CHAPTER 3

Touching ‘Clay’: reference and reality in Dubliners

A SOFT WET SUBSTANCE

Halloween games are being played at the Donnelly’s, and it is the family’s guest, their one-time employee, Maria, whose turn it is 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 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-book. (D 105)

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. That doing so raises the question of this particular text’s relationship to the general laws of representation and reference should come as no surprise; the uniqueness of a literary text is not that of some unrepeatable essence, but precisely that of its singular relation to the general, its endlessly reiterable staging of the once-for-all-time.

As part of an endeavour to respond adequately, we can try to recreate or imagine a first reading of this passage, without commentaries at our elbows or notes at the foot of the page. In such a reading, Maria’s experience 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 insubstan-
tial, 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.

In terms of standard narrative analysis, of course, the absence of any
name for the substance María touches is explained by the 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 María from the beginning (whether her own way of
speaking or thinking, or one that she would in some way endorse¹): 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 María’s;² and since María 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 identi-
fication: 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 María’s consciousness, providing a sudden external view
couched in a conventional ‘literary’ rhetoric: ‘her grey-green eyes spar-
ked with disappointed shyness’ (101), ‘her minute body nearly shook
itself asunder’ (101), ‘[she] ferreted her way’ (102).³ Even more strikingly,

¹ This second possibility would be a version of what Hugh Kenner, in *Joyce’s Voices*, famously
named ‘The Uncle Charles’ principle, after the sentence in the opening passage of Part 11 of *A
Portrait* which informs us that ‘uncle Charles repaired to his outhouse’ (11.12–13). The word
*repaired*, as Kenner points out, is not simply one that the character would use (and thus a type of ‘free
indirect discourse’ or *style indirect libre*), but one that he would choose to have used of him by
someone describing his action. The style we associate with María is not, however, a literary style
of the kind Uncle Charles favours. For further discussion, see notes 3 and 11 below.

² The assumption that we can identify a ‘narrator’ or ‘narrative voice’ – which implies a persona
responsible for the telling of the story – is one whose untenability will become evident; however, it
serves as convenient shorthand for a more theoretically laden phrase, such as ‘narrative instance’
or ‘discourse’, which would bring its own problems.

³ These rather self-conscious literary phrases are not easy to interpret: one might expect them all to
offer glamorized images of María, but this is not so – ‘ferreted’ is a case in point, and the ‘witch’
image may be another. We certainly cannot posit a single consciousness which sometimes
presents María through her ‘own’ style and sometimes through a consistent narrative style, nor
can we securely identify a voice we could call ‘authorial’ (a point made of *Dubliners* more generally
by Colin MacCabe in his chapter ‘The End of a Meta-Language: From George Eliot to *Dubliners*’
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’ (106). Not only is the narrative here pointing out something which Maria fails to perceive, but our attention is being drawn to that failure and thus to the literary strategy being used: 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 something similar for the ‘soft wet substance’ had he wished to, and therefore we are aware that the name is being withheld from us by the author as well as by the narrator; that the disjunction being enforced here between language and the material world is not to be passed over as a mere side effect of a technique that, once chosen, cannot be varied.

It might be claimed 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, makes this connection. The reader is then in a position to reconstruct the events of which Maria remains ignorant: the saucers with ring, water, and prayer book have been replaced, with mischievous intent, by one containing garden clay, pushed surreptitiously under Maria’s descending hand.⁴ Although such an appeal to the title seems satisfactorily to fill the void threatening to open at this moment in the story, we will find it useful to interrogate a little more closely the interpretative operations involved in such a solution to the puzzle.

Firstly, in order to make this move, we have to give the title an authority that the text clearly lacks, setting the utterance ‘Clay’ 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 this element of the text is in part determined by our reading of the very text it names: if ‘Clay’ had turned out to be a story

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⁴ Not all readers will want to ascribe this much malice to the children; thus Warren Beck states, ‘It 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*, 213). But the fact that the critic in question, William T. Noon, does assume it shows that it is possible to do so; 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. Cóilín 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), 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 I find it easier to imagine a free choice being allowed (see Noon, ‘Joyce’s “Clay”’).
about a sculptor the title would, at least in retrospect and in further readings, be interpreted rather differently. On a first reading of any work, we have to suspend full interpretation of the title until we have reached the end of the work, and it is only the inclusion of the passage about the saucer that enables us to interpret the word *clay* in the title literally. 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 before the question – a sort of gargantuan ‘Jeopardy’ game. And thirdly, we have to relegate any figurative interpretations of the title, including the obvious implications of malleability, frailty, and mortality, to a secondary place; or if we do not, we have to reverse our normal hierarchies and regard ‘Clay’ as a general, symbolic title which also happens to have a literal meaning in reference to one specific paragraph – a rather difficult feat.⁵

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 moment of bafflement, and our hermeneutic 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; and we cannot simply say that the words ‘soft wet sub-

stance’ refer to clay.

A comparison with earlier titles Joyce used for the story in progress will clarify the point further. The first completed version was called ‘Hallow Eve’, a name which embraces the entire narrative rather than focusing 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

⁵ Jean-Jacques Lecerel has pointed out to me that the passage signals the missing term to us 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.
story as ‘The Clay’, 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 operation and keeps the metaphoric associations – malleability, frailty, and so on – at bay.

There remains, then, something in the description of Maria’s hand reaching the saucer that resists the well-oiled machinery of our cognitive apparatus, and that recourse to the title ‘Clay’ does not quite remove; a sense that the gears which smoothly connect language to the physical world have slipped out of their normal mode of efficient and unnoticeable operation. And my argument is that it is just this slippage, this hesitation, that makes the passage so powerful and its power so hard to account for.

I want now to broaden the discussion to the whole of ‘Clay’ (and by implication to Joyce’s method throughout Dubliners). After all, if this passage is a crucial one, as the title suggests, we should be able to read it in a way that sheds light on the entire story. At first, it is not easy to see why this particular episode should be singled out. It does not appear to have narrative centrality: it is 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). If the title were to reflect a passage with this kind of thematic centrality, it would have to be called something like ‘Plum Cake’. (It is interesting to speculate whether, with this title, we would come to a different conclusion about the identity of the ‘soft wet substance’ in the saucer.) Nor does this passage constitute the culmination of the narrative; for a title that would reflect the final phase of the story, with its revealing mistake by Maria, one might suggest ‘I Dreamt that I Dwelt’.

The most common way of dealing with this problem is, no doubt, to rely on the title’s general, symbolic overtones to give the passage extra weight; 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 a case in point, where these words form part of the newspaper report quoted in the story but clearly allude to Mr Duffy’s personal history; and so, in different ways, are ‘Araby’ (the name of the bazaar, but also a pointer to the

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young boy’s yearnings and fantasies) and ‘The Dead’, where we experience a complex interrelation among Gretta Conroy’s revelation of Michael Furey’s death, Gabriel Conroy’s reverie following it, and a certain view of the characters at the party as a group. 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 does not seem immediately to radiate significance through the story in the same way as do the report of Mrs Sinico’s death (another example of a story which covers up a grim female existence), the romantic Eastern name of the bazaar which the boy longs to visit, or the desperate act of love which Gretta describes.⁷

In the case of ‘Clay’, the wider meaning that immediately springs to the interpreting mind is ‘death’.⁸ If Maria had recognized the substance, and read into it a prophecy along the lines of the other items in the saucers, she would no doubt have concluded that she was being warned of an early demise. Some versions of the game include clay with just this meaning, and it seems likely that the next-door girls have reintroduced a choice banished from many family parlours.⁹ But what remains unsatis-

⁷ Several of the stories of Dubliners have titles whose relation to the story is open to various interpretations; ‘The Sisters’ and ‘An Encounter’ seem to focus on only one section of the text, though a much more prominent section than is the case in ‘Clay’; there is no obvious eponym within the text of ‘A Little Cloud’, though a number of alternatives are available; and the title ‘Grace’ presumably exists in some kind of ironic relation to the story it names.

⁸ Examples of this interpretation in studies of ‘Clay’ abound; I note only three instances, all collected in Garrett, ed., Twentieth-century Interpretations of Dubliners. Hugh Kenner: ‘Maria is “Clay” as humanity itself, as susceptible to moulding, and as death in life’ (47); Brewster Ghiselin: ‘She is ready for death, as her touching the clay in the Hallow Eve games intimates’ (77); Florence Walzl: ‘Her hidden fortune, the clay, prophetic of death, suggests all that the ultimate future holds for her’ (109). It is perhaps the influence of this interpretation of the title which leads so many commentators to refer to Maria as ‘old’; thus Beck, who is generally scrupulous in avoiding symbolic readings, uses the phrase ‘little old Maria’ four times in his chapter on ‘Clay’ (201, 203, 206, 207). She is old enough to have looked after, perhaps as a young girl, two boys who are now old enough to have small children of their own, and she admires her body in the mirror ‘in spite of its years’: but neither of these things necessarily makes her a little old woman. Once again, what is significant is that there is nothing in the text to indicate unquestionably Maria’s stage of life.

⁹ Cóilín 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’ (“Clay” [1], 344). François Laroque, in ‘Hallowe’en Customs in “Clay”’, 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 Pleiade edition of Joyce’s Œuvres, 1, mentions this fourth possibility (1522), but then 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 . . .
factory about this interpretative jump, inevitable though it is, 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. A quite different interpretation of the title in its wider function is an appeal to the notion of malleability: Maria exemplifies the human tendency to be moulded by situation, by desire, by anxieties, by the responses of others; and the text itself, with its multiple and shifting meanings, 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.¹⁰

Though these meanings hover suggestively in the reader’s mind, they do not account for the importance accorded to the passage by the title. 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 (in fiction, but also in other types of discourse) 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 unknowingly, from the beginning of the story.

For in that beginning, from the opening words ‘The matron had given her leave to go out as soon as the women’s tea was over’, 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 first paragraph accomplishes a great deal, in spite of its apparent simplicity (let us again assume a first reading):

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. The kitchen was spick and span: the cook said you could see yourself in the big copper boilers. The fire was nice

¹⁰ These two possibilities do not exhaust the significance that has been found in the title; others include ‘an ironic reminder of [Maria’s] earth mother archetype’ (Hana Wirth-Nesher, ‘Reading Joyce’s City’, 287) and a ‘polite circumlocution that eradicates the dirt and squalor of Maria’s life’ (Norris, Joyce’s Web, 134).
and bright and on one of the side-tables were four very big barmbracks. These barmbracks seemed uncut; but if you went closer you would see that they had been cut into long thick even slices and were ready to be handed round at tea. Maria had cut them herself.

‘The matron had given her leave’: already we are assumed to know who ‘the matron’ is; we are placed in a present that presupposes a past (‘had given’); and, as if we already knew the character being spoken of, we are told only of ‘her’. The use of the pronoun where we might expect a noun is typical of free indirect style, since one does not commonly use one’s own name in one’s own thoughts, and although the second half of the sentence provides the name that we require, this early sense that we are getting Maria’s own thoughts mediated via another voice keeps reasserting itself.¹¹

As accomplished readers of fiction, we process this exiguous material with ease, and recognize that our task will be, as it has so often been, to reconstruct the context from the account of someone who gives only sparse details precisely because of their familiarity with it – and at the same time to take pleasure in the skilled writer’s ability to establish the detail of this context with the utmost economy of effort. That the narrative voice is non-literary is quickly evident – largely paratactic, it deals in cliché (‘spick and span’) and banal phrasing (‘nice and bright’), and it makes no attempt to avoid random repetition (‘go out’, ‘evening out’; ‘big copper boilers’, ‘very big barmbracks’; ‘they had been cut’, ‘Maria had cut them’). The point of view is quickly localized as Maria’s: not only does the non-literary language suggest a particular consciousness within the narrative, but the admiration for the apparently uncut barmbracks assumes a particular station in the room, which appears to be occupied by no-one other than Maria and the cook (‘if you went closer you would see’). The formally external and neutral statement with which the paragraph ends – ‘Maria had cut them herself’ – implies, in its context, a self-reflective moment of justified pride. The limited point of view and commonplace style appear designed to achieve the fullest possible involvement with the main character, Maria, whose view of her environment we have no reason to mistrust.

¹¹ Norris argues that ‘the narrative voice probably does not speak in the language of Maria’s class – whose diction can’t be verified from the text – but in the idiom of someone mimicking the accents of respectable bourgeois folks’ (Joyce’s Web, 126). The crucial term here is presumably ‘mimicking’ – and Norris goes on to refer to ‘Maria’s notion of . . . the phrasing of proper middle-class speech’ (126) – since much of the language is impoverished and repetitive. But the problem of the unverifiable ‘real’ diction of Maria’s class, like the problem of Maria’s class itself, will not go away.
For many readers, no doubt, this remains true to the end of ‘Clay’. Frank O’Connor is one such reader, 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’, 307). (I will return to this apparently mistaken description of Maria’s relation to Joe.) 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 to the reader expecting large meanings. The title, as we have noted, suggests one such extension of significance. 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 is 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 sceptical 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 on the tram, remembers how ‘confused’ the gentleman had made her: a confusion of which there was no discursive trace when the event was related. Or the suspicion that the narrative is not presenting reality in a completely straightforward manner may arise with the contrast between, on the one hand, the narrator’s repeated insistence on the success of the party at the Donnelly’s – how
Joe is ‘very nice to her’ (104) and ‘never . . . so nice to her as he was that night’ (105), how ‘everything was merry again’ (104) and ‘they were all quite merry again’ (105), how Joe and his wife are ‘in such good spirits’ – and, on the other, the narrated events, including the children’s resentment at Maria’s accusation about the plum cake, Joe’s anger over the lost (or hidden?) nutcracker, the violent argument about Joe’s estranged brother, the failed trick with the clay, the mistake in Maria’s song, and the culmination of Joe’s drunkenness in maudlin nostalgia and helplessness as he gropes, in the story’s final sentence, for the missing corkscrew.

However the reader’s suspicions are aroused, they prove a potent interpretative engine, as indeed my somewhat overstated previous sentence might suggest. They make possible the construction of a different version of Maria’s situation and experiences from the very beginning of the story: the first sentence reveals that she regularly has to work in the evenings, the second that it is her duty to clean the kitchen and scour the boilers, and that she is on an equal footing with the cook, whose praise she values. The expression of pride in the neatly cut barmbracks is seen as a diversion of the reader’s attention away from Maria’s other responsibilities to the only one consonant with a genteel lifestyle. The vigilant reader can find alternative meanings of this sort in virtually every sentence.¹² The most forceful summary of this obscured reality that I know is Margot Norris’s, in a brilliant essay on ‘Clay’ from which I have already quoted, entitled ‘Narration Under a Blindfold’ (Joyce’s Web, ch. 6):

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 slavery she once was, and from whom she succeeds in extorting only a minimal and ritualized tolerance by manipulating their guilt and pity. (124)¹³

¹² It is somewhat ironic that Chris Hutchinson, in ‘The Act of Narration’, an article with the admirable aim of criticizing speech-act theories of narrative for their idealizing tendencies, should use the opening sentence of ‘Clay’ as his example, since he argues that this sentence ‘makes no claims for the truth of the expressed proposition and, taken in the null context as a sentence in the language, requires no act of trust on the part of the hearer’, and that such propositions ‘do not involve criteria of truth or the hearer’s trust that the speaker is telling the truth, i.e., not misleading him’ (18–19). In the narrative context of ‘Clay’, the question of trust, of the possibility of the reader’s being misled, is precisely the issue; it might be said that Hutchinson has still not sufficiently de-idealized his account of narrative discourse, and that the always possible unreliability of the narrator should be taken into account, and distinguished from the authorial (or, to use a Barthesian coinage, scriptorial) function.

¹³ A less extreme account of the occulted reality of Maria’s life is given by Warren Beck; thus he regards the praise which is heaped on Maria for her peacemaking at the laundry as a jest which
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 of the person she is but the product of a social judgement on unattractive old maids, it is by transforming the neutral or hostile responses she receives from those she encounters 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, both to a reality they name – the reality of Maria’s constructed world – and to the reality which that construction is designed to oblitera-
rather grim view of Dublin family life—unless Scholes has also been taken in by the nature of Maria’s employment.) On the other hand, Norris’s reference to her as the Donnellys’ ‘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 like an honoured guest (however patronizingly)?

Once we start scrutinizing details of interpretation like this, however, the question of where reality lies becomes 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 sceptical 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’ (Joyce’s Web, 125) — but how, in a verbal text, is anything shown except by being said? It is easy enough to demonstrate inconsistencies that lead us to suspect the accuracy of the version we are given — I have already mentioned the different accounts of the gentleman on 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 it.¹⁵ 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 appears to refer, but as long as there is even the slightest hesitation about what it refers to, it cannot be said to do so in the normal sense of the word.

How can we know what Maria’s relationship to the Donnelly family is, since anything the text says about it is likely to reflect her desires on this
score rather than the plain fact of the matter? If she holds a lowly status in the family, this is the one thing that the text cannot tell us. If the response to Maria’s arrival at the Donnelly’s – ‘O, here’s Maria!’ – really means, as Norris suggests, ‘O god, here’s Maria already’ (Joyce’s Web, 132), the text will take advantage of the tonelessness of print in order to avoid revealing this. 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 we cannot make this an interpretative algorithm, since we have no way of knowing when what we are being told is the unvarnished truth. We have already noted that the narrative is not consistent in its style and its range of vision; at any point, therefore, it could refer to the unglamorized world. When we first read the sentence ‘Everyone was so fond of Maria’ we may treat it as an objective comment from the narrator; on a second reading we may decide that it is a reflection of Maria’s wishful thinking. But because the narrative is not in a position to say something like ‘Everyone found Maria rather an embarrassment, but fortunately she missed most of their mocking irony and patronizing condescension’, we can never know if this is indeed the case. When the narrative refers to Maria’s hand descending on ‘one of the saucers’, we cannot know whether there are more than one; her blindfold has rendered this knowledge forever impossible, for her, the narrator, and every reader.

The blindfold that Maria wears all the time – the bandage that protects her from the knowledge that would crush her spirit – has exactly the same effect. 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 could, in fact, gradually increase the distance between the reality which the words actually name and the one they conceal until the latter bears no obvious relation to the former: once a wedge of suspicion has been inserted between the two, we have no grounds for stopping at any particular point. It is not even a question of irony, a difficult enough rhetorical manoeuvre to pin down, since the first level of meaning, when it is dominant, completely fails to acknowledge the second. Nor can we draw a parallel with Gerty MacDowell’s romantic rendering of her experience in the ‘Nausicaa’ episode of Ulysses, or with 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
scepticism with which we treat the narrative. There is an 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 our interpretative decisions are, like Maria’s, to some degree the products of our fears and desires; if we substitute a tawdry reality for the images that the narrator offers — like Norris’s rewriting of the text’s ‘elderly gentleman’ with a ‘square red face’ who turns out to have ‘a drop taken’ as ‘a fat flushed old drunk’ given to ‘intemperate swilling’ (130)¹⁶ — we should investigate (as 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 13 November 1906 if not from some other historical source, such as Thom’s Directory¹⁷ — that there was in Dublin at this time a Protestant-run laundry called Dublin by Lamplight whose mission was to rehabilitate reformed prostitutes. 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 could not possibly admit, of course — it is 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 does not refer to the Dublin 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, making them pseudo-references, hollowed out from within.

Does this uncertain narrative, which forces us into interpretative acts that we can never fully justify, both leading us towards a hidden referent and denying its possibility, set ‘Clay’ apart from the rest of Joyce’s œuvre? On the contrary, it seems to me; not only do we find a similar staging of language’s impossible acts of reference throughout Dubliners, but the story is a remarkable foreshadowing of the way in which Ulysses, with its

¹⁶ Norris, it should be recalled, qualifies her own endorsement of this interpretation by associating such readings with the social judgements that make the text’s deceptions necessary.

¹⁷ Quoted by Aubert in Joyce, Œuvres, 1, 1521.
equal insistence on the reality of historical Dublin life and on the constitutive powers of language and style, both heightens and undermines referentiality. It could even be said to establish the method of *Finnegans Wake*, which allows language to realize all its potential as an instituting rather than a referential force. I would go further: ‘Clay’ dramatizes, with extraordinary brevity and concentration, the peculiar status of referentiality in all literary texts. The question, ‘What do the words in a literary text refer to?’ is an impossible one, even if it is one we have to keep asking. Not simply because they refer to imaginary people, places, and events, but because in literature the activity of referring is itself put in question. It is staged, simulated, played at, mimed. Nowhere is referentiality more strongly felt than in some works of literature, Joyce’s included, at the very moment when the traditional notion of reference is being most thoroughly undermined. And this staging of reference is not a game which can be confined within the harmless arena of the literary text; it is a demonstration of the limitations of a conventional, or philosophical, understanding of reference; one which attempts to cleanse language of its literary bent, its penchant for storytelling, its ceaseless invitation to interpretation, and all the self-justifications and self-defences that interpretation involves.

**MARIA VICTRIX**

I want to return now to the Halloween game, because there remains something in it that resists these explanations and theorizations. ‘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 that her fingers encounter something not among the expected alternatives in this version of the game, which Joyce has already taken care to specify. The clause that begins, ‘and she was surprised’ does not, surprisingly, turn out to refer to her reaction to the unexpected physical sensation. What she is surprised by is the silence and inaction that follow her touching of the substance – and it is clearly her lack of initial 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 is a version of the common trick of getting someone to believe they are touching excrement) or, if she did accurately identify the substance, to recoil from it as a known possibility in the game predicting an early death.

However, the trick fails, and it fails because Maria refrains from interpreting conceptually what she experiences by touch alone; she resists any temptation to transform the substance she knows through the most unverbal 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 – or non-epiphany, if you like – is an uncomfortable silence, then restlessness, then adult intervention. The reader is given a hint to confirm the interpretation that links this passage with the title – ‘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. The episode casts a general gloom on the party, and not until Mrs Donnelly has played a reel for the children and Maria has been plied with wine are we told that ‘they were all quite merry again’; and only, then, interestingly, does Maria get an interpretation of her second attempt at the game. Even in the case of a legitimate object, Maria has to have its significance explained to her.

By failing to introduce language, conceptuality, reference,¹⁸ Maria protects herself from the cruelty of the children’s trick – Norris proposes that it is motivated by revenge for Maria’s accusation that they are responsible for the disappearance of the plum cake – 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 hostility.¹⁹ 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 agency that represents her wishes – has no device to turn negative into positive. But her non-conceptualizing actually produces

¹⁸ One might debate whether the words ‘soft wet substance’ are a reflection of Maria’s thought at this moment, or a purely narrative description of a wholly physical experience. If they are to be regarded as a verbalization, they still represent only a minimal step from the physical experience.

¹⁹ 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 effected, 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.
for her a small victory, perhaps her only triumph over the many people she interacts with during this evening. 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 our recollection of the story’s title) our interpretative composure; like the adults at the party, we reassert our rational control over a situation that for a moment seemed to endanger our authority. But 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 kind of pure relation to being, the effect of the passage on us as readers might be to remind us of the need, in acts of responsible interpretation, to respect the other as other. Although ‘Clay’ demands, more insistently than most stories, intense interpretative activity, it also reminds us that there is sometimes a virtue in not interpreting, that responding fully to a text can mean allowing its otherness to remain other, unassimilable, unconceptualizable, irreducible, resistant. We perhaps shouldn’t be too quick to fill Maria’s saucer with common-or-garden clay.