

Alving Memorial Orphanage. Looking back, she now sees: "Oh, what a coward I was!" and hoping, ruefully, for a freer future, she despairs, "If only I weren't such a miserable coward, I would tell [my son] the truth." Bonnie Lyons maintains, against all evidence, that Helene Alving sees herself merely "as a victim of a passionless, duty-bound society that poisoned sex, love, and marriage and made her a wife-prostitute." This is a strange description of the intelligent and truth-seeking Helene; if she is the most admired of Ibsen's heroines, it is because she has the moral honesty to confront her past, identify her failing, and take responsibility for it: "I never really listened to myself." Ibsen's play is about the power of what Helene brilliantly calls "ghosts . . . old, dead ideas, dead beliefs" to defeat the demands of the self. But Trilling et al. refuse the demands of the self to impose a moral imperative on the woman and wife: Helene Alving owed it to her husband to want him. This is an example of precisely the kind of thinking Ibsen fought against all his life, the notion that human responsibility is determined by society's institutions (in this case, a marriage of convenience) and not by individual choice. For no matter how liberated the critics' language—Helene was not "emancipated sexually," she "had repressed the sexual side of her nature," she had a "duty to joy"—the message is nothing more than the ancient principle of the marriage debt, an old ghost come back to haunt us in a new guise. It is, in fact, an excellent example of Fru Alving's own remark about the present repeating the past: "I have only to pick up a newspaper, and I seem to see ghosts creeping between the lines." Claiming that Helene Alving was an inadequate wife also ignores what happened in the middle of the night when Helene, far from repressing "the sexual side of her nature," ran off to another man's house crying, "Here I am! Take me!" Although her critics would prefer Helene to adopt, and with joy, "La nuit, tous les chats sont gris" as a guide to sexual comportment, the woman herself felt different. One man, in her opinion, was not the same as another. Like the critics whose interpretation she repeats, Bonnie Lyons schematically equates the sexual warmth Helene failed to give her husband with the "joy of life" and opposes to this Pastor Manders's concept of duty. But it is Manders, after all, the man Helene loves, who sends her back to her husband to do her duty; exactly how this duty could then have become joy of life is a transmutation the difficulty of which has, apparently, never struck anyone. Implicit in all the criticism is that nothing should have been easier.

If Helene's coldness to Alving is the cause of the tragedy, then it has to matter in the plot. But nothing in Ibsen's painstakingly numbered time scheme suggests that the captain's sexual tastes were the result of his wife's frigidity. Moreover, there is the son to account for. If the Trilling interpretation is valid, then Oswald Alving is awkwardly *de trop*; the conflict between the vigorous husband and Bonnie Lyons's "duty-ridden, joyless, bought wife" is not sharpened by the presence of a child. And yet all

readers of *Ghosts* would agree, I think, that the extraordinary presence of Oswald Alving is essential to Ibsen's play. And why? Because the diseased son is the *fatum* of the tragedy, put into motion when Helene returns home and submits to her duty. Since no one would argue that had Helene joyously made love to her husband—if through some superhuman effort she could have managed it—Oswald would have been less syphilitic, then saying that she is responsible for the tragedy because she was not sexually warm to her husband is not only wrong but completely beside the point. It is true that, as Helene explains to her son, the young lieutenant Alving, shut up in a backwater with no friends except drunkards and bums, was society's victim. And so, as she puts it, "the inevitable" happened. But Helene is not to blame for "the inevitable." What she is responsible for, however, is doing what she was supposed to, what her society in her time said was "right"; and her punishment—one of the most unfair, although most just, ever devised—is to hear the fruit of her righteousness, her adored son, confront her with her error: "I never asked you for life. And what kind of life have you given me? TAKE IT BACK AGAIN!" Is not all talk of poor Alving's sexual frustration and Helene Alving's coldness absurdly superfluous to Ibsen's monumental and horrifying vision, a mother condemned to suffer the responsibility for the madness, or, if she prefers, the death, of a beloved son she should never have conceived?

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Joyce's Dublin

To the Editor:

Vincent Pecora's "'The Dead' and the Generosity of the Word" (101 [1986]: 233–45) is a powerful reading of Joyce's story. Never again can we glibly praise Gabriel's final reverie as a resurrective vision that ends *Dubliners* on a positive note. The vision, as Pecora shows, is too like other moments of pseudotranscendence that enable Dubliners to evade the conditions of their world. But the extreme to which Pecora takes his interpretation, until it becomes a modernist critique of culture and Christianity, reacts upon his reading and makes it shallower than it might have been.

Pecora touches the key points of the story where Gabriel escapes into "delusive magnanimity" (234). He shows, for example, that Gabriel's "inability to communicate successfully with Lily is what makes his generosity necessary to begin with" (239). This observation is very perceptive, but the structure that supports it requires Pecora to make it illustrate the mechanisms of a Christian culture out of which there is no exit. Gabriel's own "princely failing" is oddly heroized as the latest step of

a gigantic unfolding cultural trap sprung by Christ. Even Joyce, for Pecora, is caught by these mechanisms and can only dramatize their nature. Pecora dares not be visionary himself for fear of being infected by the delusive pattern, but as a result he has no way of indicating the significance of what he observes.

In addition to the theme of deferred linguistic presence that Pecora observes, there is another theme of presence in "The Dead," namely, the presence or lack of presence in people's relations to one another. What gives Gabriel's delusive magnanimity its special poignancy is the way it is motivated by his insecurity about himself, his fear of exposure, his need to protect himself within a shell. He cannot bear to be present to Lily when she challenges him, and so he retreats into his conventional courtesy. This kind of fear is at the heart of the tragedy of Dublin paralysis and underlies many incidents, like Gabriel's treatment of Miss Yvors and Gretta's treatment of her young lover. It is not repetition of cultural sedimentation that causes this paralysis; rather fear and vulnerability make the characters seize upon "Christian" sentimentalities for self-protection and make them "repeat" the culture so that they seem locked into an unbreakable cycle. Gabriel's final vision of the dead is a vision of universal vulnerability and is thus a partial breakthrough for him. Pecora's critique of this vision is good in that it reminds us that the same vision can combine elements of authentic insight and symptomatic reflex, an ambiguity, however, that Pecora's austere critique cannot accommodate. Pecora's modernism is oddly puritanical: it excoriates Gabriel and denies that he has any choice. We neither like Gabriel in this account nor see any hope for him, and besides, hope would be "hope for the wrong thing." But for Pecora there is no right thing, and centuries of attempted Christian discrimination (reflected in Eliot's poem) are simply waved away. We get no sense of the Dublin Joyce loved as well as hated or of the enormous feeling in the story, the pathos, the human bafflement, the fear, the real loss. When Gabriel says in his dinner speech, "We have all of us living duties and living affections which claim, and rightly claim, our strenuous endeavours," Pecora, I assume, would leap to the kill. And Pecora is right as far as he goes, and his reading is better than many. But the fact remains that what Gabriel says is a dim conventional expression of the real presence Joyce believes in and whose loss he chronicles.

What causes Dublin fear? I am not sure, but I think the question is worth exploring and would probably involve a study of the Irish family system, which mediates many of the problems identified as religious or political. But such study would make for a different article. My point here is that Pecora's ultimate assumptions strip Gabriel's situation of its "poignancy," "fear," and "tragedy," words that cannot have any place in Pecora's analysis. By so privileging cultural repetition, Pecora locks himself into a kind of mechanistic approach to the story. He has no vantage point from which to give a di-

agnosis of Dublin paralysis, because there are no vantage points; and standards by which we might measure fear and tragedy would seem suspiciously Christian. It is one thing to ally Joyce to Derridean critiques of narrative presence and Nietzschean critiques of Christian culture; it is another thing to say, as Pecora seems forced to, that Joyce gives us no insight into what should be present in Dublin and is in fact absent. Ultimately it is not because of the problem of language that Joyce charts "the failure of self-consciousness to uncover any essence within personal identity" (236); it is because of the problem of human relationships, which in Dublin are twisted and obscured. "Generosity," "magnanimity," and "hospitality" are indeed full of lies, but some term like them might be needed to distinguish relationships that nourish from relationships that obstruct. Pecora tells a good tale but only half the story.

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Reply:

I am very much pleased that Dennis Taylor found my essay interesting, and I appreciate his comments. But I must reply that I find my reading of Joyce no more "extreme" than Joyce's critique of his own society; indeed I worried over the degree to which, at this point, my prose would seem too tame for a writer who could refer to his own people as "gratefully oppressed" (see "After the Race"). If Taylor believes that my approach unhappily implies *huis clos*, as Sartre puts it, perhaps he should consider taking up his complaint with the spirit of Joyce and with the spirit of a large part of modernism itself. Taylor would not be the first to object to modernist literature along such lines. And if Taylor is pained to find that words like "tragedy" have no place in my analysis, I can only sympathize with him and claim (1) that it's not my fault and (2) that in my estimation tragedy is absent, not because it seems "suspiciously Christian," but precisely because from a Nietzschean point of view it is profoundly *un-Christian*. Yeats's Dublin may, at times, come close to producing tragedy; Joyce's only produces farce.

There are, however, substantive problems Taylor raises, and it would be dishonest to pass them by. I will confess that I am disappointed to have given any reader the impression that, in my view, Joyce's narrative reveals primarily "the problem of language" in the text's interrogation of reflective consciousness or that this "problem" is the motive force in the story. I intended Derrida's critique of the phenomenology of voice to be understood as a means of drawing attention to the illusion of a dependable distinction between what Schiller called the "person" and its "conditions," a distinction that in bourgeois ideology is fundamental but one that is in fact no more available in its "enlightened," secular form than in the religious metaphysics that is its model. That is, I quite agree with