
Distant Music

Symbolic Polarization in

Joyce's "The Dead"

David Lucking

It is perhaps only to be expected that critical discussion of the imagery of James Joyce's "The Dead" will sooner or later gravitate towards the question of what symbolic values are to be attributed to some of the more prominent image patterns developed in the story. This is an exegetical strategy that the evocative resonance of the prose itself seems to invite, and one which over the decades has yielded a rich harvest of insight into the underlying concerns of the work. It must be said however, in qualification of this observation, that efforts to deal on a systematic and global basis with the symbolic latencies of individual images or patterns of imagery have sometimes failed to do perfect justice to the subtlety of the manner in which they operate. The periodically resurrected issue of what the pervading image of snow represents in this story is a case in point. When Brewster Ghiselin proclaims it as "obvious" for example that "the immobility of snowy statues in that story is symbolically one with the spiritual condition of Gabriel Conroy turned to the wintry window at the very end of *Dubliners*", and suggests that what "The Dead" exhibits is "the consequences of moral degeneration ... the completion of spiritual disintegration, death itself",¹ he is I think contradicting one of our most fundamental intuitions concerning the story, our sense that something profoundly positive, though no less profoundly mysterious, is occurring in its final pages. Ghiselin is impelled to his conclusion by the assumption that the entire volume of *Dubliners* is informed by a single consistent pattern of symbolism, but his attempt to show how "The Dead" participates in this pattern, however ingenious and erudite it is in exposition, amounts to something suspiciously resembling an exercise in hermeneutic imposition.² Symbolism of the kind that Susanne Langer terms "presentational",³ which would seem to be that operating in "The Dead" if not throughout the volume of *Dubliners* as a whole, does not lend itself to schematic explication of this description.

"The Dead" narrates an incident that illustrates in exemplary and what should be instructive form not only the manner in which a symbol eludes discursive analysis, but also that in which discursive analysis seeks to camouflage its own failure. At one point in the story, the protagonist Gabriel Conroy catches sight of his wife standing on a stair and listening in a kind of transport to an old song. He reflects that "there was grace and mystery in her attitude as if she were a symbol of something", and he asks himself "what is a woman standing on the stairs in the shadow, listening to distant music, a symbol of?" (207).⁴ He cannot reply to his own question, but he can do what he feels is the next best thing, which is to assign a label to what cannot otherwise be defined: "Distant Music he would call the picture if he were a painter" (207). While the symbolic suggestiveness of the tableau he has glimpsed is sufficiently potent a catalyst as to precipitate the critical revelations of the final part of the story, Gabriel never does answer the question of what it is exactly that his wife symbolizes. What he does learn, though of course this intuition is never articulated in

explicit form, is that to project any kind of symbolic meaning upon a human individual is not only to alienate oneself from that individual but also to commit a subtle kind of violence.

Nevertheless, though symbols of this kind are by their very nature ultimately resistant to discursive definition, and may even prove to be—as William York Tindall has effectively demonstrated that some of the more obviously dominant symbols of “The Dead” are—radically ambivalent when subjected to close scrutiny,⁵ this in no way exempts us from the obligation to try to understand their workings. There are other aspects of the complex life of images that can be consulted in endeavouring to shed light on the latent significance of a literary work, not the least revealing of which is the way in which they interact with other images and compose a more or less coherent structure of relationships. This structure can itself be significant, irrespective of the precise meanings that we ascribe to the individual symbols constituting it. The obvious analogy, and one which has a peculiar relevance to the work I am discussing, is with music, in which meaningful patterns are elaborated out of elements which in themselves possess no definable meaning. If the images of a work seem often to be ambivalent, the structures in which they cohere are perhaps somewhat less so.

What I shall be arguing in the following pages is that the evolution of the imagery of “The Dead” enacts on its own level a process occurring within the story, the process that is of psychological and spiritual metamorphosis undergone at a moment of personal crisis by the protagonist. More specifically, I shall try to show that the imagistic structure of the tale is articulated around a complex of interlocking and mutually reinforcing oppositions which are eventually resolved in a general process of convergence, and that this movement corresponds to the process by which Gabriel overcomes certain alienating dichotomies in his own personality and outlook. It is this impetus towards convergence, and more particularly the symbolic reversals which it generates, that is responsible for the apparent ambivalence of the major images of “The Dead”, for it corresponds on a formal level to a growing doubt as to the validity of the conceptual polarities which those images encode, polarities which in the final pages of the story are abandoned altogether. Although this process of synthesis or integration or mediation might be amenable to analysis in Hegelian, Jungian or even Lbvi-Straussian terms, I shall here refrain from importing the terminologies of these interpretative models into my discussion, in the first place so as not to fall into the trap of reductive schematization which I began by criticizing, but also in order to distract attention as little as possible from the intimate correspondence existing between the purely formal and what might be described as the psycholmoral dimensions of the work. The character of this latter dimension, of the psychological and spiritual context in which the specific polarities I shall be discussing define themselves, can perhaps best be indicated by reviewing very briefly what actually occurs in the story.

The plot of “The Dead” can be summarized in a few lines. Gabriel Conroy is a teacher and occasional writer who, though he lives and works in Dublin, tends to be deprecating about what he regards as the provincialism of Irish culture, feeling that his own cultural and intellectual allegiances lie elsewhere in Europe. Together with his wife Gretta, he attends a Christmas party organized by his spinster aunts, and after the meal delivers a little oration to the assembled guests in which he rather patronizingly pays lip service to what he describes as the traditional Irish virtues. Before leaving the house, he catches sight of his wife listening to an old Irish lament being sung by another of the guests, and is struck by her attitude of entranced attention. As they make their way to the hotel where they will pass the night Gabriel’s mind is flooded by joyful reminiscences of his life with Gretta, with the consequence that he is seized by almost overwhelming physical desire for her. When he makes tentative efforts to woo her later, however, he discovers to his chagrin that she is thinking not of him but of someone else who is associated in her mind with the music she

was listening to at the party. This is a boy named Michael Furey, with whom Gretta was in love when she was a young girl living in Galway, and who died after venturing out on a cold and rainy night in order to see her one final time before her departure for Dublin. The story concludes with the transformation of Gabriel's feelings from jealousy and humiliation to pity, and his imaginative evocation of the churchyard in which his wife's youthful lover lies buried.

The first symbolic polarity I wish to consider, one which lies at the basis of most of the others I shall be discussing, is that adumbrated in the title. This is the elementary antithesis between life and death or, more precisely, between the living and the dead. Although Tindall is perhaps putting the matter a trifle too categorically when he states that the party given by Gabriel's aunts "is an embodiment of death and all the people there are living dead",⁶ it does seem clear enough that Joyce is at least partially inverting the ancient metaphor of the banquet of life, and that what is being implicitly contrasted in this story are different ways of being alive and different ways of being dead. Even a summary comparison of the imagery of "The Dead" with that of Eliot's *The Waste Land* will reveal the close affinities between the two works from this point of view. Both works articulate the conception of modern life as a kind of living death, and both strongly imply the obverse that there is a paradoxical sense in which the dead might be more alive than the living. Although Eliot's image of "crowds of people, walking round in a ring"⁷ derives from Dante, it also has a Joycean precursor in the anecdote describing a horse plodding mechanically around a statue, a story which has an obvious bearing on the spiritual condition of Joyce's Dubliners generally, and which Gabriel himself clownishly enacts for the benefit of his audience (205). Madame Sosostri's admonition "Fear death by water"⁸ has an antecedent if not a direct prototype in the anxiety underlying Gabriel's penchant for goloshes, which bears a similar symbolic relation to the death by water of an emblematically vital character—Michael Furey's role corresponding very closely in this respect to that of Phlebas the Phoenician in Eliot's poem. Sections of Eliot's "A Game of Chess" might easily have been inspired by Joyce's description of the party in Dublin: one thinks for example of the choruses of "good night" which in both works conclude gatherings that are perhaps a good deal less convivial than they seem (209-10).⁹

Mortuary allusions of one sort or another abound in "The Dead", composing a kind of sustained and ironic commentary on the superficial festiveness of the party. Gretta has taken "three moral hours" to dress herself for the occasion (174), and when she is greeted by Gabriel's aunts they remark with idiomatic paradox that she must be "perished alive" (175), words that assume ironic reverberations once we gain some inkling into Gretta's true state of soul. Though the three women inhabiting the "dark, gaunt house on Usher's Island" (173) are gallantly likened by Gabriel to the "Three Graces" (201), and subsequently to the three goddesses among whom Paris had the ungrateful task of choosing (202), they might equally well be conceived in alternative mythological terms, as Fate-figures presiding over the dance of life which modulates subtly into one of death. Reference is made to the monks at Mount Melleray who "slept in their coffins" (198), a variety of accommodation intended, it is said, "to remind them of their last end" (198)—a phrase which recurs in the final paragraph of the story. There is of course considerable dramatic irony in Gabriel's invocation, during his speech, of the memory of those dead and gone great ones whose fame the world will not willingly let die" (201), since this is an extremely accurate though of course entirely inadvertent description of Gretta's attitude with respect to Michael Furey. At the end of the party one of Gabriel's aunts asks that the front door of the house be closed for fear that "Mrs Malins will get her death of cold" (203), which is an approximate echo of Gretta's warning to Michael Furey many years before that "he would get his death in the

rain" (218). The song that stirs dormant memories in Gretta is an old Irish lament for the death of an infant, and Gabriel experiences a sudden premonition of the death of one of his aunts while she is singing another song: "He had caught that haggard look upon her face for a moment when she was singing 'Arrayed for the Bridal?'" (219). The coalescence of nuptial and mortuary associations in this latter sentence is perhaps ironic on one level, since Gabriel's aunts have never married, but it also hints poignantly at the essential unity of the life-cycle, in which all the ages of man are simultaneously implicated. I shall later be returning to the close association of music with death which is implicit in these and other passages.

If the schematic neatness of the life/death contraposition is severely compromised even in the course of the party, it seems to collapse altogether when the cab bearing Gabriel and Gretta towards their hotel traverses a bridge:

As the cab drove across O'Connell Bridge Miss O'Callaghan said:

"They say you never cross O'Connell Bridge without seeing a white horse."

"I see a white man this time," said Gabriel.

"Where?" asked Mr Bartell D'Arcy.

Gabriel pointed to the statue, on which lay patches of snow. (211-12)

It is of course proverbial that Death rides a pale horse, and the crossing of a bridge which is the symbol of unification par excellence might therefore suggest the transit of life into death. Indeed, it might even signal a complete inversion of the polarity in its customary configuration, for not long afterwards Gabriel makes the humiliating discovery that, at least as far as Gretta is concerned, Michael Furey is more alive than he is. Like the parallel anagnorisis in the final part of *The Waste Land*, with its recognition of the supreme importance of a "the awful daring of a moment's surrender" by which alone "we have existed",¹⁰ this revelation leads to an acknowledgement of personal failure which, because it can exist at all, has paradoxically positive overtones. "One by one, they were all becoming shades", Gabriel reflects in the aftermath of this discovery: "Better pass boldly into that other world, in the full glory of some passion, than fade and wither dimly with age" (219). Though it is perhaps too late for Gabriel to actualize this recognition in his own life, he can participate imaginatively in the lives of those who have, including those who are now dead. The boundary between life and death is virtually annihilated in the final paragraphs of the story, when Gabriel meditates upon Michael Furey's last desperate gesture. "His soul had approached that region where dwell the vast hosts of the dead", we are told: "His own identity was fading out into a grey impalpable world" (220). And under the influence of the snow, which is falling indifferently "upon all the living and the dead" (220), he makes an imaginative pilgrimage to the churchyard in which Michael lies buried.

Most of the other symbolic polarities that I intend to discuss can, as I have already suggested, perhaps best be understood in terms of this ambiguous relation between the living and the dead. Another image conventionally associated with death for instance is that of the west, which constitutes one pole of a further symbolic opposition developed in "The Dead", one that has political and psychological as well as metaphysical overtones. As Miss Ivor's caustic definition of him as a "West Briton" implies (185, 187), Gabriel's thoughts and cultural interests gravitate eastwards: he takes his vacations on the Continent, affects European mores (such as the emblematic wearing of goloshes) contributes a literary column to the pro-British *Daily Express*, and denies that Irish is his language (187). Notwithstanding his pose of cosmopolitan sophistication, however, Gabriel remains an Irishman, and his repudiation of his own Irishness, which reaches a climax in his outburst to the militantly

patriotic Miss Ivors that “I’m sick of my own country” (187), amounts to a rejection of an aspect of his own nature. Gretta on the other hand was born in the west of Ireland, a region associated with rude and quintessential Irishness, and one which Gabriel declines absolutely to explore: when Miss Ivors proposes an excursion to the Aran Isles, he pleads a previously arranged cycling tour on the Continent (186), and in response to her inquiry as to whether Gretta is in fact from Connacht will admit only that “her people are” (186). Thus Gabriel’s eastward orientation represents not only alienation from himself but also, at a certain level of their relationship, from his wife as well, and it is perhaps significant that Gretta has once fallen ill after being exposed to a wind blowing in from the east (177). The west is associated with Michael Furey’s death, but also with the passion that drove him to his death, and Gabriel’s refusal to travel westwards might signify a refusal to accept either.

Although the chasm dividing east from west appears initially to be insuperable, a tenuous bridge seems to be established between the two when, at a certain point a little over halfway through the story, Gabriel’s imagination summons up a momentary vision of “the Wellington Monument [wearing] a gleaming cap of snow that flashed westwards over the white field of Fifteen Acres” (199). The monument is of course a symbol of British dominion, and hence of the “eastern” political and cultural hegemony which Gabriel acquiesces in without question, but under the snow it seems paradoxically to signal towards the Irish west. This immediately precedes the speech in which Gabriel finds it within himself to celebrate—even if a trifle condescendingly—the distinctively Irish tradition of hospitality, although he has earlier professed himself sick of his own country. The real moment of convergence comes however not here but after Gabriel has learned the story of Gretta and Michael Furey, and realized “how poor a part he, her husband, had played in her life” (218-19). After this decisive but oddly salutary blow to his complacency, he decides that “the time had come for him to set out on his journey westward” (220), words that seem to imply his acceptance of all the things that he has previously sought to keep at arm’s length. As has earlier been the case with the Wellington Monument appearing to signal westwards, the agent which makes this unification of east and west possible is the snow, which is “general all over Ireland” (208, 220), and does not admit of the tidy distinctions upon which Gabriel has until that moment founded his existence and very identity.

Another antithesis closely linked with the polarization of east and west is that between past and present. The west is specifically associated with Gretta’s past, and also, more vaguely, with the passional, primordial past of her race. Much of the conversation at the dinner table revolves around the respective merits of different generations of operatic singers, the consensus of opinion seeming to be that the past was on the whole more musical (195-7). The contraposition of past and present is implicit in Lily’s bitter comment that “the men that is now is only all palaver and what they can get out of you” (176), and in the observation on the part of one of Gabriel’s aunts that Lily herself is “not the girl she was at all” (179)—words that perhaps hint at a romantic disappointment, or even at a cynical seduction of the sort later chronicled in *The Waste Land*. Gabriel, who is a specialist in palaver if not in seduction, owes his own allegiance to the cultivated modern world, the world of literary reviews and Continental tours and goloshes, although in his oratorical vein he is disposed to pay an urbane tribute to tradition in its more innocuous aspects. During his after-dinner speech he contrasts past and present for rhetorical effect, lamenting that they are “living in a less spacious age” (201), and invoking (with rich though inadvertent irony) “thoughts of the past, of youth, of changes, or absent faces” (201), before going on however to declare that he “will not linger on the past” (201). Notwithstanding this resolution, in the aftermath of the party, and in particular of his epiphanic vision of his wife listening to music, past and present begin to merge as “moments of their secret life together burst like stars

upon his memory" (210). And this process continues in the hotel room, where Gretta's past erupts in so momentous a form as to become more present to him than the present itself, a paradox which parallels that by which the dead assume greater life than the living.

Yet another formal opposition operating throughout the story as a whole is to be identified in the recurrent contrast between "inside" and "outside". The use of the image of a room or a house or any other kind of enclosed and disciplined space as a metaphor for life or the personality is of course a pervasive one in literature, but as it is also suggestive of moral and spiritual confinement and of the terror provoked by all that lies "outside" it tends to be employed with ironic intent: one thinks of all those real and figurative rooms in which the characters of Eliot, Beckett and Pinter (not to mention Dostoevsky and Kafka) effectively barricade themselves. In "The Dead" the polarity between inside and outside is linked at first with those between warmth and cold on the one hand, and light and darkness on the other, although in the latter part of the story this pattern is significantly disrupted. Gabriel's first act upon arriving at his aunts' house is to scrape the snow from his goloshes (174), thus divesting himself of all traces of the cold outer world. He reminds his aunts that while returning home from their party the year before Gretta succumbed to a severe cold, and announces that in order to obviate such risks on this occasion he has taken the precaution of reserving a hotel room for the night (179). That Gretta herself evinces no such timidity, but would "walk home in the snow if she were let" (178), is another indication of the radical difference between her temperament and that of her husband. Yet Gabriel's own feelings concerning the exterior world are not unmixed. In the course of the story he quite frequently stations himself at a window, on the frontier as it were between inside and outside, and finds himself positively yearning to be out in the external world. On one such occasion:

Gabriel's warm, trembling fingers tapped the cold pane of the window. How cool it must be outside! How pleasant it would be to walk out alone, first along by the river and then through the park! The snow would be lying on the branches of the trees and forming a bright cap on the top of the Wellington Monument. How much more pleasant it would be there than at the supper-table! (189)

And as he commences his speech he once again projects himself imaginatively outside the house, reflecting that "people, perhaps, were standing in the snow on the quay outside, gazing up at the light windows and listening to the waltz music. The air was pure there" (199). Here the connotations of "outside" are unequivocally positive, although it is the house he is in that encloses the light and warmth that are customarily associated with life.

For one of the things that the external world represents symbolically is intimately in Aunt Kate's demand that the front door be closed lest Mrs Malins catch "her death of cold" (203)—which is in fact exactly what happened to Michael Furey in consequence of the desperate vigil he kept outside Gretta's house in Galway. Coldness as a physical condition characterizing the exterior world is related to the ailment of colds, an intimation of mortality that cannot be left at the door, and the incidence of which in this story seems to have reached epidemic proportions. "Everybody has colds", observes Aunt Kate, and her niece blames this fact on the circumstance that "the snow is general all over Ireland" (208). It is in order to protect Gretta from colds and from the cold at large that Gabriel has taken a room at a hotel, and it is a cold which for most of the evening prevents the tenor Bartell D'Arcy from singing at the party. When D'Arcy does at last consent to perform, he song he chooses embodies the same imagery:

O, the rain falls on my heavy locks
And the dew wets my skin,
My babe lies cold ... (207)

The associations attaching to “coldness” will therefore seem negative enough, until we learn that Michael Furey, who is intimately connected with D’Arcy’s song in Gretta’s recollections, and who died of cold, was impelled to his doom by a passion which was the reverse of cold. We are only apprised of this tragedy in the final pages of the story, but even earlier a rather more positive set of associations comes into play when Gabriel recalls an occasion on which he stood with Gretta “in the cold, looking in through a grated window at a man making bottles in a roaring furnace. It was very cold. Her face, fragrant in the cold air, was quite close to his” (210). Here once again what seem to be the obvious connotations of a symbolic polarity are effectively reversed, and the warmth of human feelings is associated with the outside and the cold. When at the end of the story Gabriel feels “chilled” by “the air of the room” as he meditates upon death (219), it would seem that the process has been taken a step further, and that the cold of the external world has at last invaded the habitations of the living.

The final scene of “The Dead”, following a physical passage across Dublin and the emblematic crossing of a bridge, has as its setting the anonymous confinement of a hotel bedroom. This room is without electric light, and Gabriel has the porter remove the candle, explaining that “we don’t want any light. We have light enough from the street” (213). Whereas earlier he has stood in a brightly lit room looking out into the darkness, he now stands in a dark room illuminated only by a “ghastly light from the street lamp” (213). After glancing out of the window, Gabriel takes up a position “with his back to the light” (213), and as he begins to recognize his own emotional inadequacy while listening to Gretta’s account of Michael’s doomed but desperate passion “turned his back more to the light lest she might see the shame that burned upon his forehead” (217). The polarity of inside and outside, with its attendant associations of light and darkness and warmth and cold, is implicated in the story of Gretta and Michael as well. When Michael, already gravely ill of consumption, visited Gretta on the eve of her departure for Dublin, he signalled his presence to her by throwing gravel against the window of the room in which she was packing. She ran out into the garden to find the boy shivering with cold, and when she warned him that “he would get his death in the rain” he replied that “he did not want to live” (218). After registering the implications of this tragic little anecdote Gabriel resumes his station at the window (218), and turns to it again when the snow starts to fall once more. The final line of the story, with its description of snow “falling faintly through the universe and faintly falling ... upon all the living and the dead” (220) might seem to imply the final annihilation of the distinction between inside and outside as it does that of the other polarities developed in this work.

I have referred to Gabriel’s situation as being one of alienation, of estrangement from his wife, his race and his own most basic nature. His urge to shield himself from everything that is truly fundamental in human existence is imaged in the goggles which he has learned to sport in ultracivilized Europe, and which he obliges his wife to wear “whenever it’s wet underfoot” (178). Gretta seems to be somewhat restive under her husband’s oppressive solicitude, joking that “the next thing he’ll buy me will be a diving suit” (178). A more significant symptom of Gabriel’s compulsion to distance himself from what in fact lies in his own nature is his addiction to language, and this constitutes one pole in what is perhaps the most suggestively elaborated antithesis in “The Dead”, that between speech and music. As we learn from the beginning of the story, Gabriel is intensely verbal in tendency, and this

sets him somewhat apart, though conferring upon him a privileged status, in a house which is primarily associated with music. All the women of the household engage in musical pursuits of one sort or another, and the entertainment offered at the party too revolves around music and dancing. The only one of the three sisters who was deficient in musical talent was Gabriel's own mother, "though Aunt Kate used to call her the brains carrier of the Morkan family" (184). A photograph of this lady at her sister's house captures her in a significant pose with an open book on her knees, and we are informed not only that it was her ambition that was responsible for her son's worldly success, but also that she took violent exception to Gretta, whom she defined as "country cute" (184). Gabriel has inherited his mother's intellectualism and her bookishness, and although he happens not to share her judgement of Gretta's character, he seems not to have objected to her supercilious scorn of rural culture. The alienating effect of the verbal orientation he has acquired from his mother betrays itself when he cites the need to "keep in touch with the languages" as one of the principal reasons for his preference for European over Irish excursions (187), while it is of course his journalism which causes him to incur the charge of being a "West Briton" (185). The fervently patriotic Miss Ivors, significantly enough, does not stay to hear his speech (193).

Unlike many of the other people attending the party, Gabriel exhibits no sign of possessing a particularly acute musical sensibility, and his lack of participation in the musical life of the house figures his essential detachment. This detachment appears in subtly rendered descriptive details, such as that of Gabriel waiting "outside the drawing-room door until the waltz should finish" and pulling from his pocket "a little paper [listing] the headings he had made for his speech" (176). Shortly afterwards "Gabriel could not listen while Mary Jane was playing her Academy piece ... He liked music, but the piece she was playing had no melody for him" (183). Gabriel does not contribute to the dinner table conversation concerning the operatic singers of past and present, although he does during his speech rather characteristically allude to that conversation for purely oratorical effect ("Listening tonight to the names of all those great singers of the past", etc. [201]). The manner in which he attempts to convert even musical experiences into verbal ones appears when he mentally assigns the rather artificial title *Distant Music* to the spectacle of his wife listening to music, remaining totally oblivious to the meaning that the music holds for her. By contriving a name he is seeking to fix in the linguistic universe in which he feels most at home a kind of experience whose subjective aspect lies outside his capacity for comprehension. Gretta by contrast "seemed unaware of the talk about her" (209) while she is under the spell of the song, her genuine susceptibility to music thus tending to separate her from the verbal world in which he husband moves. The air she hears D'Arcy sing is associated in her mind with her past, with her home in the west, and in particular with Michael Furey, who "had a very good voice" (217) and used to sing that very song. Because of these associations, the song is also linked with death, as the air that Gabriel's aunt sings—"Arrayed for the Bridal"—comes to be as well. If language tends to create and enforce distinctions, and is therefore estranging by its very nature, then the effect of music is to unite, although the things it unites include life and death themselves.

There is therefore considerable irony in the familiar orator's gambit with which Gabriel embarks upon his speech, protesting that "my poor powers as a speaker are all too inadequate ... to express to you in words what my feelings are on this occasion" (199-200), since words are in his case used not to communicate or to explore the world of genuine feeling but to erect a barrier against it. A similar irony underlies the chorus which immediately succeeds Gabriel's toast, a repeated line of which—"Unless he tells a lie"—might seem to suggest a kind of musical aspersion on the mendacity of speech (203).

Nonetheless, just as Gabriel experiences moments in which he feels drawn to the outer world beyond the window, so is he sometimes seized by spasms of doubt as to the authenticity of this mode of existence which is so intimately bound up with language. It would seem to be for this reason that he is so strangely “discomposed” by Lily’s mordant observation that “the men that is now is only all palaver and what they can get out of you” (176), words which might imply a slur on his own verbal facility, and to which he guiltily responds by virtually forcing a gift of money upon the girl. It is while he is still smarting under the impact of Lily’s abrasive comment that he begins to feel that “his whole speech was a mistake from first to last, an utter failure” (177), a sensation which for somebody such as himself constitutes a threat to his very identity. Immediately prior to actually beginning his speech, perhaps recoiling from the insincerity and even hypocrisy of what he is about to say, he imaginatively transports himself outside the house to where “the air was pure” (199).

As in the case of the other polarities I have been examining, then, the implied antithesis between speech and music begins to be undermined in the course of the party, and this process continues in its aftermath. As they are walking towards their hotel Gabriel remembers a letter he wrote to Gretta many years before in which he asked: “Why is it that words like these seem to me so dull and cold? Is it because there is no word tender enough to be your name?” (211). On this occasion in the past words were used to express their own inadequacy before an emotional truth, and their poetic sincerity presents a striking contrast to the routine formula with which Gabriel deprecates his power to express his sentiments during his after-dinner speech. The mood in which Gabriel recalls this letter, a mood which once again unites past and present, is conveyed in a simile which possesses telling reflexive significance: “Like distant music these words that he had written years before were borne towards him from the past” (211). In this case words have become music, have become in fact genuinely “distant music” in ironic contrast with the artificial and characteristically literary title which Gabriel would have assigned to the portrait of his wife listening to D’Arcy’s singing. There has been in other words a virtual breakdown of the polarity between speech and music, one which corresponds to those we have already seen operating between past and present and “inside” and “outside”, and which we later see operating between east and west and life and death. For if speech erects a temporary bulwark against death, music in the story implies and contains death, so that the convergence of speech and music entails that of death and life as well.

To recapitulate, then, what I have been attempting to trace in this discussion of the imagery of “The Dead” are the operations of a series of symbolic antitheses which might be tabulated as follows:

living	-	dead
east	-	west
inside	-	outside
light	-	darkness
warmth	-	cold
present	-	past
speech	-	music

The symbolic overtones of many of these elements depend at least in part on their relation to other symbols belonging to the same column, and in particular to the crucial symbols of life and death which might in this respect be regarded as primary. While from a certain point of view the speech/music polarity represents a special case—since it is speech that makes

possible the very distinctions which these various contrapositions embody, whereas music tends to overcome them—it too partakes of the general pattern. The east is of course associated metonymically with the resurgence of light, and metaphorically with birth and hence life. Gabriel's life, which in his more complacent moods at least he regards as being of an entirely superior order to that of those around him, revolves around and is sustained by language (speech), which is related in turn to Europe and hence the geographical east. The connection between light and warmth on the one hand, and life on the other, is self-explanatory, as is that linking the present with life (since the dead all belong to the past), whereas the use of an interior space such as a room or a house (inside) as a metaphor for life or, as in this case, for a particular mode of existence is frequently encountered in literature and elsewhere. Conversely, the west is traditionally associated with sunset, and hence with the extinction of light, as well as with death. In this particular story the idea of the west is also coupled with that of the past, and with the memory of a specific person whose death was provoked by a vigil kept in the cold and darkness of a garden. That person is in his turn recalled in connection with music, and music is indeed linked with the past and with death throughout the story.

Such conceptual polarizations might at first seem coherent and intelligible enough, but in point of fact the diagrammatic simplicity of this structure of associations and contrasts is as we have seen undermined by ironic qualifications almost from the beginning of the story, and this tendency gathers momentum as the narrative proceeds. Thoughts in the present dwell obsessively upon the past, succumbing to the spell of that music which harks back to the vanished passions of bereavement and love. The dead refuse to remain quietly buried, but return to haunt the conversations of the living, as does—at least at that subterranean level suggested by allusions to colds, the unusual sleeping arrangements of certain monks, and so forth—the topic of death itself. The relation between these formal oppositions becomes in the end confused to the degree that they seem at points virtually to exchange places. The ostensibly living are shown to be spiritually dead, the bland automatism of their continuance in a merely routine mode of existence attesting to an essential fear of life. While the west connotes death, and so is shunned by the eastward-tending Gabriel, it also comes to be equated with passion, which is life taken to the maximum pitch of intensity. If the past seems at first to have vanished beyond recall, Gabriel makes the disconcerting discovery that Gretta's spiritual being is anchored in the past, which therefore has more meaning for her than the present she shares with her husband. Gabriel is to an almost exemplary degree a man of speech, and instinctively endeavours to reduce all experience to verbal formulation, but one of the most powerful experiences in his own life has consisted in the recognition of the inadequacies of language, while the words in which this recognition was expressed are recalled as if they were music. Similarly, yet another fragment of the past, which emerges from memory to exert a regenerating influence upon the arid present, takes the form of a precise reversal of the inside/outside, warmth/cold polarities, and Gabriel recalls standing with Gretta in the cold, looking in through a window at a man making bottles in a roaring furnace.

The mechanism underlying this formal movement of symbolic reversal and convergence is a psychological or, if we prefer, spiritual one, for implicit in the contrapositions I have been discussing is a psychological metaphor, adumbrating the familiar dichotomy between reason and passion. Gabriel, representative of the Apollonian spirit in its modern, decidedly etiolated version, is eminently rational, frowns genteelly on displays of inebriation (182), and wears goshes in order to keep his feet dry. Michael Furey, less ironically Dionysian in his association with music, darkness and passion, allows himself to become soaked in the rain and declares that he does not want to live. Meditating on this absurd and poignant gesture,

Gabriel becomes sensible of his own remoteness from the world of genuine feeling: “he had never felt like that himself towards any woman, but he knew that such a feeling must be love” (220). But Gabriel’s nature, confined by the small proprieties though it may be, contains potentialities which make spiritual regeneration possible even for him. That he is not entirely oblivious to the hypocrisy and fatuity of his own mode of existence is attested in the embarrassment provoked in him by the comments of Lily and Miss Ivors, as well as by his occasional evocation, while at the party, of the external world and all it represents in the way of cold purity. The position he frequently assumes before a window is significant, for the window constitutes the literal boundary between some of the polarities I have listed above (inside and outside, light and darkness, warmth and coldness), as well as representing, by extension, the figurative boundary between others (east and west, speech and music, life and death). It is also the partition that stands between Gabriel and Michael Furey, for Michael waited for Gretta outside a window, while Gabriel himself is safely ensconced within, though separated from his wife by what proves to be a more impenetrable barrier than Michael ever knew.

The bridge that Gabriel and his wife traverse as they make their way from the house where the party has been held to the hotel room in which the culminating revelation occurs, a bridge which in addition to symbolizing the unification of opposites is also invested, as I have suggested, with connotations hinting at a direct encounter with death, thus plays a pivotal role as a mediating symbol in this story. This is even more the case with the ubiquitous snow which, obliterating all distinctions—including in the end that between life and death themselves—effectively abolishes the barriers dividing the living from the dead, the living from each other, and the living from themselves.¹¹ The discovery that his marital life has been founded on what is essentially the illusion of his own centrality in Gretta’s life, far from being destructive, exercises a strangely liberating effect on Gabriel, dissolving the carapace of pride and intellectual snobbishness that has hitherto insulated him from authentic human feeling. The trajectory that his emotions describe as they evolve from “dull anger” (215) and “shame” (217) to “friendly pity” (219) and “generous tears” (220), indicates a turning outward of the current of feeling, a relinquishment of the self-protective egoism which is conceived in this story as the most abysmal form of death of all.

This process, in both its formal and its psychological aspects, reaches a climax in the extraordinarily suggestive paragraph with which “The Dead” concludes. I shall quote this finale in its entirety, italicizing those words which have by now accreted around themselves complex and frequently contradictory associations not easily susceptible of precise elucidation:

A few light taps upon the pane made him turn to the window. It had begun to snow again. He watched sleepily the flakes, silver and dark, falling obliquely against the lamplight. The time had come for him to set out on his journey westward. Yes, the newspapers were right: snow was general all over Ireland. It was falling on every part of the dark central plain, on the treeless hills, falling softly upon the Bog of Allen and, farther westward, softly falling into the dark mutinous Shannon waves. It was falling, too, upon every part of the lonely churchyard on the hill where Michael Furey lay buried. It lay thickly drifted on the crooked crosses and headstones, on the spears of the little gate, on the barren thorns. His soul swooned slowly as he heard the snow falling faintly through the universe and faintly falling, like the descent of their last end, upon all the living and the dead. (220)

It would perhaps not be too much of an exaggeration to suggest that this passage, which depends for its effect upon devices analogous to those employed in music, itself enacts a final resolution of the tension between speech and music, and is thus paradigmatic of the process operating throughout the work as a whole. Nearly all the polarities that have been introduced in the course of the story are invoked here for a final time only to be more or less definitively annulled. The taps upon the pane, recalling the gravel that Michael threw against Gretta's window, suggest the outside seeking to gain admittance, and hence the imminent disintegration of the antithesis between the interior and exterior worlds. The snowflakes, which are both silver and dark against the lamplight, belong to the worlds both of darkness and light, for the snow is "general all over Ireland" and falls without distinction upon all the living and the dead. Gabriel's imagination, hitherto oriented exclusively towards the east, begins its long pilgrimage westward, and before circling back to the churchyard where Michael Furey lies buried hovers briefly over the "dark mutinous Shannon waves" which—dark, unruly, and presumably very wet—symbolize everything he has previously shunned. The languorous "swooning" of his soul, and its distantly implied assimilation to the snow falling faintly through the entire universe, is suggestive of a surrender or abolition of personality, a death to self, a profound and mysterious apocalypse of the spirit. And if the imagery in which Michael Furey's final resting place is described—with its crosses, spears and thorns—is indeed reminiscent, as has been suggested, of an obscure Passion,¹² then it may also presage a kind of vicarious, though of course hardly less obscure, process of redemption.

Notes

¹ Brewster Ghiselin, "The Unity of *Dubliners*", *Accent* (Spring/Summer 1956), reprinted in the Macmillan Casebook on *Dubliners and A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, edited by Morris Beja (London, reprinted 1978), these quotations pp. 101, 108.

² Such an interpretation implies among other things an essential continuity of attitude throughout *Dubliners* which no one who has read the relevant sections of Richard Ellmann's biography of Joyce is likely to accept. Ellmann's view is that during the period in which the final story in the volume was conceived the author "became aware of the change in his attitude towards Ireland", and that he "embodied his new perceptions in 'The Dead'". *James Joyce* (New York, revised edition reprinted 1983), p. 243.

³ Susanne K. Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key: A Study in the Symbolism of Reason, Rite, and Art* (Cambridge, Mass., 3rd edition reprinted 1974), p. 97.

⁴ This and all subsequent references to "The Dead" are to the Penguin edition of *Dubliners* (Harmondsworth, reprinted 1973).

⁵ William York Tindall, *The Literary Symbol* (Bloomington, reprinted 1967), pp. 224-8.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 224.

⁷ T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*, l. 56.

⁸ *Ibid.*, l. 55.

⁹ Cf. *Ibid.*, ll. 170-2.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, ll. 403-5.

¹¹ While I basically agree with Ellmann that the snow "is mutuality ... a sense that none has his being alone" (*op. cit.*, p. 251), my concern here is more with the formal function discharged by the image than with its meaning. Indeed I would argue that its "meaning" is in the final analysis *identical* with that function, which Ellmann's formulation does however satisfactorily adumbrate.

¹² Ellmann makes the valuable suggestion that "through Gabriel's mind runs the imagery of Calvary", and argues further that in a certain sense Gabriel is in the final pages of "The Dead" emulating Michael's sacrifice (*op. cit.*, pp. 249-50). To the images Ellmann cites might be added those of the garden and the tree which are associated with Michael's death.