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Joyce's "Clay" and the Problem of the Referent

L *e dit et le non-dit*, the spoken versus the unspoken : the terms imply an opposition. What I want to suggest in the course of a reading of some aspects of Joyce's short story "Clay", in *Dubliners*, is that literature is a discourse in which the spoken and the unspoken are not opposed but inhabit one another, a discourse in which we cannot draw a clear dividing-line between what is represented and what is not represented. It will already be clear that my reading will be strongly indebted to the work of Jacques Derrida. Of course, as Derrida has often reminded us, any statement of the form "literature is x" is problematic (including the one I'm just about to make) : literature is that which questions the philosophical question "What is... ? " Perhaps even that which, in the act of making the philosophical question impossible, makes it possible – as Derrida might say.

Derridean deconstruction is often depicted as a strategy of reading which releases the unspoken from the spoken, and if it is philosophical writing which is at stake, this may not be too inaccurate a characterization, at least as a preliminary gesture pertaining to an initial move of deconstruction. There are things of which philosophy, *qua* philosophy, cannot speak, and their necessary unspokenness is constitutive of philosophy. One of the names we might give to this structural *non-dit* of philosophy is "literature". Philosophy has to efface its reliance on the spatio-temporal contingencies of language, on the rhetorical and performative dimension of utterances, on the endless reinterpretability of signs

in their changing contexts, on the constant dependence of the signified on the signifier : just the things that literature thrives on. But what then of a deconstructive reading of *literature* : how can such a thing be possible ?

The possibility of literature's deconstruction lies in the extent to which it is not, and has not been, literature (in the sense that I have just described it), but rather something else – something much more like philosophy. Derrida spells this out in *De la grammatologie* :

A l'exception d'une pointe ou d'un point de résistance qui ne s'est reconnu comme tel que très tard, l'écriture littéraire s'est presque toujours et presque partout, selon des modes et à travers des âges très divers, prêtée d'elle-même à cette lecture transcendante, à cette recherche du signifié que nous mettons ici en question, non pour l'annuler mais pour la comprendre dans un système auquel elle est aveugle¹.

A "transcendent" reading of literature, then, is one that attempts to *reduce* the literary text to a signified ; and the argument of this passage is that only certain literary texts offer a strong resistance to such a reading. Derrida elaborates on this argument in *Positions*, where again the subject is literature :

Certains textes, donc, [...] m'ont paru marquer et organiser une structure de résistance à la conceptualité philosophique qui aurait prétendu les dominer, les comprendre, soit directement, soit au travers des catégories dérivées de ce fonds philosophique, celles de l'esthétique, de la rhétorique ou de la critique traditionnelles. Par exemple les valeurs de sens ou de contenu, de forme ou de signifiant, de métaphore/métonymie, de vérité, de représentation, etc., du moins sous leur forme classique, ne peuvent plus y rendre compte de certains effets très déterminés².

1 *De la grammatologie* (Paris : Minuit, 1967), p. 229 ; translated as *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore : Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), p. 160.

2 *Positions* (Paris : Minuit, 1967), p. 94 ; translated as *Positions* (Chicago : University of Chicago Press, 1981), pp. 69-70.

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We have here a more extended list of those philosophical categories which literature is capable of putting in question but which, under the thumb of philosophy, it has for the most part accepted and assumed.

A deconstructive reading of a literary text, therefore, is one which reads it, in a certain sense, as literature ; one which attempts to locate or release or produce (it's hard to find the right word here) that within the text which pushes to their limit the philosophical concepts that usually govern both literature and its readings. Derrida observes in a recent interview :

[...] un texte est poético-littéraire quand, par une sorte de négociation originale, sans annuler ni le sens ni la référence, il fait quelque chose de cette résistance [à la lecture transcendante], quelque chose que précisément nous aurions beaucoup de mal à définir [...] Car cette définition suppose non seulement la prise en compte de modifications conventionnelles et intentionnelles multiples, subtiles, stratifiées, mais aussi, à un certain point, la mise en question des valeurs d'intention et de convention qui font, avec la textualité du texte en général et la littérature en particulier, l'épreuve de leurs limites³.

The texts of James Joyce are on obvious place to look for moments where something is made out of literature's capacity to resist a transcendental or philosophical reading, where the naive values of sense and reference are, without being annulled, negotiated, suspended, played at or on or with or out. Derrida himself has written on both *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake* with this object (though the bulk of interpretation of these works remains in a naively philosophical mode)⁴. But the stories of

3 A translation of this interview appears in Jacques Derrida, *Acts of Literature*, ed. Derek Attridge (Routledge, 1991), 33-75 ; the passage quoted is translated on p. 47. The French original is unpublished.

4 See *Ulysse gramophone : Deux mots pour Joyce* (Paris : Gallée, 1987). These essays have been translated as "Ulysses Gramophone : Hear Say Yes in Joyce", in Derrida, *Acts of Literature*, ed. Derek Attridge (New York : Routledge, 1991), pp. 253-309, and "Two Words for Joyce", in *Post-structuralist Joyce : Essays from the French*, ed. Derek Attridge and Daniel Ferrer (Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 1984), pp. 145-159.

Dubliners have less often been read as problematizing the categories of philosophy and its province, literary criticism ; they would seem to be texts which above most others "lend themselves", to use Derrida's phrase, to a transcendental reading – whether one that reduces them to a historical and referential "real" or one that passes through the text to a transcendent symbolic system. (These two types of reading may appear to be totally opposed, but Derrida argues that they both serve the same metaphysical goal of reducing and fixing the text.)

In examining some aspects of one of these stories, "Clay", I shall also be bearing in mind another emphasis which runs through Derrida's writing on literature. For instance, after the comments I've just quoted from the interview, he continues :

St chaque texte littéraire joue et négocie la suspension de la naïveté référentielle [...] chaque texte le fait différemment, singulièrement.

(p. 47)

This respect for, and insistence upon, the *singularity* of each literary performance is one which has a certain traditional ring about it, but which takes on a different colouring, and constitutes a more difficult challenge, in the context of Derrida's writing. It's no longer an appeal to an essence, as if "Clay" retained a core of true meaning through all varieties of interpretation, but rather an insistence on a singularity that has been thought *with* the thought of openness to unlimited reinterpretation in new contexts.

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It's Halloween, the end of the Celtic year, and the traditional games are being played in the Donnelly household in Dublin. It is the turn of the family's special guest, their one-time employee, Maria, to be blindfolded and to bring her hand down on one of the three saucers, containing a ring, a prayer book, and some water, each with its prediction for the coming year. The paragraph that describes her moment of choice seems

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to me one of the most strangely potent in *Dubliners* ; indeed, in all Joyce's work :

They led her up to the table amid laughing and joking and she put her hand out in the air as she was told to do. She moved her hand about here and there in the air and descended on one of the saucers. She felt a soft wet substance with her fingers and was surprised that nobody spoke or took off her bandage. There was a pause for a few seconds ; and then a great deal of scuffling and whispering. Somebody said something about the garden, and at last Mrs Donnelly said something very cross to one of the next-door girls and told her to throw it out at once : that was no play. Maria understood that it was wrong that time and so she had to do it over again : and this time she got the prayer-book⁵.

Responding to "Clay" – answering to what is unique in the text, and doing so both responsively and responsibly – entails, for me, attending with as much care as possible to the resonances and refractions of this passage.

As part of an endeavour to respond adequately, we can try to recreate or imagine an encounter with this passage during a first reading of the story. In such a reading, Maria's bafflement is briefly our own ; character and reader share this moment of contact with a substance which is both real and somehow unreal, a substance whose physical qualities of softness and wetness impinge more directly than those of any other object in the story, yet one which remains nameless, resistant to any attempt to pull it into the reassuring grid of language. A substance which is both substantial and insubstantial, densely present yet strangely absent, an existence without essence. The games, and the narrative, falter, as if for an instant the usually hidden sources of their functioning had been exposed, thus unsettling their confident and unselfconscious progress.

5 James Joyce, *Dubliners*, Viking Critical Library, ed. Robert Scholes and A. Walton Litz (New York : Viking, 1969), p. 105. Further references given in the text.

In terms of standard narrative analysis, the absence of any name for the substance Maria touches is explained by the rigorous point-of-view that has been adopted throughout the story. Although the narration is in the third person, we recognize in this paragraph a style that we have associated with Maria from the beginning (whether her own way of speaking or thinking, or one that she would in some way endorse) : the simple paratactic syntax, the non-literary diction, the slightly awkward repetitions – "she put her hand out in the air", "She moved her hand about here and there in the air", "Somebody said something", "Mrs Donnelly said something". Knowledge of the world possessed by this narrator goes no further than Maria's ; and since Maria never discovers the true nature of the substance she touches, we are not informed either. But this is not a full explanation of the strange absence of identification : Joyce may utilize narrative conventions, but he is never wholly bound by them. There are moments throughout the story when a distinctly different style breaks through the jejune, repetitive language that we associate with Maria's consciousness, providing a sudden *external* view couched in a conventional "literary" rhetoric : "her grey-green eyes sparkled with disappointed shyness" (p. 101), "her minute body nearly shook itself asunder" (p. 101), "[she] ferreted her way" (p. 102). Even more strikingly, a deliberate inconsistency in the technique of limited point-of-view follows soon after the passage I have quoted, when Maria sings the first verse of *I Dreamt that I Dwelt* twice but, we are told, "no one tried to show her her mistake" (p. 106). Not only is the narrator here pointing out something which Maria fails to perceive, but our attention is being drawn to that failure : the limitations of Maria's awareness are the very reason for the step which the narrative takes outside her consciousness. Joyce could have found a way of doing the same for the "soft wet substance", had he wished to, and we are conscious that the name is being withheld from us by the author as well as the narrator ; that the disjunction being enforced here between language and material world is not to be passed over as a mere effect of a chosen technique.

It might be said that Joyce *did* provide the missing external comment when he entitled the story "Clay", and no doubt our first-time reader, after a moment of bafflement, falls with relief upon this name and the referent it brings with it. It is then possible to reconstruct the events

of which Maria remains ignorant ; the saucers with ring, water, and prayer-book have been replaced with another one containing garden clay, pushed under Maria's descending hand⁶. Although this appeal to the title seems to fill the void that threatens to open at this moment in the story, I'd like to interrogate a little more closely the interpretative operations involved in such a solution to the puzzle. First, we have to give the title an authority that the text lacks, setting it outside the narrative as the emanation of a transcendent consciousness with access to a full truth. (This is how we frequently treat titles, forgetting that our reading of a title is in part determined by our reading of the text it names : if "Clay" had turned out to be about a sculptor, the title would give rise to rather different interpretations.) Secondly, and rather more unusually, we have to make the primary function of the title the revelation of the name of an object which appears unnamed in the text, as if the story were a bizarre kind of riddle where the answer appears first. And thirdly, we have to relegate any figurative interpretations of the title, including implications of malleability, frailty, and mortality, to a secondary place ; or if we don't, we have to reverse our normal hierarchies and regard "Clay" as a general,

- 6 Not all readers will want to ascribe this much malice to the children ; thus Warren Beck states "If is scarcely possible to assume, as one critic does, that the children trick blindfolded Maria into choosing the clay ; she is merely told 'to put her hand out in the air' ; she then 'moved her hand about here and there' and it 'descended on one of the saucers' " (*Joyce's "Dubliners" : Substance, Vision, and Art* (Durham, N.C. : Duke University Press, 1969), p. 213). But the fact that the critic in question, William T. Noon, does assume it shows that it is possible ; and it is central to my argument that such an assumption is impossible to disprove. Beck, in citing the words that reflect Maria's sense of what is happening, simply reproduces the text's doubleness at this point. C  llin Owens, in the first part of a three-part article on "Clay" and Irish folk traditions, also assumes that these words provide objective "information" about what is happening (" 'Clay' (1) : Irish Folklore", *James Joyce Quarterly* 27 (1990) : 337-52 ; see p. 344). It is equally possible to assume, as Noon does, that the Donnelly parents arrange things so that Maria, on her second attempt, gets the prayer book, though here it's easier to imagine a free choice being allowed. (See William T. Noon, S.J., "Joyce's 'Clay' : An Interpretation", *College English*, 17 (1955) : 93-95)

symbolic title which also happens to have a literal meaning in connection with one specific paragraph⁷.

I don't intend to mount a challenge to the view that the title names the substance which Maria, and the narrator, fail to identify, but merely to stress that in order to reach this conclusion we have to pass through a number of interpretative mechanisms and negotiate a number of literary conventions, and that this is not a perfectly smooth process. Our knowledge of the clay under Maria's fingers is not direct ; it comes only *after* our bafflement, and our interpretative activity is impelled by that initial sense of resistance to understanding. However secure may be our eventual certainty that the title names the substance, it is a certainty always haunted by the knowledge that it depends on a prior uncertainty, and on a mechanics of deduction following in its wake. The transparent relation that we expect between title and text is permanently shadowed.

A comparison with earlier titles Joyce used for the story in progress will make this clearer. The first completed version was called "Hallow Eve", a name which embraces the entire narrative rather than focussing on one object in one paragraph, and demands much less interpretative work in relating title to text. (Of course, it would also leave us much closer to Maria in our uncertainty about the contents of the saucer.) In a letter to Stanislaus some months later, Joyce refers to the story as "The Clay"⁸, a title which has the opposite effect : its function as an explanation of the substance that Maria touches is more secure, since the definite article signals more clearly its literal function and keeps the metaphoric associations at bay.

There remains, then, something in the description of Maria's hand reaching the saucer that resists the well-oiled machinery of our interpretative apparatus, and that recourse to the title "Clay" doesn't quite remove : a sense that the cogs which smoothly connect language to the

7 Jean-Jacques Lecercle has pointed out to me that the passage signals the missing term in another way, but by a logic that is even less acceptable within the norms of a philosophical reading : in the phrase "that was no play" the text comes as close as it ever does to repeating the title of the story.

8 About 24 September, 1905 ; *Letters of James Joyce*, ed. Richard Ellmann, vol. II (New York : Viking, 1966), p. 109.

physical world have slipped out of their normal mode of efficient and unnoticeable operation. And it's this slippage, this hesitation, that makes the passage so powerful and so hard to account for.

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I want now to broaden the discussion to the whole of "Clay" (and by implication to Joyce's method throughout *Dubliners*); since if this passage is a crucial one, as the title of the story suggests, we should be able to read it in a way that sheds light on the entire text. At first, it's not easy to see why this particular episode should be singled out in this manner. It doesn't appear to have narrative centrality: it's not the most acute of Maria's petty humiliations on this Hallow Eve (in fact, her hosts are more discomfited by it than she is, a point to which I shall return).

The most common way of dealing with this problem is, no doubt, to move away from the title's specific reference to its general, symbolic overtones; a number of the stories of *Dubliners* have titles which refer in a literal sense to something specific in the text, and then in a more general way delineate the story as a whole. "A Painful Case" is an example, where these words form part of the newspaper report quoted in the story; and so, in different ways, are "Araby" and "The Dead". But in none of these is there a disjunction between the specific and the general significance as there is in "Clay"; in these stories the specific reference within the text is itself a crucial moment in the unfolding of the narrative, and already functions both literally and figuratively. Maria's failure to recognize the substance she is touching doesn't seem immediately to radiate significance through the story in the same way as the report of Mrs Sinico's death in "A Painful Case", the romantic Eastern name of the bazaar which the young boy longs to visit in "Araby", or the meditation which Gretta Conroy's reminiscence provokes on the part of her husband Gabriel in "The Dead".

We do, however, try to find wider meanings for the passage, and the word that immediately springs to the interpreting mind is "death". If Maria had recognized the substance, and read into it a prophecy along the lines of the other items in the saucers, she might well have concluded that she was being warned of an early demise. It's reasonable to deduce

that this was the children's cruel intention ; we know from records that clay was often included in the game with just this meaning⁹. But what is unsatisfactory about this interpretative jump is its complete lack of any relation to the rest of the narrative ; death does not figure at all among the many human predicaments with which the story deals. More satisfactory as an interpretation of the title in its wider function is the suggestion of malleability : Maria exemplifies the human capacity to be moulded by situation, by desire, by anxieties, by the responses of others ; and the text itself, with its multiple and shifting meaning, shows that language, too, lacks fixed identities. The problem with *this* interpretation is that it seems to have no relation to the passage in question ; malleability is not likely to have been in anybody's mind during the Halloween game.

Significance of this kind seems difficult to attribute to the passage, in spite of the title's focus upon it. However, I believe that we *can* fruitfully move from the episode of the saucer to the story as a whole – not in a way that will lessen the title's slight oddness, but one that will justify its underscoring of the passage. To do so, we need to follow through the question that it raises, at the moment when Maria touches something in the saucer and we strain to know what it is : how do words relate to the world to which they refer ? How does referring happen ? If the title and its curious relation to this passage raise the question of Maria's capacity – or incapacity – to name what she experiences, then we have in small compass the issue that every reader is caught up in, knowingly or

- 9 C  il  n Owens cites the 1943 Irish Folklore Commission survey of Halloween customs as indicating that the most widely reported version of the game at that date was the one including clay, though he also notes that the clay was "sometimes suppressed by parents" (*op. cit.*, p. 344). Fran  ois Laroque, in "Hallowe'en Customs in 'Clay' – A Study of James Joyce's Use of Folklore in *Dubliners*" (*Cahiers victoriens &   douardiens*, n   14 (October 1981) : 47-56), also cites from the *Journal of the Kildare Archaeological Society* of 1908 (as quoted in Kevin Danaher's *The Year in Ireland*) a description of the game with four saucers, including one containing clay as a foretelling of death. Jacques Aubert, in his notes to *Dubliners* in the Pl  iade edition (*James Joyce :   uvres*, I (Paris : Gallimard, 1982), p. 1522), mentions this fourth possibility but suggests that in the transformation of a folk-ritual to a family game the clay would have been omitted – except that the next-door girls don't play the game...

unknowingly, from the beginning of the story. From the opening words we sense a strong pull towards the referent they claim to designate : Joyce uses the traditional techniques of realist narrative to create the illusion of an already existing world, and to release information about this world with a calculated miserliness that has readers eager for each morsel they are allotted. The limited point-of-view and commonplace style which we sense from the opening sentence («The matron had given her leave to go out as soon as the women's tea was over and Maria looked forward to her evening out») appear designed to achieve the fullest possible involvement with the main character, whose view of her environment we have no reason to mistrust.

For many readers, no doubt, this remains true to the end of "Clay" ; Frank O'Connor is one of such readers, summing it up as a story which «describes an old maid who works in a laundry and the succession of utterly minor disasters that threatens to ruin her celebration of Halloween in the home of her married nephew» ("Work in Progress", Viking Critical Library edition, p. 307). (I'll come back to this description of Maria's relation to Joe in due course.) For others, the insignificance of the story means – according to a strategy frequently applied to the stories of *Dubliners* – that it has to be interpreted on a symbolic level : a reasonable response to a narrative that, interpreted literally, seems to have little to offer the reader expecting large meanings. I've already touched on the suggestion of death in the title ; another detail crying out for symbolic interpretation is Maria's three-times-described long nose and long chin, almost meeting when she laughs – this peculiar physiognomy, together with the Halloween setting, seems to imply that she may be understood as a witch ; while for some readers her name and her presumed virginity indicate an association with the Virgin Mary. It's undeniable that Joyce scatters tempting clues to large symbolic structures throughout the stories of *Dubliners*, as he does throughout his other works ; the question is whether any of these works can be *reduced* to a symbolic system, or whether, instead, what is being offered is the temptation itself, a demonstration of the desire to invest quotidian reality with deeper significance. If this is so, then what is equally important is the inevitable *failure* of such symbolic reductions, since quotidian reality – and the openness of the text to interpretation – will always exceed them.

I would suggest, however, that most readers accustomed to Joyce's methods, alert to the nuances of his styles, and skeptical of grand symbolic gestures, find that what becomes of absorbing interest in "Clay" is the growing sense of a gap between the version of Maria's experience being presented by the narrative and an alternative, but obscured, reality. No doubt the point at which this sense is born varies from reader to reader ; for many it may come with the delayed information that the "colonel-looking gentleman" who makes room for her in the tram is – or rather was – in fact drunk, or perhaps a little later when Maria, deciding that she must have left the plum cake she had bought for a present on the tram, remembers how "confused" the man had made her : a confusion of which there was no trace when the event was related. However the reader's suspicions are aroused, they prove a potent interpretative engine, making possible the construction of a different version of Maria's situation and experiences from the very beginning of the story ; the vigilant reader can find alternative meanings in virtually every sentence of the story.

The most forceful summary of these two versions of Maria's existence that I know is Margot Norris, in a brilliant article on "Clay" entitled "Narrative under a Blindfold" :

According to [the first] version, Maria is a well-bred, middle-class maiden lady living on a small but independent income from a job that earns her the respect of co-workers and superiors. Although unmarried and, of course, childless, she enjoys the affection of a surrogate family that had once employed her more as a governess than as a domestic and that still cherishes her as a favorite sort of godmother who visits them laden with gifts [...]

According to [the second version], Maria works long hours for meager pay as a scullion in a laundry for reformed prostitutes who make her the butt of their jokes. She is ignored and patronized by everyone, including the family whose slavey she once was and from whom she succeeds in extorting only a minimal and ritualized tolerance by manipulating their guilt and pity¹⁰.

10 Margot Norris, "Narrative under a Blindfold : Reading Joyce's 'Clay' ", *PMLA* 102 (1987) : 206-15 ; passage cited on p. 208.

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As Norris argues, the text of "Clay" that we read, presented by a narrator who embodies Maria's desires, consists of a series of attempts to promote her importance in the face of abundant evidence to the contrary. Since Maria's insignificance is not an inherent quality but the product of a social judgement on unattractive old maids, it is by transforming the neutral or hostile responses she receives into positive valuations that she escapes the ever-threatening sense of worthlessness – and, as Norris rightly points out, the reader who cleverly "sees through" the wishful thinking to the "real" Maria is implicated as one of those who bring into being the need for wishful thinking. The "real" Maria – ugly, easily flustered, interfering, unsuccessful, thick-skinned – is as much a social product as the fantasized Maria, who is attractive, popular, respected, admired, influential. The words we read refer twice, and contradictorily : to a reality they name – the reality of Maria's constructed world – and to the reality which that construction is designed to obliterate.

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There is bound to be some resistance to this negative reading of Maria's experience, since it entails going against the explicit word of the text ; and many discussions of the story in print testify to the compelling force of the glamorized version. Thus Maria's exact relation to the Donnelly's is not stated, and it's easy to find oneself assuming, on the basis of her claims to an intimate connection, that she is a member of the family – Frank O'Connor, we have already seen, assumes that she is the boys' aunt, and Robert Scholes, in an essay included in his own edition of *Dubliners*, regards her as their sister (Viking Critical Library edition, p. 381). On the other hand, Norris's reference to her as the Donnelly's "slavey" can be challenged, too : would someone who held the position of a maid-of-all-work be invited to the family Halloween party and treated (however patronizingly) like an honoured guest ?

Once we start scrutinizing details of interpretation like this, however, the question of where reality lies become highly problematic. Put baldly, the problem is this : if the words of the text that we read are all devoted to the establishment of the favourable version of Maria's life, by what interpretative authority can we deduce the version that lies behind

them, and how can we set limits to the skeptical drive that would treat every overt statement, potentially at least, as the concealment of an unpalatable truth? If the narrative is capable of distorting, displacing, and occluding, how do we know of any "fact" that it is not a fantasy? Norris writes of «discrepancies [...] between what is said and what is shown» (p. 208) – but how, in a verbal text, is anything shown except by being said? It's easy enough to demonstrate inconsistencies that lead us to suspect the accuracy of the version we're given – I've already mentioned the different accounts of the gentleman of the tram. But if the real story cannot be put into words – if the function of the words is precisely to conceal that story – we can never securely identify it¹¹. This, of course, is the problem raised by the phrase "soft, wet substance", which succeeds in drawing our attention to the existence of an object without immediately granting it identifiability; the phrase refers, but as long as there is even the slightest hesitation about what it refers to, it can't be said to refer in the normal sense of the word – there is no-one, for instance, to whom we can address the question "What are you referring to?"

How, then, can we know *what* Maria's relationship to the Donnelly family is, since anything the text says about it is likely to reflect her own enhanced version? If she held a lowly status in the family, this is the one thing that the text *cannot* tell us. So we are in the curious situation of interpreting words on the basis of their *not* referring to reality, or rather their referring to it by not referring to it; though even here there is no certainty, since we have no way of knowing when what we are being told is the unvarnished truth. Had the narrative been presented in the first person, we would at least have been able to develop a sense of the typical workings of Maria's mind, but Joyce takes even this degree of calculability away. We've already noted that the narrative is not consistent in its style and its range of vision. It is not even a question of irony, a difficult enough rhetorical manoeuvre to pin down, since the first level of meaning completely fails to acknowledge the second. Nor can we draw a parallel with Gerty MacDowell's romantic rendering of her experience in *Ulysses*, or

11 It is surely not the case, as Norris claims, that deceptive narratives of this kind necessarily give themselves away. It's only in the cases of the ones that give themselves away that we can be reasonably sure that deception has occurred.

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HCE's defences of his innocence and worth in *Finnegans Wake*, since in both these instances the language itself is constantly giving its speakers away.

The "reality" which lies "behind" the story has a very peculiar status, therefore : it shifts like a kaleidoscope image, depending on the degree of skepticism with which we treat the narrative. There is a shimmering array of alternative stories lurking beyond the text, one of which we may choose to fix as the real referent, but whose reality is quite clearly the product of an interpretative decision on our part. And to some degree our interpretative decisions are, just as Maria's are, the products of our fears and desires ; if, like Norris, we substitute a tawdry reality for the images that the narrator offers we should investigate (as indeed Norris begins to do) what needs of our own are being satisfied.

It may be objected that there *is* a possible reference-point against which to check at least some of the text's assertions : actuality, recorded in history. Thus we know – from Joyce's letter to Stanislaus of November 13, 1906, if not from some other historical source, such as *Thom's Directory* – that there was in Dublin at this time a Protestant-run laundry called *Dubltn by Lamplight* whose mission was to rehabilitate reformed prostitutes¹². Since Maria's laundry has the same name, and a number of puzzles in the text are cleared up when this is assumed to be its function – one which the narrative voice couldn't possibly admit, of course – it's legitimate to equate the two institutions ; and because the knowledge comes from outside the text, we feel, for once, a satisfying certainty about the "real" world which the narrator is (mis)representing. But we have to be careful here : the text doesn't *refer* to the *Dubltn by Lamplight Laundry* that existed historically in Dublin (if we can trust the other texts that tell us it did) ; it brings into being a laundry with this name, just as *Ulysses* brings into being an Ormond Hotel and an Eccles Street, and at any point it has the power of rupturing the historical illusion – as when a historically vacant property is given fictional tenants called Leopold and Molly Bloom. This permanent possibility of rupture radically transforms all the "historical references" of fiction, hollowing them out from within.

12 *Letters of James Joyce*, vol. II, p. 192.

It is part of "Clay" 's unique power, then, that it suspends the norms of referentiality, even while relying on them as much as any piece of prose fiction. The story does not *refer* to referentiality, as might a philosophical article or a lecture on literary criticism, it *stages* it. And the philosophical language of criticism is, necessarily, unable to describe or formulate that staging. It is in the experience of reading the text, responding as responsibly as possible to its acts of reference, that we apprehend what it means for it to be literature, not philosophy.

If there were more space, one would go from here to a discussion of referentiality throughout *Dubliners*. (For instance, Joyce's battles with publishers who wished to censor his very precise references to people and places in Dublin would be understood not as an obsession with realism, or rather the illusion of realism, but as a determined strategy of heightening the play of referentiality in this volume.) And one would show how, always in distinct but related ways, *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake* stage the very processes of referentiality. Beyond that, one would argue – with Derrida – that the problematization of reference in literature (when read against the grain of the metaphysically-oriented literary tradition) is not something whose significance is confined to a closed aesthetic domain, but leads rather to a questioning of the philosophical notion of reference itself. And our initial opposing of the domains of philosophy and literature would emerge as too simple; for in philosophy too the unspoken is not simply separable from the spoken. An act of referring in philosophy – to a concept, say, or an idea – is not wholly distinct from the acts of referring in "Clay", acts caught up in systems of desire, interpreted within inexhaustibly changeable contexts, and speaking continually of what they do not speak. Even deconstruction might look a bit different in the light of "Clay", its confident uncovering of a *non-dit* beneath the philosophical surface more problematic, more open to questions of desire and aspiration.

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Instead of saying further about this work of extrapolation, whose main outlines I hope are evident, I want to end by returning to the Halloween game. «She felt a soft wet substance with her fingers and was surprised that nobody spoke or took off her bandage. There was a pause for a few seconds ; and then a great deal of scuffling and whispering. Somebody said something about the garden, and at last Mrs Donnelly said something very cross to one of the next-door girls and told her to throw it out at once : that was no play.» There is no sign that Maria is surprised by the fact her fingers encounter something not among the expected alternatives in the game, which Joyce has already taken care to specify. What she is surprised by is the silence and inaction that follow her touching of it – and it is clearly her *lack* of surprise that causes the silence and inaction, and the scuffling and whispering that ensue. The trick was designed, presumably, to provoke a vigorous response from Maria : she would be expected to imagine something far more disgusting than clay (Norris suggests that it's a version of the common trick of getting someone to believe they are touching excrement) or, if she did accurately identify the substance, to regard it as a premonition of death. However, the trick fails, and its fails because Maria refrains from interpreting conceptually what she experiences by touch alone ; she resists any temptation to transform the substance she knows only through the most unverbale of the senses into that curious thing that only language can bring into existence, a "referent". Instead, she waits for the game to go on, for the blindfold to be removed, and the meaning of her experience to be explained to her. The result of this non-response is an uncomfortable silence, then restlessness, then adult intervention. The *reader* is then given a hint to confirm the interpretation that links the title with this passage – "something about the garden" – but although the next sentence begins "Maria understood...", it turns out that all she understands is "that it was wrong that time". Even at this stage she has no awareness that she has been the target of a practical joke.

By failing to introduce language and reference, Maria protects herself from the cruelty of the children's trick, and she is able to persist in her favourable self-representation as honoured and loved guest of the family, warding off the recognition that she is not a welcome member of the group but an outsider, a target of derision and

hostility¹³. To acknowledge that a trick has been played on her would be to destroy her carefully-constructed self-image ; and for once she – or the resourceful narrative that represents her wishes – has no device to turn negative into positive. But her non-conceptualizing actually produces for her a small victory. The pause, the scuffling, the whispering, the anger : though these remain uninterpreted by Maria (except as an indication that "it was wrong that time"), we can construct out of them a picture of the discomfiture and embarrassment destined for her rebounding on the trick's perpetrators. And we, as secure and superior readers, are *also* subject to a moment of discomfort at this non-naming, before we regain (thanks to the title) our interpretative composure. While we process the language of the story with the machinery of reference and representation to deduce what the substance is, Maria touches and waits. Though her non-entanglement with language is more psychic defence, we may feel, than some simple relation to being, the effect of the passage on us as readers might be to remind us of the impossible demand entailed in all acts of responsible interpretation that we respect the other as other, responding to what remains unassimilable, unconceptualizable, residual, resistant. This applies just as much whether the other in question is a race, a past, a cultural institution like literature, or a story like "Clay".

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13 There seems to be general complicity in the trick, even though "one of the next-door girls" is eventually blamed : the adults make no attempt to prevent the substitution from being made, and are presumably watching Maria during the pause and the scuffling, until "at last" – when it is evident that Maria is not going to respond – Mrs Donnelly raises her voice.