in our analysis because their data is filtered through incomplete language as well as complete silence. We depend on them at best as eye-witnesses to Flynn's last days. Eliza reports on Flynn's strange behaviour: she notes his moping, sleep-walking and talking to himself, and finally locking himself in the confessional. In the confessional, we find him "sitting up by himself in the dark . . . wide-awake and laughing-like softly to himself" (*D* 15). This moment of dramatic irony is another reenactment of the boy's dream-scene (Werner 53). Flynn's locking himself in the confessional implies he has something to confess, for one thing, and that he may have violated a clerical obligation, i. e. "the secrecy of the confessional" (*D* 11), for another. The Eucharist and the Confession are two cardinal obligations of a priest. Flynn has violated the former by breaking the chalice. The latter remains undiscovered so far. The highly obscure narrative is again recognized when it closes with Eliza's elliptical silence: "So then, of course, when they saw that, that made them think there was something gone wrong with him . . . " (*D* 10). Not having a key to offer or feigning ignorance, she simply recalls her brother's distracted manner, and (un)finishes her version of the story. Yes, the closing ellipsis is "a gesture of reluctance to complete the diagnosis" and readers are left with an "incomplete diagnosis" as well as an "atmosphere heavy with insinuation" (Heller 32).

III.

From the start, this paper never intended to delve into the real causes of Father Flynn's fall and breakdown. The task at hand is to analyze how the "gnomon" works as Joyce's narrative strategy in "The Sisters." Thus far we have recognized gnomonic instances as well as gnomonic characters in the narrative which function not as "active presences" but rather as "negative presences." These are conspicuous by their absence. Why did Joyce design such an opaque short story? More

mysteriously, why does Joyce deny readers any crucial keys to interpretation while pretending to supply clues? Readers in "The Sisters" are stunned because Joyce actually complicates and disorients, to be more exact, the signification task. The boy-narrator pretends to share the reader's job by deciphering hidden meanings or filling gaps in the adult dialogues. He provides Cotter's version, which turns out to be full of unsaid narrative. He even rewinds his own dream scene to show readers the contents that can never be said. The dream-scene, however, simply turns out to be a visual version of the narrative. Again, nothing decisive can be said. Finally, the boy-narrator accompanies his aunt to Flynn's funeral and reports what the Flynn sisters have delivered to his aunt. Flynn's sisters' version proves, again, to be highly problematic because they, residents of the world of silence and the past, intermittently return to the present world of language. Their ability to communicate is very low and the reliability of their version is lower still. The search for meaning in "The Sisters," if such a thing can happen, is delayed endlessly and the readers' signification process is frequently frustrated. Traditional concepts of reading as well as individual readers are challenged in "The Sisters" which demands a radically different perspective on the world, language, and readers. While sharing fictional characteristics with modernism, Joyce's stories look at the post-modern world and its values. To hunt for meaning or prophetically trace a plausible story out of "The Sisters" is not recommended. Instead, post-modern readers should pay more attention to Joyce's gnomonic imagination, and regard his narrative as a continuous gnomon-making process. This frustrates the traditional signification process but opens up rich possibilities of multi-interpretations in a highly inconclusive narrative that endlessly delays the reader's signification process. Here is the diabolical beauty of "The Sisters" which ventures to guide readers into the world of (un)meaning.

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Abstract

Gnomon as a Narrative Strategy: Rereading "The Sisters"

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A 'gnomon' is a parallelogram, one of whose corners is cut away in the form similar to the larger parallelogram. Since the term appears, together with 'paralysis' and 'simony,' in the first passage of "The Sisters," readers have been intrigued by the possibility that the words are Joyce's hint in their approach to a notoriously misleading narrative. This paper suggests that 'gnomon' can be a geometrical explanation of the narrative strategy Joyce arguably employs in "The Sisters." As a 'gnomon' looks like a parallelogram but is not, so Joyce's narrative seems to supply abundant data that nevertheless hinders readers' signification process. Rather, traditional readers of Joyce who try to work out a whole, coherent story of Father Flynn's decline and death frequently feel frustrated by Cotter's, the boy-narrator's, and Flynn's sisters' versions. Finally, they come to realize, very late, that the search for meaning in a Joycean narrative is impossible because the words are studded all over with highly inconclusive information. Joyce suggests a whole parallelogram in his narrative yet readers are simply left with a 'gnomon,' a narrative full of gaps, silences, ellipses. If so, we should abandon the traditional way of Joyce reading, i. e. hunting for meaning. Instead, we should welcome the undecidability of his narratives and enjoy Joyce's rich possibility of multiple interpretation. Understood this way, gnomonic imagination hardly blocks the reading process but offers great potential and creative perspectives that, I would argue, enrich the reader's experience.

■ Key words : gnomon, narrative strategy, boy-narrator, undecidability, Father Flynn (노우먼, 서술전략, 소년-화자, 결정불가능성, 플린 신부)

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