Chapter 1
The Gnomon of the Book: "The Sisters"

Among the stories in *Dubliners*, the gaps, ellipses, and silences in "The Sisters" have engrossed critics for decades, and have received such illuminating attention that their dilation of the story's interpretive possibilities has been extensively explored. This is clearly no accident, for I believe (along with other critics) that Joyce made the figure and function of the gap, the silence, and the figure of incompleteness an inescapably foregrounded trope in the story. By doing so he guaranteed that it could not be missed, and would therefore serve as a clew and a clue, a guiding thread and key to the entire volume's hermeneutical enigma. No reader of "The Sisters" can get past that arresting sentence on the first page of the story—and of *Dubliners*—when the narrative voice invents a quite ordinary word with the sound of strangeness ("I said softly to myself the word *paralysis*. It had always sounded strangely in my ears") (9), and then multiplies that strangeness with the sound of two even stranger words, "like the word *gnomon* in the Euclid and the word *simony* in the Catechism" (9). When the narrative voice confesses its fascination with these strange bookish words, it simultaneously invites the reader to look into the abyss of stories that are marked by incompleteness, by insufficient information, by chunks missing from them, gaps and silences that render them undecidable. Their indecibility also renders them, in a sense, unreadable, albeit unreadable in quite determinate ways.

The evidence for the function of these mysterious words as a hermeneutical signal was made available quite early in the tradition of *Dubliners* criticism, and nowhere more clearly or persuasively than in Florence Walzl's 1973 *James Joyce Quarterly* essay examining Joyce's draft revisions of "The Sisters." Walzl stressed the relentlessly realistic, though not entirely unambiguous, representational mode of the first version of the story that Joyce wrote for the August 13, 1904 *Irish Homestead*. At the same time she makes it clear that the strangely resonant figures of paralysis, gnomon, and simony were later additions—"there is no mention of paralysis and no detail that can be specifically pinpointed hemiplegia (a unilateral paralysis), let alone total paralysis. There are also no suggestions of immoral conduct. And in this description there are no mysterious gnomons, no inferences of simony, and no hints of sodomy" (379). Walzl infers that the function of these additions and revisions was to allow "The Sisters" to serve as introduction and overture to the volume as a whole: "Examination of the final versions indicates that 'The Sisters' had been gradually redesigned to act as introduction to *Dubliners*' main themes and motifs" (376). By 1898, when Thomas F. Staley wrote "A Beginning: Signification, Story, and Discourse in "The Sisters," he was able to call this notion—that the opening paragraph of the story was intended to function as an overture for the themes, conflicts, and tensions of the entire volume—a "critical commonplace" (181). He was also able to describe that function in terms of new theoretical concepts and a new theoretical language: "With 'The Sisters' Joyce had just begun a deconstructive process, and the title is the first announcement of a new awareness of the potentiality of language" (181).

We can take this point even further in the direction of Jean-Michel Rabaté's formulation of the function of silence in *Dubliners*, arguing that it allows the volume to produce a "theory of its own interpretation, of its reading, of its possible meta-discourses about textuality" (46). In this sense "The Sisters" can be thought of as that which makes of *Dubliners* a gnomon—by serving as a synecdoche or miniature representation of the whole collection. Walzl gives a Webster's dictionary definition of a gnomon as "the remainder of a parallelogram after the removal of a similar parallelogram containing one of its corners" (389). Much later Leonard Albert offered a diagram of a gnomon to illustrate the story's "gnomonology." He also pointed out its possibilities as a genealogical trope, as a geometric version of the colloquial description of a son as "a chip off the old block" (355); "we are being shown, in effect, two parallelograms with congruent angles, that is, of the same shape, different only in size, the smaller being the offspring, so to speak, of the larger or parent figure" (355). Albert uses this insight into the generational relationship inherent in the gnomonic structure by which a "parent parallelogram" produces a gnomon through the removal or separation of a "scion parallelogram" (356) to look at the relationship between the priest and the boy. More accurately, gnomon as a generational trope would point to a parent who has lost a same-sex child: Leopold Bloom would be a human gnomon, as would the mythical figure of Daedalus. But a child is itself a gnomonic figure, a figure of incompleteness, and a dead child becomes an unreadably gnomonic figure, since its destiny, its hypothetical completion as a human being, is rendered eternally unknowable by the truncation of its life. One way of reading "The Sisters," in this light, would be to place the adult narrator and his boy-self into a gnomonic genealogical relationship. This would allow us to explore whether the adult narrator is the father, as it were, of a boy-self who suffered a trauma that left him *un-whole*, and that subsequently produced an adult with a missing piece. The narrator would be missing a part
of childhood that can't be remembered or articulated, and his telling of a story of his boyhood would be necessarily left unfinished and therefore unreadable. I plan later to explore not only the triangulated relationship between the reader, the "adult" narrator, and the narrated-narrating boy, but to stretch that triangle into a gnomic parallelogram by configuring it to include the fourth figure of the titular sisters.

Before moving inside the story, however, I would like to consider how "The Sisters" functions gnemonically for the entire collection of Dubliners, and for the Joycean oeuvre as a whole. If we translate what Albert calls the "scion" parallelogram or "chip off the old block" into a rhetorical figure, we could say that "The Sisters"—with its gaps and silences—functions as a synecdoche, not for the book as a whole, but precisely for the book as an un-whole, a volume of incompleteness, a collection of stories each of which is riddled by gaps and silences that afflict it with incompleteness. In other words, in its status as a fiction without wholeness, "The Sisters" serves as a synecdoche for a collection of fictions without wholeness. This sense of "The Sisters"' relationship to the rest of the stories would also encompass Leonard Albert's recollection of gnomon's Greek root—"Unchanged from ancient Greek ... the basic meaning of gnomon is 'model, criterion, standard' " (355). What "The Sisters" performatively announces in its function as a model or standard for the rest of the collection is that the remaining stories will be as fragmented, as full of gaps and ellipses and mysteries, as it is itself. I would go further to give a moral resonance to "The Sisters" as the un-whole model of a collection of un-whole stories by suggesting that its state of un-wholeness opens the possibility that its gaps and ellipses will open into a moral universe of unwholesomeness, an unwholesomeness at the heart of all the stories that points to what Joyce himself in his October 15, 1905 letter to Grant Richards called "the special odour of corruption which, I hope, floats over my stories" (Letters II, 123).

The critical readings that have been performed on "The Sisters" have been among the most sophisticated and inventive in the entire canon of Dubliners criticism precisely because they have delved into the gaps and silences. Perhaps because Joyce posed the narrative mysteries so pointedly in the story's disjuncted narration, the kinds of undecidable speculation and inference readers would normally be reluctant to make were hazarded even at the beginning of the story's critical history. Florence Walzl remembers Joyce reporting a conversation with his editor George Roberts, "He asked me very narrowly was there sodomy also in 'The Sisters' and what was 'simony' and if the priest was suspended only for the breaking of the chalice" (Joyce's 'The Sisters' " 392). Walzl not only refused to shy away from the startling speculation that Father Flynn's sin might have been of a sexual nature, but she went further. In an essay co-authored with a medical physician, she linked the priest's breakdown and death to this sin by diagnosing his paralysis as syphilitic paresis, also known as "general paralysis of the insane" (Torchiana 20). The argument is not unconvincing, particularly given Joyce's early admiration of Ibsen—the author who dared make syphilis and its concealment the subject of the drama Ghosts. Stanislaus Joyce's 1904 diary entry notes that his brother James "talks much of the syphilitic contagion in Europe, is at present writing a series of studies on it in Dublin, tracing everything to it" (Complete Dublin Diary 51). Walzl nonetheless ascribes chiefly symbolic significance to the syphilis, treating it as a medical figure for the spiritual condition of the Irish people.

The holes in the Dubliners stories open up the possibility of transgressive reading in two senses or layers. First, the reader (like the characters, on occasion) entertains the suspicion that the gaps and ellipses in the narrative hide or occlude evidence of transgression. Second, this suspicion itself becomes a form of readerly transgression by implicating the reader in imagined transgressive knowledge. Tanja Vesala-Vertala argues that all readers share a characteristic vulnerability with the child-protagonists, or what she calls the "child interpreter," of Joyce's stories (123). In this way the reader confronted by the gaps and ellipses of "The Sisters" shares the vulnerability of the boy who risks a loss of innocence by the very fact that he must confront gnomonic language. As soon as a text is recognized as un-whole it threatens the reader with the specter of the unwholesome, and the risk of engaging in an unwholesome interpretive experience. This phenomenon has both a psychoanalytical and a political explanation. Psychoanalytically, we can conjecture that an epistemological gap or a missing piece of knowledge (as opposed to a random absence) must have a negative psychological origin in repression motivated by fear, a sense of danger, or a reluctance. Politically, we know that textual censorship is motivated by the need to suppress an injurious disclosure, a dangerous knowledge, or a threat against authority. The boy protagonist in "The Sisters" is confronted by ellipses in adult conversations—particularly those of Mr. Cotter and Eliza Flynn—whose reading has threatening implications for him ("When children see things like that, you know, it has an effect ... " [11]). Cotter's conversational ellipses imply that the boy had unwittingly entered into a relationship with an unwholesome priest. But the narrative also implies that the boy is himself scrutinized for agitations that might betray his recognition of this unwholenessness ("I felt that his little beady black eyes were examining me but I would not satisfy him by looking up from my plate" [10]). The boy is vulnerable both as an interpreter and as object of interpretation—and so, presumably, is the adult narrative voice of the boy, telling his retrospective story. Kersner points out that the two voices of the narrator-protagonist—"the voice of immediate (child's) experience and the
voice of retrospection (from some indeterminate distance in time)” are curiously “mixed”: “the boy seems in some respects to be a disguised adult—he is almost preternaturally sensitive, suspicious, and evasive. To what extent are we to attribute the boy’s expressions of suspicion, hostility, and general free-floating anxiety to a later retrospection, and to what extent may they be directly attributed to the child’s immediate experience?” (24). Indeed, virtually every figure in “The Sisters” is placed in an anxious interpretive position: the boy, his aunt and uncle, Father O’Rourke, and the priest’s sisters, Eliza and Nannie Flynn. Even Mr. Cotter, the only person who seems comfortable with his suspicion of unwholesomeness, is put into an uncomfortable narrative position, as he realizes that his imputations will be met with skepticism and resistance, and denied corroboration by the boy. No wonder then that the adult narrator, in telling his story of anxious interpreters and uncomfortable narrators, transfers his own performative unease—symptomatized in the fragmented and elliptical conversations he reports and in his own unremembered and unfinished dreams and confessions—onto the reader.3

What seems to be at stake for the adult narrator in telling this riddled story of his youth is his own interpretation—or rather his refusal to interpret—whether the childhood experience he narrates is innocent or guilty. And here, it seems, may be the nub of the problem: that an interpretation of innocence can itself be culpable as a denial of transgressive knowledge, as a refusal to confront and tell a truth, while a suspicion of guilt can itself be culpable as a potential betrayal and sullying of innocence. Is the boy guilty of something because he acquired or confronted a guilty knowledge about the priest, or because he studiously refused to confront the mysteries that surround him? Is the adult narrator reenacting precisely the same mystified stance as the boy, or is he recreating for the reader the suspicious discourse of innuendo that surrounds the boy? Is the boy infected by the adult whisperings into imagining himself as guilty of a desire for guilty knowledge, or is he repressing or withholding guilty secrets that he knows and finds, to his discomfiture, betrayed to the outside world? When the narrative voice tells us of his childhood fascination with the word paralysis—“But now it sounded to me like the name of some maleficient and sinful being. It filled me with fear, and yet I longed to be nearer to it and to look upon its deadly work”—it appears to be confessing something that it will spend the remainder of the story concealing. As Tanja Vesala-Varttala writes, “What the child as a figure for reading demonstrates is that it is never possible to read innocently.” (129).

The fractured sequence of narrative disclosure further functions more like a symptom of a moral and psychological splintering of knowledge than like a willing revelation or confession. The boy’s morally charged meditations on the word “paralysis” are reported as preceding the priest’s death and its announcement by Mr. Cotter. His thoughts could therefore be construed as a desire for transgressive knowledge that precedes the creation of its object by Mr. Cotter’s ellipses (“I puzzled my head to extract meaning from his unfinished sentences”). The boy is reported as filling in the puzzle with the image of the paralytic’s “heavy grey face,” which he tries unsuccessfully to banish by ducking under his covers and thinking of Christmas. But not only does the face reintrude into his thoughts, it now comes accompanied by a murmuring, confessing voice issuing from an increasingly corporeal and vividly imagined smiling mouth whose “lips were so moist with spittle” (11). Is the boy conflating his own supplement to Mr. Cotter’s innuendo with a sexual fantasy (“I felt my soul receding into some pleasant and vicious region”) or with a remembered experience? The puzzle is clarified no better when this sequence—Mr. Cotter’s innuendo and the dream it produces—is recapitulated in reverse as the boy is pictured walking past the priest’s house on the sunny side of the street on the following morning. The heavy grey face of the priest is now remembered in daylight—still with vivid attention to an enlarged corporeal smiling mouth (“When he smiled he used to uncover his big discoulored teeth and let his tongue lie upon his lower lip”). This image recalls Cotter’s words and a part of the boy’s dream that was elicited in the reportage of the previous night, “As I walked along in the sun I remembered old Cotter’s words and tried to remember what had happened afterwards in the dream. I remembered that I had noticed long velvet curtains and a swinging lamp of antique fashion. I felt that I had been very far away, in some land where the customs were strange—in Persia, I thought. . . . But I could not remember the end of the dream.” (13).4 Presumably the adult narrator, remembering his inability, as a boy, to remember the end of a dream, still fails to remember it. As an auto-parental gnomon, the adult narrator harbors a psychologically gnomic scion-self.

The story of “The Sisters” ends with an ellipsis in Eliza’s story about the priest laughing in the confession box—an ellipsis that forecloses the revelation at the heart of the story, “there was something gone wrong with him . . .” (18). The adult narration still does not, and perhaps cannot, tell us what had gone wrong with the priest, and what the boy knew of what had gone wrong with the priest. The trail of signifiers, however, is sufficiently ample by this time that it can be suggestively linked into a hidden guilty narrative of the priest’s sexual molestation of a complicit child. One could reconstruct from the adult narration a sense that the boy already knows, at the opening of the story and before he learns of his death, the sin the laughing priest confesses to himself in the confession box of the empty chapel. We can conjecture that it informs his fascination with paralysis, gnomon, and simony, and that he already knows what
Cotter is talking about, and what he fears Eliza and Nannie will betray to his aunt. The narrator tells of the unfinished dream in two parts. But if we put the parts together, and juxtapose the dreamed confession of the moist-lipped priest with the Persian velvet curtains and antique lamp, we have an image that suggests toward the laughing priest in the dark chapel and the confession box. Yet the boy will not hear about the confession-box incident until the evening of the next day, when Eliza tells her incomplete story. What are we to make of the equanimity with which the narrative reveals the boy's repeated attention to the priest's lower face, the great snuff-filled nostrils, the smiling or laughing mouth with its large teeth, moist lips, and protruding tongue? The memory suggests not sodomy but some less invasive intimacy of a more or less guilty kind. The vision may be simply a child's vantage of a towering figure seen from below. But it may also suggest a connection between the discursive intimacy between priest and boy, the teaching and telling and confessions, to an intimacy with its source in the priest's corporeal mouth.

The construction of this guilty reading of the story is itself culpable, however, if the story is innocent. What if the priest is merely a lonely and kind old man who gratefully repays a boy's charitable visits and gift of sniff by talking to him, and teaching him things? Then the guilty interpretation becomes itself a species of the kind of vicious innuendo with which a dirty-minded Cotter besmirches the reputation of an innocently demented and stroke-pulsed priest. In that case, the adult narrator's tale both tells and performs the way in which the libeling of the priest also victimizes the boy, and victimizes the adult the boy becomes. The gaps in knowledge at each level of the story—in the childhood experience and the adult retelling—makes a measure of guilt and victimization inevitable, and intensifies it by its unlocatability and unverifiability. The story entraps the reader as surely as it entraps all of the story's figures, and especially the protagonist, in a cloud of ethical incertitude that also victimizes the reader. Brian Bremen's discussion of scrupulosity in relation to the story sheds an important light on the reader's ethical dilemma. He cites the New Catholic Encyclopedia's definition of scruples—"Scruples render one incapable of making with finality the daily decisions of life. The psychic impotence, providing a steady source of anxiety and indecisiveness, is especially prevalent in ethical and pseudoethical areas" (63). With this definition, Bremen gives our interpretive paralysis in the face of an impossible ethical adjudication a new, or rather, an old name: "The Sisters' afflicts us with inescapable scruples. The story poses to us the kind of moral conundrum posed by the priest to the boy: "Sometimes he had amused himself by putting difficult questions to me, asking me what one should do in certain circumstances or whether such and such sins were mortal or venial or only imperfections" (13). The need to make difficult moral adjudications places the reader in a scrupulous situation, like that of the boy, who responds to the priest's "intricate questions" by telling us, "I could make no answer or only a very foolish and halting one" (13).

I wish, however, to compound this mystery of the priest's breakdown and potential hidden sin and its implications for the boy, by linking it to the more prosaic textual problem of the story's title. Peter Spielberg is given credit for first drawing serious attention to the story's title as one of its enigmas—"The Sisters' still presents the reader with a major and tantalizing riddle: the title" (Albert, 354). Fritz Senn gives nuance to this problem when he links it to the other strange enigmas of "a story as intricately layered, as bifocal, as off-center, as oddly titled as 'The Sisters'" (17). Are the sisters of the title signposts of misdirection or red herrings? Are they central chiefly as a generalized stand-in for the paralytic Irish people, as many critics suppose? Or must the mystery of the title be brought into some direct link with the mystery of the boy and the priest. Do the sisters belong to the general gnemonology of "The Sisters" as a story, and to the gnemonology of the book? One critic who has made such a link is Leonard Albert. He makes the title coincide with the relationship of boy and priest by arguing that with its connotation of effeminacy, as in the diminutive "sissy," the word "sisters" serves as a code for homosexuality—"The Sisters' therefore has a meaning akin to 'the odd couple,' or in today's phrase, 'the gay couple' " (363). I find this argument, which totally extrudes the literal sisters from the story's drama, intriguing but finally too extreme. Reluctant to abandon the story's literal sisters, I would take the problem of this story of a boy, a priest, and his sisters, in a different direction, by reading it backwards from my own later reading of another pair of spinster sisters in "The Dead." As I argue later in this volume, I believe that the lives of the Morkan sisters in "The Dead" are represented in the story as a narratively occluded feminist tragedy. One can show that Joyce slipped a hidden dimension as artist and protestor behind the insignificant exterior of the sisters, one that the narrator and the other figures in the story manage to stifle. Perhaps, we should look at Nannie and Eliza Flynn as possible figures of occlusion that also hide eloquent silences they cannot speak.

I begin with the view, already explored above, that the question of the priest's (and the boy's) sin or innocence is absolutely undecidable by the reader, and that there is simply insufficient evidence to do more than create the conditions for an overdetermined skepticism or doubt. Although this skepticism taints any possibility of an "innocent" reading, it is nonetheless heuristically useful to construct both "innocent" and "transgressive" hypothetical readings of the priest and the boy against its implications for, and effects on, Eliza and Nannie Flynn, the sisters. The "innocent" reading produced by rigorously limiting our interpretation to what the boy reveals about his intimacy with Father Flynn,
proposes that the boy simply delivered packets of High Toast snuff to the priest on behalf of his aunt. In return for this gift, or the gift of his visit, he received an ongoing, informal tutorial in clerical and theological lore from the house-bound paralytic. The priest’s innocent motive, in this case, is his construction of the boy’s fascination with this religious instruction into “a great wish” (10)—presumably for a religious vocation. Yet in this “innocent” reading, the sisters remain subject to varying and contradictory interpretations. William Johnson, for example, discusses the priest’s sisters as powerful and vulgar figures who have enslaved their helpless and intellectually superior brother in the “sordid tide” of Dublin life, which will again engulf the boy upon the priest’s death. Johnson shares the boy’s “disdain” for these common women: “This is the crux of the story. The grotesque ministrations to the corpse makes apparent a condition which has always existed: the paralytic’s enslavement to the patronage of the sisters” (11). But we can as easily construct a much more sympathetic version of “The Sisters” as a naturalistic tale of poverty, ignorance, and sadness that betrays the politics of gender differences. The story of Nannie and Eliza Flynn may well concern two very poor women from the slums of Irishtown (Gifford, 36) who never married and rose to little more than a meager draper’s business in Dublin. Indeed, at the time of the priest’s death, Eliza Flynn still characterizes herself and her sister as “poor as we are” (16). Meanwhile, their brother managed to receive an education and travel to Rome to attend the Irish college there (Gifford, 31). Yet instead of transferring the responsibility and benefits of this vocation to his sisters, the outcome of their brother’s ecclesiastical career was unhappiness, disappointment, and a final dementia that now threatens to further cloud their lives.6

Garry Leonard, ever sensitive to the ontological nuances of gender implication, also produces an “innocent” reading of the story that foregrounds the victimization of the sisters by their brother’s life and fall. He finds that the symptoms of Eliza Flynn’s “empty” speech (in the Lacanian sense) and the “full” speech of her slips of the tongue (the famous “rheumatic” tires, for example) betray her hidden and bitter feelings about her own and her sister’s disappointed and crossed lives. Leonard conjures that in their bitterness at having been disgraced by the scandal of their brother’s final madness, Eliza and her sister may have resisted a return to Irishtown, to the origin and site of their poverty: “Eliza’s empty speech presents the failure to visit Irishtown as one more unfortunate disappointment in the life of a disappointed man. But once again something is missing from beyond her discourse. Her full speech, the slip of her tongue, betrays something else: a determined woman who frustrations a dying man’s wish in her bitter attempt to hold together the appearance of normalcy and propriety he has so incomprehensively compromised” (47).
the boy and his aunt, before giving final testimony of his dementia in his discovered laughing in the confession box of the dark and locked chapel. Clearly, the queer thing that had come over Father Flynn had come over him not lately at all, but in stages that could, arguably, be correlated with the two previous "strokes." Or had the three strokes occurred in relatively rapid succession at the end—but still far enough apart that word had been circulated widely enough for the boy to have learned of them. If James had been acting queer since the time of the broken chalice ("he began to mope by himself, talking to no one and wandering about by himself" [17]), why had the boy noticed nothing odd about him, except that his hands trembled when he took snuff and that his tongue protruded when he smiled? We never learn whether the chalice was broken publicly, perhaps during a Mass, since an acolyte may have been implicated ("They say it was the boy's fault" [17]), or privately, in the sanctuary, before or after a service, since the chalice was empty. What is the broken chalice a symptom of, to paraphrase Gabriel Conroy? One of the priest's strokes? Or the discovery of some misconduct on his part with an altar boy? The holes in the innocent readings continually open up the possibility of the unwholesome. However, the priest had clearly remained clerically active after the incident of the broken chalice, since he remained "on call" ("So one night he was wanted for to go on a call" [27]) to attend to such religious emergencies as the administration of last rites. Was he retired on disability, as it were, or was he informally defrocked? And was that it? said my aunt. I heard something..." (17). The narrator describes Eliza Flynn as opening the discussion of her brother's condition "shrewdly" (16). She has certainly produced an "innocent" reading of the priest's queerness both for the boy and his aunt, and for our own consumption—regardless of what we assume to be the truth.

So, what if we assume the transgressive scenario that has been a staple of "Sisters" criticism since the beginning, and believe that the priest is syphilitic, and perhaps even guilty of molesting or sodomizing the boy? The truly horrifying implications of this scenario have rarely been fully confronted—the immorality of broken clerical vows with diseased sexual partners compounded with the criminality of a priest preying on, and perhaps fatally infecting, a kindly child. The unreliability of the boy's narration in this case takes on monstrous and tragic proportions as his shielding of a dreadful man, and his concealment of a dreadful experience, either through denial produced by his own feared complicity, or through a kind of occlusion or amnesia produced by trauma. The function of the reader in this case becomes highly problematic as well, as the undecidabilities produced by the boy's willful or unconscious cover-up prevent us from exonerating him from complicity even as we recognize that he must not be blamed. We too are rebuffed as prying and tiresome old imbe-

ciles, like Mr. Cotter, scrutinizing a boy with secrets he refuses to reveal. Wohlfart proposes that Father Flynn's legacy to the boy is "that he must seek out the tales of the people so that they can be incorporated in a new form of confession, a form which might purge the conscience of Ireland" (413). If so, then "The Sisters" is the very opposite of such a confession, an adult tale designed to divert, mislead, and mystify, leaving readers with no possibility of determining a truth, and with no way to purge their everlasting unease.

What of the sisters, if we assume the priest's guilt of syphilis and sodomy? Their role in the story then becomes far more sinister, incriminated, and tragic. To speculate about their role, we need to return to that strange supper conversation in which the aunt insists on pressing Mr. Cotter to clarify his insinuations that the boy ought not to have been allowed to spend time with the old priest. "How do you mean, Mr Cotter?" (to), she asks him, "But why do you think it's not good for children, Mr Cotter?" (11). Leonard suggests that old Cotter is "as suspicious of the boy as he is of Father Flynn" (37), going so far as to say, "one of Old Cotter's unfinished sentences implies that it is the boy who has been suspiciously aggressive in courting the attention of Father Flynn" (38). But Fritz Senn stays with the aunt, and her unanswered question: "The aunt may be irritating and intrusive to her husband and Mr. Cotter, but she asks the right question, and has an inquisitive mind. The visit to the house of mourning owes something to her curiosity" (2). Senn's suggestion, that the aunt's visit to the Flynn home with the boy is an investigative mission, casts her mourning platitudes into a much more ambiguous light. "Did he...peacefully?" (15) leaves the discursive door open to a possible deathbed confession, as does the unfinished "And everything...?" (15). But the aunt appears mollified by news that the priest took the last rites while still conscious, perhaps satisfied that anything of a scandalous nature would have erupted on his deathbed. Yet her unease returns when Eliza edges into her confession that "there was something queer coming over him latterly" (16) and tells the story of the broken chalice. "And was that it? said my aunt, I heard something..." (17). The aunt has not pressed for an explanation; Eliza has volunteered it, though she may have done so knowing that everyone, like the aunt, has "heard something."

The aunt receives little more than the story of the missing priest found laughing softly to himself in the confession box. But what if Eliza and her sister know more than this, more than they let on? What if these women who confuse "pneumatic" with "rheumatic" nonetheless have an inkling about the syphilitic paresis, and suspect that their brother's crossed ways and disappointments reflect a violated celibacy. The honor Eliza imputes to him—"He was too scrupulous always" (17)—then becomes a highly ironic and mendacious mask. It seems almost monstrous to imbue this elderly spinster, with her imperfect grasp of
language, with the ability to have perceived vice and violation in her brother and in her home. The time sequence of the story remains obscure, but the boy's intimacy with the priest seems to have been confined to that back room, the very one in which the boy and his aunt are conversing with Eliza and the nodding Nannie at the story's end. How could Eliza and Nannie have failed to notice something, suspect something, register something going on in that back room in their home when the boy visited his friend? We might say that they were, after all, working in their draper's shop, recovering old umbrellas and such, and not capable of monitoring the activities in their house. But such alibis smack of resistant disavowal, recalling the resistance that Freud encountered in arguing to a shocked world that children are sexualized beings with sexual fantasies and desires, and with misprised knowledge of the life and passions that go on around them. If children know more than we want to believe they know, why not two elderly spinsters?

It is fatuous, I would argue, to maintain Eliza and Nannie's perfect innocence once one posits their brother's vice and the boy's complicity or victimization. Even if we adopt the most moderate view of an improper relationship between priest and boy—that it was discursive and confined to spoken confidences and confessions rather than corporeally enacted—there is still an inescapable ethos of suspect intimacy that the sisters would have had the opportunity to register. What do we make of the sisters once we impute to them a knowledge however fragmented, imperfect, and repressed, of a brother who crossed into transgression and who initiated a child into "a pleasant and vicious region" (11) of smiling exchange and fantasy? I believe the sisters then become figures of the boy and of the reader: figures not of blindness and cowardice, as Walzl supposes, but of tormented uncertainty and troubled incrimination in a moral universe not of their making that nonetheless entrains them in unwanted moral risks and responsibilities. What could or should they have done? Should they have reported their brother's friendship with the boy to Father O'Rourke, the trusted friend ("a body can trust" [16]) who helped them with their arrangements and the insurance? Perhaps Father O'Rourke need not be told since he was one of the three men who found Father Flynn in the confession box laughing to himself? Should they have confessed what they knew, or feared, to the boy's aunt?

Certainly they could not have done so in the boy's presence. William Johnsen takes the boy's judgment of the sisters at face value—"With scrupulous meanness he notes Nannie's commonness. He fancies a conspiratorial smile from the priest, confirming his disdain for these trolls" (11). Johnsen assumes that the reader will share the boy's judgment of the aunts as trolls. But the boy's strange fixation on the material during his vigil, his observation of the badly hooked skirt and down-trodden heel, of poured sherry and sips and sighs, could betoken something quite different than mere disdain. Is the boy determined to distract himself from his fear that he will find himself betrayed, that the sisters have observed him with the priest and will, like Old Cotter, try to air their suspicions to his aunt? As it happens, he remains quite safe, perhaps because the priest was innocent and there was nothing for the sisters to tell except that their invalid brother went mad. But perhaps Eliza, knowing there were rumors, made her own decision to squelch them with a story of ecclesiastical breakdown. Imagining the sisters with a painful dilemma in telling allows us to see them as the mirror of our painful dilemma in reading, veering from possibly innocent blindness to possibly prurient and self-incriminating suspicion.

I am suggesting then that Joyce opens his fictional career with a story that alerts us to pay attention to marginalized and stereotyped figures. The story's title may prod us to consider that all Dubliners, even its seemingly ignorant old women, enjoy the dignity of complex inner lives, moral dilemmas, and, in their later incarnation in "The Dead," political tragedies. Joyce's early fiction seems to privilege the figure of the sensitive boy in the initiation narrative—not only in the first three Dubliners stories, but in Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man as well. Yet impoverished sisters with no prospects, and aging spinsters with few resources, live on the margins of Joyce's fiction just as they live on the margins of society's awareness of them. Their frustrated hopes and dreams are hidden and suppressed as they watch their brothers go off to Rome or Paris to study while they stay behind covering umbrellas or embroidering scenes of Shakespeare in wool or buying a French primer with money needed for food. Not only is "The Sisters" the gnomon for the collection, but the sisters in "The Sisters" are themselves as gnomic in the story as they are in the remainder of Joyce's oeuvre.