

Butchery of Spirit in Dublin : Reading 'The Boarding House' in *Dubliners*

YOSHIOKA Fumio

I

'Dublin is such a small city: everyone knows everyone else's business' (*Dubliners*, p. 71: page numbers alone to be cited hereafter). These epigrammatic lines, muttered in the mind by a luckless Dubliner, succinctly recapitulate the tenor and ambience of 'The Boarding House'. What is special about the utterance is that there is actually nothing special about it: it is so common, so trite, so insipid that its special message might be detected in its vigorous resistance to being special. The speaker himself, endowed with no clear personality or individual distinctness, represents the Dublin version of 'everyone' and embodies an ordinary circumscribed state of being in the city. 'The Boarding House' might be summed up as a story of ordinary people occupied with everyday issues in very conventional situations.

Still, the lines quoted above can illustrate the city in one brush, or for that matter, any city, any human community, of the world. Nobody can be left alone in the pretentious, stifling milieu of the Irish capital. The citizens are observed, spied on, and, if suspected to be involved in any offence or misconduct, placed under 'visual' probation. Every action, either private or public, of whatever significance is noticed, examined, and commented on. Acts of transgression and errors of judgement are especially scrutinized and put to relentless analysis until they appear pulverized into bits and pieces of total meaninglessness. Once cornered in such circumstances, no one can hope for an easy way out to absolution or back to one's initial, pristine condition of freedom. *Dubliners* gleans slices of life coerced or goaded into relinquishment of such precious treasures and tamed into the mainstream of the feudalistic citizenship as if nothing has happened. What is silently muffled to death in the process in exchange for a bitter epiphany is a free, vaulting spirit that revolts the status quo and pines for escape to liberation and independence.

'The Boarding House' is the seventh of fifteen stories and the fourth and last in the category of adolescence in *Dubliners*. It is fifth in order of composition dated 1 July 1905, according to Don Gifford (62). The story simply offers a sketch of inner landscapes prior to a personal meeting for three people. The meeting itself is planned and announced but never shown within the narrative framework of the story. While it is conducted behind the scene, a vivid picture

of the entangled human relationships among the owner of a boarding house, her daughter, and one of the lodgers is evoked by their interactions, mostly mental and psychological. The narration adopts the conventional mode of storytelling at the beginning but shifts acutely to an innovative style punctuated with orchestrated insertions of free indirect speech. The greater part of the tale is consequently dominated by the characters' inner monologues and streams of their thoughts and visions. Like many of the fellow stories in *Dubliners*, 'The Boarding House' is 'open-ended': it suspends its narration abruptly in the middle of the action and leaves behind a lingering aftertaste of incompleteness. Its narrative scheme and design bestride the boundary of fiction and entice the reader into close collaboration with it for conceptual closure of the plot.

II

The story begins with a quick glance at the outcome of Mrs. Mooney's broken marriage and the collapse of her family business. Her husband formerly ran a meat shop handed down from her father, but it was destroyed by his infatuation with drinks and his reckless lifestyle. The opening pages, brief and prosaic as they appear, significantly insinuate a multiple line of interpretation and pave the way for the plot to tread. To begin with, they provoke an idea of linear succession or subtle linkage between people and between generations paradoxically in the midst of the episodes of separation and disintegration. While the marriage was dissolved and the family divided, the Mooneys' shop was taken over and turned into a boarding house in which the owner still, in a sense, deals with 'meat' not of animals but of 'humans'. Mr. Mooney once went after his wife with a cleaver, which has somehow changed hands and is now metaphorically brandished by Mrs. Mooney to hack human affairs: 'She dealt with moral problems as a cleaver deals with meat' (68). Her coolness, ever close to cynicism and even callousness, either gifted by nature or ingrained by habit in the profession of butchery, flows into her offspring, modulated into Jack Mooney's streaks of violence and Polly Mooney's pretension of sly innocence. At the expulsion of the dissipated paternal figure and the bankrupt male dominancy, the Mooneys set up a matriarchy of their own under the guidance of the tight-fisted, ruthless mother.

Secondly, the opening pages imply that the commercial term 'business' expands its semantic range so far as to incorporate the institution of matrimony and the custom of courtship. It is noticeable that 'business' for Mrs. Mooney is nothing but pecuniary gains, regardless of whichever field she sets her hand to. Her raw instinct for survival and profit hardly hesitates in subjugating such fundamental human values as love and passion to the brutal tyranny of economy. She approaches, discusses and handles the issue of her daughter's marriage in the same terms and with the same mindset as she runs her boarding house and collects rents: '... Mrs. Mooney, who was a shrewd judge, knew that the young men were only passing the time away: none of them meant business' (68). Although she proclaims her faith in Catholicism and

behaves like a devout Christian, her sense of value affects and alters people around her in a peculiarly twisted way. The resident young men at her house do not call her 'landlady' affectionately but address her with mixed feelings of fear and contempt as '*The Madam*' (67, italics in the original), which carries a faint association with a female entrepreneur of a ribald bar or a brothel: Jackson and McGinley find that the expression 'boarding house' was nineteenth-century slang for 'a prison or house of correction' and also that 'boarding' has Shakespearean connotations of 'making sexual advances' (Note a, 53). Money can buy flattery and obedience but not much respect or fond attachment in Mrs. Mooney's living quarters. Her case epitomizes a reciprocal interplay between people and society in which an individual's aberration, molded by a communal ethos and psyche over a lengthy period of time, in due course returns its negative debts and erodes a whole community in the most surreptitious way.

Thirdly, the unharmonious union between Mr. and Mrs. Mooney mentioned in the opening pages procures its *raison d'être* in the ominous prospect that it will also be handed down, like their family business and the cleaver, to the next generation and recycled by people of their own flesh and blood. To be betrothed with someone selected mostly for the merits of 'a good screw' and 'a bit of stuff' (70) as much as for the virtue of being a bore, Polly precariously stands in the ominous shadow of her mother's stormy marriage and ignominious separation. Nothing is stated with certainty about her future, but much can be surmised through the story's conceptual design of repetition and transmission. Such vague anticipation and conjecture amount to sinister plausibility when observation in the other direction connects Mr. Doran with the obscure Mr. Mooney by the endemic bond of failure and misery that dogs male Dubliners. The two men, albeit widely different in personality, background and living conditions, are steamrolled into the mutual fate of deprivation of a hope of escape and a subsequent purposeless life. Here again, nothing is stated definitely about Mr. Doran's future, but the droopy figure of 'a shabby stooped little drunkard' (66) sitting all day long in the sheriff's office can predict what might lie ahead of the doomed man who is intrigued into being an extended member of his kinship. This perspective of linkage and circulation vindicates the sense of abruptness with which the story comes to an end by indicating that tales of love and marriage in Dublin duplicate themselves in the same old pattern and on the same familiar note. 'The Boarding House' in fact continues to spin a vignette of wretched love and rotten marriage in the reader's imagination even after Polly is rudely awakened from her daydream at the end of the story.

III

'The Boarding House' essentially traces a storyline of 'the hunters and the hunted', in which the Mooneys place themselves into the role of predators instinctively as if beckoned by nature and run down Mr. Bob Doran into that of a helpless prey. At the outset of the plot, Mr. Mooney

makes a boisterous entry and a quick exit, succumbing to his own fatuity and loss of self-control rather than anything else. His self-inflicted downfall serves in two ways for the ensuing development of the plot: it revives in the reader a hackneyed lesson to the effect that one is always fully responsible for one's own failure; and it also tips the scale of the battle between the sexes in favour of the survivor, his wife. The moral of Mr. Mooney's wasted life is that a winner takes all whoever the contestants are and in whichever way the battle is fought: any battle, once started, should therefore be won by any means and at any cost. Quite unlike the loser, who has become a shadow of his former self, Mrs. Mooney is 'a big imposing woman' (66), whose practical acuity and shrewdness make her loom much larger than life to the people around her. No sooner did she reckon her marriage as virtually irredeemable than she consulted the priest on annulment of it and secured a neighbour's sympathy and support. She did as best she could under the social condition where divorce was legally and religiously inconceivable. She then endeavoured to grab all the financial remainder of the ruined family business without taking the least compassion upon her husband. Mrs. Mooney learnt not only how to win but also how not to lose in a hopelessly losing situation. The whole process, though narrated hurriedly through flashbacks, sinisterly foreshadows her measures and manoeuvres against her next prey.

Mrs. Mooney now reigns over a dominion of her own making protected by a son as a bouncer and assisted by her daughter as a maid-in-waiting. Jack Mooney is 'a hard case' (67), disposed to heavy-drinking, rowdy and tenacious like a bulldog. His explosive temperament and expertise in boxing issue a silent threat to others. Polly Mooney is 'a naughty girl' (67) of nineteen, whose trade is to flirt with young men and eventually entice one of them, at least one judged suitable if not the best by her mother, into a choice of no choice about tying the knot. Her ultimate weapon is physical like her brother's: her coquettish feminine charms at times border on provocative or lascivious eroticism. Comparison of her to the Madonna is not limited to facial features and names alone: while the Madonna was blessed with the Immaculate Conception, the 'little perverse madonna' (67) of Dublin is suspected to be in an immoral, untimely and scandalous pregnancy: nobody knows whether it is accidental, planned, or even phony. One thing that is certain about Polly's 'family way' is that no consideration is taken of her male counterpart's will or intention. John Kelly shrewdly alludes to 'Marlborough Street Church' (69) as 'a church (as Joyce well knew) dedicated to the Immaculate Conception' (xxxviii). All in all, the three members of the Mooneys comprise a team for crafty exploitation, their strategy is intimidation at once verbal, physical and psychological, and their allies outside the immediate family circle are Dublin society and the Catholic Church. The significance of the outside assistance is very familiar to the matron and mastermind of the family through her bitter experiences of the past. In no explicit manner, however, do the Mooneys work together but there surely exists tacit agreement among them about the necessity of solidarity and joint efforts, in particular when

materialistic benefits come into sight. Towards the end of the story where Mr. Doran is held at bay, the trio appears to be a pack of natural killers spawned out of Dublin's corrupted soil of compromise between Catholicism and Capitalism (cf. C. H. Peake, 26).

In the meantime, the lover and victim remains obscure, nameless and out of sight until the plot moves beyond the midsection: he is referred to initially as 'one of the young men' (68) and then 'the young man' (68). When his name is mentioned at last, he is already found wading wearily in a mire and tormented, mainly due to his own lack of will power, by the realization that he has reached the point of no return in his liaison with Polly. Aged 34 or 35 and employed by a local Catholic wine-merchant, Mr. Doran is after all an average Joe of Dublin, a far cry from a hero of a traditional story of love. Everything about him - his appearance, lifestyle, career, views and tastes - is dull and flat: his personal claim that he sowed 'his wild oats' (70) as a young man and that he still subscribes to *Reynolds's Newspaper*, a radical journal published in London, sounds like a feeble protest of vanity and self-aggrandizement. On top of that, nothing surpasses in homeliness and plenitude the nature of his present trouble and the way he plunged into it

As Mr. Mooney surrendered to the allure of alcohol, so does Mr. Doran to a petty amorous temptation of the landlady's daughter. Apparently, it started as something that cannot be called genuine love, more like a teen-age couple's toying and dallying, and before long developed into something of a sordid affair which attracts the interest and attention of the fellow residents of the house: 'All the lodgers in the house knew something of the affair; details had been invented by some' (70). The moral fibre of the age and society allows of little amorous misdemeanor. Any irregularity in this genre tends to be denounced as 'sin', as demonstrated by the priest of Mr. Doran's church. If a girl is found 'expectant', she and her family will demand certain types of compensation, commonly money or marriage. Mr. Doran is well aware that there are few options open to him at this stage and that, as a mature man and respectable Catholic citizen, he ought to take full responsibility for the result. His trouble deepens further at the discovery that there is nobody willing to stand on his side: the priest not only reproved him in the face but also seemed thrilled to hear the smallest details of his affair during his confession. His employer will be enraged at the news and dismiss him on the spot. His family will construe Polly as a little vulgar and undesirable and her family as socially inferior. His friends will laugh at the relationship and make fun of him behind his back. Listening to his own inner voice as a celibate bachelor urging him to run away, he cannot but feel being 'had ... and done for' (72). Don Gifford comments on his name that '*Doran* in the original Irish language means an exile or a stranger' (64, his emphasis). If so, Mr. Doran is a stranger among his own people, a castaway in his own society, an exile in his native land.

IV

The general atmosphere of inquisitive observation and moral scrutiny in Dublin is symbolically concentrated in the particular act of looking into a mirror and inspecting facial appearance. The verb 'watch' in this context lays the foundation and gains momentum in frequency and weight after the introductory section: Mrs. Mooney 'watched the pair and kept her counsel' (68) and 'Polly knew that she was being watched ...' (68). The latter half of 'The Boarding House' presents sequential portrayals of an internal drama skewered with reflections in the mirror and acted out by three characters. The order of the entrance of Mrs. Mooney, Mr. Doran and Polly is deliberately arranged: Mr. Doran has his path blocked by the dam-and-chick pair and stands dazed in the middle, unable either to proceed or to retreat. His personal cul-de-sac in its turn reflects the mental inertia of Dublin and also casts a revealing light on the grotesque image of the Madam as a voracious sow: she devours not only her own litter like Ireland as Joyce sees it in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (470) but also the opposite sex. There is a mounting sense of irony in the act of looking into the mirror since it reveals little more than a cursory interest in the surface and evinces an inability to probe what is buried deep within. Truly, what the three Dubliners have in common is total indifference to moral reflection and inward groping - a manifestation of the paralysis of the city at its spiritual core.

Mrs. Mooney is drawn through the mixed channels of objective description and free indirect speech. The former medium is a conventional tool of fiction suitable for analytical delineation from the third-person point of view, while the latter specializes in sketching so-called 'streams of consciousness' transmitted by a character almost personally to the reader. The narration of 'The Boarding House' infiltrates stealthily into the thoughts and feelings of the three characters and guides the reader around the workings of their minds. Mrs. Mooney sits in the living room after breakfast and absentmindedly 'watche[s]' (69) the servant Mary clearing the table. Her gradual drift into recollection and reverie points backward and forward to the two interviews, the one that she had with her daughter on the previous night and the other that she plans to have with Mr. Doran. What is crucial to Mrs. Mooney and to the plot as well is the meeting to come, whose script she formulates and rehearses in the mind with meticulous care and attention to the finest points.

It is highly suggestive that this part of her inner workings is demarcated at both ends by her act of looking and inspecting: her imaginary session with Mr. Doran is preceded by 'Mrs. Mooney glanced instinctively at the little gilt clock on the mantelpiece ...' (69) and terminated before 'She stood up and surveyed herself in the pier-glass' (71). On the first occasion, she hears the bells of George's Church ringing, but no bell of conscience or self-search peels inside her. The second glance occurs after 'Nearly the half-hour!' (71). What happens in between is a scrupulous examination of how to vanquish in a crushing manner someone who is soon to

be her son-in-law. It takes her that length of time to review the course and manoeuvre of the confrontation and convince herself with two expressions of self-assurance: 'She was sure she would win' (69) and 'She felt sure she would win' (70). Now the imaginary rehearsal is over, the cast is lined up, and it is high time to put the scenario into action. 'The decisive expression of her great florid face' (71) in the pier-glass satisfies her of the success of her project even before it is launched.

Mrs. Mooney's triumphant countenance fades out into the afflicted image of Mr. Doran struggling to shave himself. The pronounced difference in their appearance is aligned with their contrast in attitude and mindset. On his first entrance in person, the lover of the story is 'very anxious indeed this Sunday morning' (71). He has already made two attempts to shave at the basin, but his shaking hands have thwarted his efforts each time. As a matter of fact, he has been unable to execute that morning ritual for men for the past three days due to his excessive agitation and perturbation: as a result, 'Three days' reddish beard fringed his jaws' (71). Furthermore, although the time and season of the plot are set on 'a bright Sunday morning of early summer' (68), Mr. Doran's profuse sweating sounds a little too abnormal and possibly sends a message of physical or psychological disorder: '... every two or three minutes a mist gathered on his glasses so that he had to take them off and polish them with his pocket handkerchief' (71). Up against Mrs. Mooney's arsenal built on the strength of her observational power and scheming ability, Mr. Doran is about to be thrust out into a killing field unprepared, unassisted, and deprived of much of his eyesight.

The cause of his trouble is already known to the reader but explained anew from his side. The priest to whom he made confession unabashedly drew out 'every ridiculous detail of the affair' (71), accused him without mercy of the 'sin' he had committed, and patronizingly offered him 'a loophole of reparation' (71). With the major figure of spiritual support gone, his reverie is naturally replete with chagrin and remorse, interspersed with a suspicion of 'being had' (72), an awareness of the future lost in rashness and obtuseness, and a fear of tarnished reputation. Nothing is felt reliable or trustworthy to him but 'his instinct' (72), which 'urged him to remain free, not to marry' (72). Later on, the impulsive voice of his free spirit once again solicits him to recoil from the tight spot: 'The instinct of the celibate warned him to hold back' (73). In the light of the line quoted before, 'Mrs. Mooney glanced instinctively at ...' (69), it might be argued that 'The Boarding House' hosts a battle of raw instincts fought between Mrs. Mooney and Mr. Doran. To the latter's great discomfort and disappointment, however, his instinct, surely except in the carnal division of its wide spectrum, is all but harnessed by his 'sense of honour' (73) as an educated man and respectable citizen. Upon the call of the servant Mary at his room, Mr. Doran's fate is sealed, and the hunting is practically over.

His defeat is reinforced subtly around the same time through a different medium. Before Mrs

Mooney sends Mary up to Mr. Doran's room, before old Mr. Leonard calls out in his rasping voice, 'Send Mr. Doran here, please' (71), Polly visits the troubled man for no other purpose than dressing him for her mother's cleaver. She runs directly into his embrace and moans pitiably to him: 'O Bob! Bob! What am I to do? What am I to do at all?' (72). While listening to the inner alarm of his own instinct, Mr. Doran inadvertently reiterates Polly's words of lamentation verbatim: 'He echoed her phrase, applying it to himself: "*What am I to do?*"' (73, italics in the original). What else could this be but a sign of his psychological yielding to the all-out assault of the Mooneys, a symptom of his intellect subdued by the family's beastly power? Some moments earlier, sitting alone on his bed in shirt and trousers, Mr. Doran was busy finding faults and defects in Polly, above all in her grammar: 'She *was* a little vulgar; sometimes she said "I seen" and "If I had've known"' (72, emphasis in the original). But the realization never occurs to him that he copies the plainest expression, its exact style and phraseology, from the same undereducated, unsophisticated girl almost half his age whose ability, manners and upbringing he despises and loathes inwardly. Mr. Doran has his intelligence and reasoning, quite robust in his own esteem, knocked senseless to the point of no functioning by the first member of the Mooneys.

The disruption of Mr. Doran's inner being reaches its apex during his descent to the ground floor where the Madam is waiting. In his further agitation and fear suggested by his glasses dimmed again with moisture, his body and mind, his action and desire, are split apart and driven in the opposite directions. While going down the stairs, he cannot suppress a wild fancy which wishes to soar up high and flee from the present circumstance: 'He longed to ascend through the roof and fly away to another country where he would never hear again of his trouble' (74). However, his personal frailty, his cowardly conformity to commonsense and the mores of the society, never cease to push him down with overriding force: C. H. Peake maintains that 'He is as subservient to appearances and respectability as Mrs. Mooney herself, and the landlady well realizes this' (27). The distant source of a mind torn asunder might be sought in *Hamlet*, in which Claudius prays on his knees while unwilling to renounce the fruits of his sin:

That cannot be; since I am still possess'd
Of those effects for which I did the murder –
My crown, mine own ambition, and my queen.

....

O limed soul, that, struggling to be free,
Art more engag'd! (III.3.53-69)

The sense of sin and the metaphor of flying bind the two characters together by the chain of incarceration. In any case, a crushing blow conducive to the butchery of Mr. Doran's free spirit is dealt by the second member of the family midway through what Bernard Benstock

terms 'a reverse gauntlet of the Mooney opposition' (125). Mr. Doran engages in a skirmish of sneak views against Jack with his dimmed sight: 'he glanced up on the stairs and saw Jack regarding him from the door of the return-room' (74). Jack's bulldog face and short thick arms send shudders of fear through the spine of Mr. Doran, who suddenly recalls the night when a derogatory allusion to Polly drove Jack so wild and so violent that the party had to be cancelled. The instant evaporation at the sight of might of Mr. Doran's wishful, illusory vision of flying now compels him to resign himself to the ultimate option of matrimonial reparation.

The last brief section of the story is devoted to Polly's daydreaming and reverie. The first thing she does in Mr. Doran's room after his departure is to emulate her mother and go over to the basin to look into the mirror: 'She dipped the end of the towel in the water-jug and refreshed her eyes with the cool water' (74). Her familiarity with the room silently expounds what relationship she has with the resident. When she is finished in examining her own profile in the mirror and readjusting her hair, 'there was no longer any perturbation visible on her face' (75). The question of whether there is any 'real' perturbation in her might be asked here. Oblivious of the trouble at hand and restored to her usual self, she peacefully falls into a reminiscence of the recent past. The surprising shift in her frame of mind offsets the sincerity of her despairing utterances to her lover such as 'She could put an end to herself, she said' (72) and "*O my God!*" (73, italics in the original). Only when left alone and unwatched does she lay her true personality bare and behave naturally: she is in one sense an exemplary product of the atrophied humanity of Dublin but in another might be a victim of the virulent circumstances herself.

The end of 'The Boarding House' affords an intriguing scene concerning the union of Mr. Doran and Polly, the scene in which the incompatible couple comes to be temporarily integrated by means of impaired eyesight. Exactly like her lover, Polly obtains a blurry vision when her eyes look beyond the immediate objects and far into the future: 'Her hopes and visions are so intricate that she no longer saw the white pillows on which her gaze was fixed, ...' (75). The dissolution of her consciousness and senses into a kind of euphoria divests her of her seeing ability and her touch with the reality. Her mind and body out of harmony with each other might also be linked with Mr. Doran's state of disruption. What pulls the couple apart again after this ephemeral congruity is the object of their cloudy vision: Polly's inner eye is riveted on a rosy dream of the future while his is fixed on the despair of the moment. The difference marks a crucial point of departure for Mr. Doran and Polly in the story not of love but of lust, coercion and exploitation. 'The Boarding House' closes with Polly all of a sudden dragged back to the reality by her mother's command resonating from downstairs:

'Come down, dear. Mr. Doran wants to speak to you.' (75)

Chillingly, the centre of paralysis and decadence alone remains alert, sees all, and manipulates everyone else without being seen.

Works Cited

Texts:

Joyce, James. *Dubliners* with an Introduction by John Kelly. Everyman's Library 49. London: David Campbell Publishers, 1991.

— *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, in *A James Joyce Reader* ed. Robert Scholes. London: Penguin Books, 1993.

Shakespeare, William. *The Alexander Text of William Shakespeare The Complete Works* edited by Peter Alexander. London and Glasgow: Collins, 1951.

References:

Benstock, Bernard. *Narrative Con/Texts in 'Dubliners'*. Basingstoke and London: Macmillan, 1994.

Gifford, Don. *Joyce Annotated: Notes for "Dubliners" and "A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man"*. 1967; Revised edition. Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1982.

Jackson, John Wyse and McGinley, Bernard. *James Joyce's 'Dubliners': An Annotated Edition*. London: Sinclair-Stevenson, 1993.

Kelly, John. 'Introduction' to *Dubliners*: Everyman's Library 49 (London: David Campbell Publishers, 1991), pp. xi-iii.

Peake, C. H. *James Joyce: The Citizen and the Artist*. 1977; paperback edition, London: Edward Arnold, 1980.