

Dead and Gone Great Ones: The “Opera” Scene in Text and Film Versions of James Joyce’s “The Dead”

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John Huston’s recent film version of “The Dead,” admirable as it is in many ways, may be faulted on at least one major score: its failure to locate the story’s center of significance in the great opera conversation that precedes and influences Gabriel’s after-dinner speech.¹ It is not so much that Huston ignores the opera conversation’s weight in the narrative movement of the story—indeed, it fills a significant space in the film—as that he misjudges its subtle positioning of the characters, particularly Gabriel and Gretta, who are set, via the opera conversation and the speech that follows, on a collision course that will end only in the explosion and insight of the final scene in their hotel room.

Huston modernizes the conversation, first of all, by changing the initial subject, *Mignon*, to something he feels a contemporary audience would recognize more readily, Puccini’s *La Boheme*, which had indeed premiered eight years before the time of the story. This change enables him to add in conversational material about the popular aria, “che gelida manina,” before proceeding to the chief subject of the conversation, the real or imagined superiority of the singers of the past to those of the present day. The talk of *Boheme*, however, is distracting, as is the lengthened hamming of Freddie Malins in the film version, and is accomplished at the expense of connecting the conversation in a vital way with Gabriel’s speech. When it does come, Gabriel’s speech includes no mention of the opera conversation. His important and ironically effective exhortation that the guests bring to mind “those dead and gone great ones whose fame the world will not

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willingly let die” (203) is therefore muted, and must appear, as it were, in a narrative vacuum.

Actually, the connection of the conversation and the speech is of great importance in the story, and it is worth quoting Joyce in detail.

Mary Jane led the table back to the legitimate opera. One of her students had given her a pass for *Mignon*. Of course it was very fine, she said but it made her think of poor Georgina Burns. Mr. Browne could go back farther still, to the old Italian companies that used to come to Dublin—Tietjens, Ilma de Murzka, Campaini, the great Trebelli, Giuglini, Ravelli, Aramburo. Those were the days, he said, when there was something like singing to be heard in Dublin. He told too of how the top galley of the old Royal used to be packed night after night, of how one night an Italian tenor had sung five encores to *Let Me Like a Soldier Fall*, introducing a high C every time, and of how the galley boys would sometimes in their enthusiasm unyoke the horses from the carriage of some great *prima donna* and pull her themselves through the streets to her hotel. Why did they never play the grand old operas now, he asked, *Dinorah*, *Lucrezia Borgia*? Because they could not get the voices to sing them: that was why.

—Oh, well, said Mr. Bartell D’Arcy, I presume there are as good singers today as there were then.

—Where are they? asked Mr. Browne defiantly.

—In London, Paris, Milan, said Mr. Bartell D’Arcy warmly. I suppose Caruso, for example is quite as good, if not better than any of the men you have mentioned.

—Maybe so, said Mr. Browne. But I may tell you I doubt it strongly.

—Oh, I’d give anything to hear Caruso sing, said Mary Jane.

—For me, said Aunt Kate, who had been picking a bone, there was only one tenor. To please me, I mean. But I suppose none of you ever heard of him.

—Who was he, Miss Morkan? asked Mr. Bartell D’Arcy politely.

—His name, said Aunt Kate, was Parkinson. I heard him when he was in his prime and I think he had then the purest tenor voice that ever was put into a man’s throat.

—Strange, said Mr. Bartell D’Arcy. I never even heard of him.

—Yes, yes, Miss Morkan is right, said Mr. Browne. I remember hearing of old Parkinson but he’s too far back for me.

—A beautiful, pure, sweet, mellow English tenor, said Aunt Kate with enthusiasm. (198-200)

Like all such arguments, however fascinating, this one about the opera singers is ultimately insoluble, as indeed it would be even in an age armed with the evidence of compact disks. Too much in the way of personal taste, or personal nostalgia, inevitably intervenes in such comparisons. The perspective of each participant is thus limited in an essential way, which renders all the most passionate arguments finally somewhat absurd. The point, however, is not simply to show the characters quarreling with each other; the imagined superiority of the past, in this case of the singers of the past, is a main theme of the story. And of course Gretta's adolescent lover, Michael Furey, who loved her with a high romantic passion and then took the romantic precaution of dying young, was a singer too. Along with an earlier mention of Galway, the opera conversation is what first stirs up thoughts of Michael Furey in Gretta's mind, the tone of the conversation suggesting that inviolable romantic aura of the dead boy which will later frustrate Gabriel and bring him to a different sense of himself.

In his speech, Gabriel unwittingly fans this flame, sentimentally taking a side in the argument without realizing the effect his words may be having on his wife:

—Ladies and Gentlemen.

—A new generation is growing up in our midst, a generation actuated by new ideas and new principles. It is serious and enthusiastic for these new ideas and its enthusiasm, even when it is misdirected, is, I believe, in the main sincere. But we are living in a sceptical and, if I may use the phrase, a thought-tormented age: and sometimes I fear that this new generation, educated or hyper-educated as it is, will lack those qualities of humanity, of hospitality, of kindly humour which belonged to an older day. Listening tonight to the names of all those great singers of the past it seemed to me, I must confess, that we were living in a less spacious age. Those days might, without exaggeration, be called spacious days: and if they are gone beyond recall let us hope, at least, that in gatherings such as this we shall still speak of them with pride and affection, still cherish in our hearts the memory of those dead and gone great ones whose fame the world will not willingly let die. (203)

Prompted perhaps by his anger at Miss Ivors, Gabriel uses the occasion of his speech to slight the present generation (his own) in favor of an earlier generation

sentimentally and indeed rather glibly invoked here. Like the others, Gabriel is not free of absurdity and pomposity. In fact, from the beginning of the story we have seen him as something of a stuffed shirt, overly careful to protect his dignity. He is surely headed for an ironic fall.

This would seem to support the view of critics like Hugh Kenner, who see “The Dead” as the climactic story of a series in *Dubliners*, another mercilessly ironic exposure of the pretensions of its characters. The people who line the Misses Morkan’s table, according to such a view, are “those who remain alive, but fail to live: the disillusioned, the self-destructive, the blighted and wasted lives” (Bernard Benstock 149). Indeed, Kenner has gone so far as to term the story a “definition of living death” (62). It is not at all surprising that the characters in such a story, the “living dead,” should cast their ballots and their hearts with the past, the “dead and gone great ones” like Parkinson, Trebelli, and Michael Furey. And Gabriel, of course, will soon learn that he too is traversing such a death in life, that he too is humbled by comparison with the past.

The nature of Gabriel’s epiphany at the end of the story has been much debated, but I would argue that it is more generous than Kenner and Benstock have suggested. The opera conversation itself implies in a subtle way that this may be the case, and that in this story at least Joyce was casting his ballot with the living. There is ample evidence that “The Dead,” composed considerably later than the other stories in *Dubliners*, involved Joyce in a different conception of his characters (see Walzl). Far from leaving his main character mired in the past, Joyce, by the time he wrote “The Dead,” meant to suggest the death of a hollow and shamming existence for Gabriel and Gretta and their rebirth into a new and higher level of consciousness among the living. The favorable mention of Caruso by Bartell D’Arcy and Mary Jane, though hooted down in the general nostalgia of the conversation, is a sign of this. Bartell D’Arcy, a “modern” singer himself, may be trying to protect his own ground (as Gabriel does not), but he is certainly right to claim for Caruso at least equal status with the singers of the past. The living, though they lack the glamorous and nostalgic aura of the dead, assert themselves nonetheless by their sheer presence. They equal the dead in the tragedy of their fate, and surpass them in their unfinished claims on life. Gabriel too, once he has died to a hollow and pretentious conception of himself, will assert new claims to life that Michael Furey, who is as it were completely written, cannot make. There is no suggestion that Gabriel’s life with Gretta will end on this night.

The speech, in which Gabriel sentimentally invokes the “dead and gone” singers, and by ironic extension the ghost of Michael Furey, is the final act of what we see to have been a bankrupt self, and sets in motion the liberating epiphany of the

story's last pages:

Generous tears filled Gabriel's eyes. He had never felt like that himself towards any woman, but he knew that such a feeling must be love. The tears gathered more thickly in his eyes and in the partial darkness he imagined he saw the form of a young man standing under a dripping tree. Other forms were near. His soul had approached that region where dwell the vast hosts of the dead. He was conscious of, but could not apprehend, their wayward and flickering existence. His own identity was fading out into a grey impalpable world: the solid world itself, which these dead had one time reared and lived in, was dissolving and dwindling. (223)

The irony involved here is not simple. Its effect is not merely to expose Gabriel as a sham; it prepares his conversion to the "generous tears" of an unromantic but substantial present. Homer Obed Brown, following Ellmann, speaks of Gabriel's insight at the end of the story in terms of "the death of egoism" (99). And what seems to be the emotive image of Calvary supports and strengthens this: Gabriel's old and bankrupt sense of self dies so that a new and finer one may be born. If we are disposed to translate a secular tale into the familiar terminology of Christianity, "the form of a young man standing under a dripping tree" does seem very like a figure of Christ, and Gabriel's fading identity very like those rare things, Christian selflessness and humility. And the approach to these is mediated by Gabriel's hard earned, very human love, "the word known to all men" which according to Richard Ellmann informs Joyce's masterpiece, *Ulysses*, and proves, in Ellmann's phrase, "the closest we can come to paradise" (37). Far from culminating "the centre of paralysis" depicted in Joyce's earliest stories, "The Dead" points the way toward the great comedy of life in his mature fiction.

It is perhaps natural that Huston's "translation" of "The Dead," in so far as it reflects his own creativity, must have different emphases. Joyce's story is the work of a young man in the act of discovering his mature style. Huston's film, on the other hand, is the work of an old man reflecting on a long, varied, and vigorous career. Its pervading atmosphere—and this is alien to Joyce—is one of Lear-like retrospection, which is certainly evident in the attention the camera lavishes on such older characters as the Morkan sisters, Mrs. Malins, and even Mr. Browne. Indeed, Gabriel's vivid imagining of Aunt Julia's impending death (given a rather unobtrusive half paragraph in Joyce but worthy of a lingering, imagined scene in the film) seems to carry more emotional weight in the film than his confrontation

with the ghost of Michael Furey. In Huston's film ripeness is all. The basic tonality of the film is different from that of the story, and thus the concerns of those in Gabriel's generation, which dominate Joyce's text, take something of a back seat in the film, except perhaps as they merge with the concerns of the older generation: nostalgia and the difficult preparation to let go of life. In Huston's film, therefore, the opera conversation is given over to the nostalgia of the older characters, and the ironic implications of Joyce's scene, so important in our evaluation of Gabriel's and Gretta's relations, are muted.

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