

Joycean Hermeneutics and the “Tyranny of Hidden Prejudice”

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Abstract: In order to revise interpretive prejudgments, it is necessary to first recognize them for what they are. Problematically, the habitual overreliance on deficient prejudgments can make such recognition difficult. An impasse appears: How can I intervene on deficient interpretive resources if those very same resources conceal their deficiencies from me? To answer this question, I analyze James Joyce’s short story “The Dead,” in which the protagonist Gabriel is highly resistant to internalizing experiences that might otherwise prompt him to revise his interpretive projections. I argue that Gabriel only becomes aware of his interpretive shortcomings after an induced experience of hesitation that allows him to affectively sense the limitations of his prejudice. Drawing from Hans-Georg Gadamer, Kristie Dotson, and Alia Al-Saji, I argue that Gabriel’s experience of hesitation temporarily denaturalizes his deeply entrenched sexism, circumventing the hermeneutical impasse described above. Read in this way, “The Dead” illustrates the power of affective experiences to unsettle highly resilient ways of seeing the world.

Keywords: hermeneutics, critical phenomenology, prejudice, epistemological resilience, Joyce

I. Introduction

20th-century hermeneutical philosophy is not only concerned with successful interpretation, but also with the ways in which interpretations can go wrong. Here is one of those ways: sometimes the habitual overreliance on certain prejudgments can make it near-impossible to recognize the influence of those same prejudgments. Prejudgments that are self-concealing in this way are resistant to conscious revision because they are naturalized to the point of operating invisibly.

Hans-Georg Gadamer famously describes this interpretive disfunction as the “tyranny of hidden prejudices.”¹ When Gadamer accuses Enlightenment philosophy of harboring a “prejudice against prejudice [*das Vorurteil gegen die Vorurteile*],” he is specifically concerned that one’s awareness of prejudice can, itself, be prejudiced.² When prejudices conceal themselves in this way, how can one intervene? What can interrupt self-concealing (and therefore deeply resilient) prejudgments?

In this paper I analyze James Joyce’s short story “The Dead” in order to glean one possible answer to this hermeneutical impasse. I will argue that the character Gabriel undergoes an affective experience of profound hesitation that unsettles and partially denaturalizes his resilient, sexist interpretive habits. Drawing on Alia Al-Saji’s critical phenomenology of hesitation, I aim to show that Joyce’s short story offers one possible solution to the dilemma of uncovering and revising naturalized prejudice.

I begin by describing the problem of self-concealing prejudice in two ways: first, in terms of Gadamer’s hermeneutics, and second, in terms of Kristie Dotson’s concept of ‘epistemological resilience.’ Next, I analyze the opening pages of “The Dead” in order to show

¹ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2004), 282.

² Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 283.

that Gabriel's character displays this hermeneutical dysfunction. Finally, after reconstructing Alia Al-Saji's argument for the power of hesitation to interrupt racialized vision, I argue that Gabriel's shift in perspective at the end of "The Dead" comes about through an affective experience of profound hesitation. Read in this way, Joyce's story illustrates the possibility for affective experiences (such as hesitation) to grant basic awareness of self-concealing prejudgments.

II. Hermeneutical Resilience in Gadamer

Though the problem of highly resilient prejudgments appears across a wide swathe of hermeneutical philosophy, in this section I will focus on its appearance in Gadamer's *Truth and Method*, as well as in recent scholarship in epistemology of ignorance, where Dotson has identified what I take to be the parallel phenomenon of 'epistemic resilience.' Both of these approaches will inform my reading of Gabriel's hermeneutical predicament in "The Dead."

In *Truth and Method*, Gadamer emphasizes repeatedly that prejudice [*Vorurteil*] is the necessary condition for all interpretation. For Gadamer, meaning emerges from the movement between fore-projection and revision, through which prejudgments are gradually "replaced by more suitable ones."³ Gadamer's concept of prejudice builds on Heidegger's insight in *Being and Time* that every interpretive encounter is contextually enmeshed in a "totality of involvements [*Bewandtnisganzheit*]."⁴ In Heidegger's words, in interpretation "one finds that what 'stands there' in the first instance is nothing other than the obvious undiscussed assumption of the person who does the interpreting."⁵ This means that interpretive objects never appear nakedly. Rather,

³ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 280.

⁴ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 191.

⁵ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 192.

they are always already interpreted in their first appearance. In fact, this pre-understanding is what enables the object to appear as open to interpretation in the first place.

Gadamer stresses that rigorous interpretation requires being “on guard against arbitrary fancies and the limitations imposed by imperceptible habits of thought.”⁶ This means that while prejudice is the necessary grounds for interpretation, it is also a site of vulnerability to distractions that are “not borne out by the things themselves.”⁷ Accordingly, an interpreter must hold open the possibility that her fore-projections are unduly influenced by arbitrary pre-judgments, and therefore in need of revision.

In order to revise our interpretive prejudgments, it is necessary to first recognize them. In some situations, however, our prejudgments are concealed by our habitual overreliance on them; that is, the ubiquity of prejudice can allow it to operate unnoticed. To be trapped in the ‘tyranny of hidden prejudices’ is to fail to note the operation of prejudice in the first place. In such a situation it seems nearly impossible to catch sight of one’s fully naturalized prejudice through critical reflection that is, itself, affected by that prejudice.

What does this sort of tyrannical prejudice look like? Drawing from Kristie Dotson’s work in epistemology of ignorance, one way to describe it is in terms of the resilience of epistemological systems. For Dotson, an epistemological system “includes operative, instituted social imaginaries, habits of cognition, attitudes towards knowers and/or any relevant sensibilities that encourage or hinder the production of knowledge.”⁸ Epistemological resilience refers to the capacity for an epistemological system to avoid restructuring itself in response to disturbances, such as countervailing evidence. Some degree of resilience is not inherently

⁶ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 279.

⁷ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 280.

⁸ Kristie Dotson, "Conceptualizing Epistemic Oppression," *Social Epistemology* 28, no. 2 (2014): 121, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02691728.2013.782585>.

problematic. In fact, Dotson argues that it is vitally important for everyday life. On this point, Dotson is in full agreement with Gadamer's view that being hermeneutically open "does not mean that when we listen to someone or read a book we must forget all our fore-meanings concerning the content and all our own ideas."⁹

Resilience becomes deeply problematic, however, when it obscures the limitations of an epistemological system. In Dotson's words:

... the very resilience of the system may thwart one's ability to make significant headway into becoming aware of the limitations of one's epistemological system by only revealing what the system is prone to reveal, thereby reinforcing the idea that one's system is adequate to the task, when one is actually stuck in a vicious loop.¹⁰

This is to say that when we reflexively assess our own epistemological system by relying on the resources of that same system, its limitations rarely make themselves known.¹¹ Extreme epistemological resilience of this sort can lead to what José Medina calls 'meta-blindness' or 'meta-insensitivity' – that is, an insensitivity to one's own insensitivity.¹² Like a feedback loop, epistemological resilience can cause numbness to disturbances that might otherwise prompt that agent to reassess her epistemic resources.

This form of hermeneutical dysfunction is depicted in "The Dead" in Gabriel's resistance to revising his sexist prejudgments. In Gadamer's language, he cannot "break the spell of [his]

⁹ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 281.

¹⁰ Dotson, "Conceptualizing Epistemic Oppression," 132.

¹¹ Following Gaile Pohlhaus, I take epistemic resources to refer to "resources of the mind, such as language to formulate propositions, concepts to make sense of experience, procedures to approach the world, and standards to judge particular accounts of experiences." (Gaile Pohlhaus, "Relational Knowing and Epistemic Injustice: Toward a Theory of "Willful Hermeneutical Ignorance", " *Hypatia* 27, no. 4 (2012): 718.) As Briana Toole writes, "we employ these resources to make sense of our experiences, and when our conceptual resources are inadequate to that task, we reform and revise those resources as necessary." (Briana Toole, "From Standpoint Epistemology to Epistemic Oppression," *Hypatia* 34, no. 4 (2019): 604.)

¹² José Medina, *The Epistemology of Resistance: Gender and Racial Oppression, Epistemic Injustice, and Resistant Imaginations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

own fore-meanings.”¹³ In the next section, I will offer evidence that Gabriel not only displays sexist interpretive habits, but also is extremely epistemologically resilient. This will open the way for the last two sections, in which I read Joyce’s story as suggesting one possible catalyst for unsettling highly resilient prejudice – namely, the affective experience of profound hesitation.

III. “Palaver” and Willful Misinterpretation

There is a long tradition of criticism of “The Dead” that focuses on what Tilly Eggers describes as “a series of challenges by individual women to Gabriel’s conventional perceptions of women.”¹⁴ These interpretations focus on Gabriel’s interactions with Lily, Molly Ivers, his aunts, and his wife Gretta. I do not have the space to describe each of these encounters at length, so I will restrict my analysis to Gabriel’s conversation with Lily at the outset of the story. In my view, Gabriel misinterprets Lily in such a way that he is able to remain willfully ignorant of his own sexism. My point here is not only that Gabriel misinterprets Lily, but also that his interpretive projections are unusually obdurate. His ability to sidestep an experience that might otherwise prompt him to reassess his interpretive habits suggests a high degree of epistemological resilience.

Some brief context will be helpful. “The Dead” begins with Lily at the door collecting coats for the men arriving at the Morkans’ annual party. When Gabriel and his wife Gretta arrive, Gretta moves up the stairs to greet Gabriel’s aunts, while Gabriel follows Lily into the pantry to remove his boots. As she politely makes conversation about the weather the reader sees Lily through Gabriel’s eyes: “She was a slim, growing girl, pale in complexion and with hay-coloured hair. . . . Gabriel had known her when she was a child and used to sit on the lowest step nursing a

¹³ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 281.

¹⁴ Tilly Eggers, “What is a Woman...a Symbol of?,” *James Joyce Quarterly* 18, no. 4 (1981): 379.

rag doll.”¹⁵ In a tone somewhere between paternal interest and flirtation, Gabriel jovially brings up the question of whether Lily will marry soon.

Unknown to Gabriel, he has already revealed a great deal about the way he sees Lily (who he exclusively refers to in his own mind as ‘the girl’). For one, he cannot suppress a condescending smile at her working-class accent when she mispronounces his last name (Conroy) with three syllables (Con-ner-roy).¹⁶ More to the point, his ostensibly polite mention of Lily’s hypothetical wedding betrays his sexualized perception of Lily as a ‘growing girl.’ Even as he physically backs Lily into the pantry, Gabriel’s class condescension and attentiveness to her sexual maturity objectify Lily by reducing her to her social status as a young, working-class woman. By objectification, I mean at least three of Nussbaum’s seven senses of the term: In Gabriel’s eyes, 1) Lily lacks autonomy and self-determination regarding her hypothetical marriage, 2) as ‘the girl,’ she is largely interchangeable with other young women, and 3) her experiences and feelings are largely irrelevant for Gabriel.¹⁷

Lily bristles at Gabriel’s remark, and sharply retorts that the “men that is now is only all palaver and what they can get out of you.”¹⁸ This “bitter and sudden” response makes Gabriel blush and feel that “he had made a mistake.”¹⁹ Her words cut through the façade of polite conversation, laying bare that, as Vincent Pecora puts it, “[Gabriel’s] apparent concern and ‘generous’ interest in Lily’s life have in reality been nothing more than ‘palaver’ and what he can ‘get out of her’ through his avuncular, patronizing flirtation.”²⁰

¹⁵ James Joyce, "The Dead," in *Dubliners* (New York: Dover Publications, 1991), 120.

¹⁶ Joyce, "The Dead," 122.

¹⁷ Martha C. Nussbaum, "Objectification," in *Sex & Social Justice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

¹⁸ Joyce, "The Dead," 121.

¹⁹ Joyce, "The Dead," 121.

²⁰ Vincent P. Pecora, "'The Dead' and the Generosity of the Word," *PMLA* 101, no. 2 (1986): 238.

Lily's response is a direct challenge to Gabriel's objectifying vision. Tellingly, however, Gabriel misinterprets her remark to refer to his snobbery, not his sexualizing vision. This misinterpretation is made explicit as Gabriel begins to worry about his upcoming speech, which he anticipates will be too erudite for the partygoers. Specifically, he worries that he "would fail with them just as he failed with the girl in the pantry."²¹ In Gabriel's mind, the awkwardness with Lily is the result of him speaking over her head; as he thinks to himself, he had simply "taken up a wrong tone."²²

To quote Pecora once more, "Gabriel himself is preserved untouched if this failure is attributed to a 'wrong tone,' or if the 'mistake' is only a failure to use the appropriate social code...."²³ Gabriel's refusal to acknowledge his own clumsy flirtation allows him to avoid correcting his sexualizing vision. The point here is not only that Gabriel invariably focuses on women's bodies when he speaks with them (as is also the case when he sees Molly Ivers at the party and, in a revealing turn of phrase, immediately notes that she "did not wear a low-cut bodice").²⁴ Rather, what I want to emphasize is the fact that Gabriel deftly avoids Lily's challenge to his sexist prejudice by misinterpreting her response as a reaction to snobbery, when, in fact, the retort is unambiguously directed towards the double-talk of the men in her life who objectify her.

Gabriel's mischaracterization of Lily's response is an instance of what Gaile Pohlhaus calls 'willful hermeneutical ignorance.' In her analysis of Tom Robinson's trial in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Pohlhaus notes that the "inferences that the jurors *ought* to draw are unavailable to them, not because they inherently lack a capacity, but because they use epistemic resources that

²¹ Joyce, "The Dead," 122.

²² Joyce, "The Dead," 122.

²³ Pecora, "'The Dead' and the Generosity of the Word," 239.

²⁴ Joyce, "The Dead," 127.

are faulty and that distort a significant portion of the experienced world.”²⁵ Similarly, Gabriel’s prejudiced epistemic resources conceal the fact that they are implicated in Lily’s retort. He interprets her so as to leave his sexism unchallenged. In effect, Gabriel is insulated from the need to understand why Lily might bristle at an older man whom she has known from childhood lightheartedly mentioning that she has become sexually interesting to him.

IV. Hesitation as a Catalyst for Denaturalization

The encounter with Lily suggests that Gabriel is epistemologically resilient. This is only one of several examples of Gabriel sidestepping challenges to his worldview from the women at the party. In short, Gabriel’s prejudices prevent him from experiencing their operation or limitations, precluding their revision. In order to break this vicious loop, it appears that something more than critical reflection is required.

Gadamer identifies the experience of interpretive failure as one possible solution: “It is only when the attempt to accept what is said as true fails that we try to ‘understand’”²⁶ Similarly, Al-Saji’s work on racialized vision sheds light on the disclosive power of failure. Drawing from Fanon, Al-Saji argues that racialization interferes with our basic faculties of perception by projecting race as a natural category. As Al-Saji writes, “In a narcissistic and self-justifying move, racializing habits of seeing inscribe their cause in the perceived body, positing themselves as the objective or natural reaction to that body. In this way, these habits rationalize racism.”²⁷ Through this process of self-naturalization, racialized vision resists acknowledging or adopting alternative ways of seeing.

²⁵ Pohlhaus, "Relational Knowing and Epistemic Injustice: Toward a Theory of “Willful Hermeneutical Ignorance”.”

²⁶ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 305.

²⁷ Alia Al-Saji, "A Phenomenology of Hesitation: Interrupting Racialized Habits of Seeing," in *Living Alterities: Phenomenology, Embodiment, and Race*, ed. Emily Lee (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2014), 139.

We should note a basic similarity between racialized vision and Gabriel's sexualizing vision: namely, both are defensive hermeneutical postures that are able to ward off the recognition or uptake of alternative ways of seeing. Given this resemblance, it is worth considering whether the same potential correctives that Al-Saji discusses in the context of racialization are appropriate for Gabriel's situation. Specifically, Al-Saji identifies *hesitation* as an affective experience that can disrupt racialized perception. Because racialization "proceeds at a velocity such that we cannot see it happening, faster than the speed of thought," the experience of hesitation can be felt as a "deceleration that opens up the affective infrastructure of perception, in order to make it responsive to what it has been unable to see and to make it aware of its contextual and constructed features."²⁸ By slowing us down, hesitation makes it possible to notice our habitual, automatic processes of cognition. In short, it opens space for racialization to be denaturalized "so that its immediacy no longer stands in for its 'naturalness' and self-evidence."²⁹ In short, denaturalization brings social, political, and historical contingency into view.

By decelerating the speed of thought required for racialized perception to operate, hesitation opens space for alternative ways of seeing. Experiencing hesitation, one is invited to embark on "a tentative search that is receptive to that which is not already given on this map."³⁰ This experience affectively induces the awareness that one does not have everything one needs for the interpretive task at hand.

²⁸ Al-Saji, "A Phenomenology of Hesitation: Interrupting Racialized Habits of Seeing," 147.

²⁹ Al-Saji, "A Phenomenology of Hesitation: Interrupting Racialized Habits of Seeing," 147.

³⁰ Al-Saji, "A Phenomenology of Hesitation: Interrupting Racialized Habits of Seeing," 148.

To be clear, Al-Saji's position is that we ought to consider the role of hesitation as a preparatory step for other forms of intervention, not as a sufficient condition for overcoming racialization:

Hesitation is both the ontological ground that makes possible transformations in habit, and the phenomenological opening that can be utilized and supplemented for such change to take place. ... What this suggests is that critical and antiracist practice include indirect strategies for fostering hesitation; this involves the creation of situations and attachments that bring hesitation about, as well as attention to ways of holding hesitation open and allowing it to become productive.³¹

These strategies for fostering hesitation, which Al-Saji refers to elsewhere as “discomfiting” practices, can potentially circumvent the problem of self-concealing prejudice.³² Recall that epistemological resilience by its very nature attenuates critical reflection. While we cannot always reflect ourselves out of resilient prejudgments, Al-Saji's analysis reveals that we can undergo experiences that bring our prejudgments into focus *affectively* and phenomenologically, prompting us to seek out interpretive alternatives.

V. “The Lass of Aughrim”

For the remainder of this paper, I will argue that Gabriel's experience hesitation allows him to notice and temporarily denaturalize his sexist habits of perception. Some context from “The Dead” is required to make this claim.

As the last of the guests depart after the party, Gabriel discovers Gretta standing at the top of the staircase listening intently to distant music. Though he cannot hear the music clearly himself, he senses that her intense stillness is meaningful. Later, he learns that the music that Gretta hears through the walls is the ballad “The Lass of Aughrim,” which is an Irish variant of

³¹ Al-Saji, "A Phenomenology of Hesitation: Interrupting Racialized Habits of Seeing," 149.

³² Alia Al-Saji, "Feminist Pedagogies: Listening, Hesitation, and Lived Possibilities" (The Gender Research Institute at Dartmouth, Hanover, NH, 2017).

the Scottish ballad “Lord Gregory,” sometimes also called “The Lass of Roch Royal.”³³ Though Joyce does not provide this context, most known versions of the ballad do not stray far from the story of a young mother and her infant seeking shelter from the rain at her lover Gregory’s home. As the story goes, Gregory is asleep when she arrives, but his suspicious mother impersonates his voice from behind the door and questions the young woman, demanding that she give proof of her identity out of fear that she aims to take advantage of Gregory. In one variant collected by Francis James Child, she is explicit that she perceives the young woman as a threat: “But I woud na lat her within the bower, / For fear she had done you harm.”³⁴ In the end, the young woman is turned away and dies in the night.

Unknown to Gabriel, Gretta is deeply affected by “The Lass of Aughrim” because her childhood lover, Michael Furey, used to sing it to her before he passed away tragically. Noticing Gretta’s uncharacteristic withdrawnness on their journey home, Gabriel becomes sexually aroused at what he perceives as appealing, feminine fragility.

She leaned lightly on his arm.... But now, after the kindling again of so many memories, the first touch of her body, musical and strange and perfumed, sent through him a keen pang of lust. ... She seemed to him so frail that he longed to defend her against something and then to be alone with her. ... He was trembling now with annoyance. Why did she seem so abstracted? He did not know how he could begin. Was she annoyed, too, about something? If she would only turn to him or come to him of her own accord! To take her as she was would be brutal.

³³ Biographically speaking, Joyce appears to have first learned *The Lass of Aughrim* from Nora Barnacle, but there is another specific encounter with the ballad that is worth noting here. On August 26th, 1909, Joyce wrote a letter to Nora from Galway. He had promised her that he would take their song Giorgio to visit her family there, though Ellmann claims that he was unsure of his welcome. (Richard Ellmann, *James Joyce* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 286.) Nora’s mother, Annie Healy, welcomed him into her home, sat him down in the kitchen, and sang him the ballad. “My dear little runaway Nora,” he writes in the letter, “I am writing this to you sitting at the kitchen table in your mother’s house! I have been here all day talking with her and I see that she is my darling’s mother and I like her very much. She sang for me *The Lass of Aughrim*....” Annie Healy’s rendition made such an impression on Joyce that a week later he mentions it again in a separate letter to Nora: “I was singing an hour ago your song *The Lass of Aughrim*. The tears come into my eyes and my voice trembles with emotion when I sing that lovely air.” Note the similarity between Joyce and the young woman in the ballad, in that both appear at their lover’s mother’s door with a child in tow, and also the dissimilarity between Annie Healy’s hospitality and Gregory’s mother’s cruel suspicion.

³⁴ Francis James Child, *English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, ed. Helen Child Sargent and George Lyman Kittredge (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1904), 164.

No, he must see some ardour in her eyes first. He longed to be master of her strange mood.³⁵

Back in their hotel room, when Gretta gives him a light kiss, Gabriel seizes upon the gesture as an indication that Gretta's pensive mood is the result of her concealing her own sexual desire for him. He thinks to himself, "Perhaps her thoughts had been running with his. Perhaps she had felt the impetuous desire that was in him, and then the yielding mood had come upon her."³⁶

But to his surprise, when he flirtatiously tells her that he thinks he understands why she has been so quiet, Gretta begins to weep. She confesses that she has been thinking about "The Lass of Aughrim" and her childhood lover who used to sing it to her. With this revelation, Gabriel cannot escape the sheer absurdity of his misinterpretation. No amount of epistemic resilience can protect him from the shame that he had mistaken Gretta's mourning for sexual desire. In this discomfiting moment, Gabriel literally catches sight of himself in the text:

Gabriel stood stock-still for a moment in astonishment and then followed her. As he passed in the way of the cheval-glass *he caught sight of himself in full length*, his broad, well-filled shirtfront, the face whose expression always puzzled him when he saw it in a mirror, and *his glimmering gilt-rimmed eyeglasses* [emphasis added].³⁷

What I take to be most important in this passage is that Gabriel's inability to ignore his interpretive failure allows him to see his own expensive and academic "gilt-rimmed eyeglasses." What he sees, in other words, is the apparatus through which he sees the world, a prosthetic that refracts the world around him in order to compensate for his imperfect vision. What this passage depicts is a moment of reflexive self-awareness in which Gabriel's failure allows him to see his own spectacles even while he is looking through them.

³⁵ Joyce, "The Dead," 145-8.

³⁶ Joyce, "The Dead," 148.

³⁷ Joyce, "The Dead," 148-9.

As Gretta tells him more about her past with Michael Furey, Gabriel comes to view himself as an absurd figure:

A shameful consciousness of his own person assailed him. He saw himself as a ludicrous figure, acting as a pennyboy for his aunts, a nervous, well-meaning sentimentalist, orating to vulgarians and *idealizing his own clownish lusts* [my emphasis], the pitiable fatuous fellow he had caught a glimpse of in the mirror.³⁸

Here, Gabriel's recognizes his tendency to sexualize the women around him as 'clownish,' and his self-image 'assails' him because it demands change. His self-consciousness is prompted by what Gadamer describes as the 'knocking-over' [*umstößt*]³⁹ of stubborn prejudgments, startling Gabriel into what appears to be a more hermeneutically open attitude: "He did not question her again, for he felt that she would tell him of herself. Her hand was warm and moist: it did not respond to his touch, but he continued to caress it just as he had caressed her first letter to him that spring morning."⁴⁰ Holding her hand as if it were a letter, Gabriel begins to listen Gretta on the basis of her words, not his objectifying gaze. After Gretta finishes recounting the story of Michael's death, the text states that Gabriel "held her hand for a moment longer, irresolutely, and then, shy of intruding on her grief, let it fall gently and walked quietly to the window."⁴¹ This careful release of her hand can be read as a relinquishment of space, perhaps differentiating Gabriel from Gregory's mother in "The Lass of Aughrim," who tragically fails to extend hospitality to the young woman at her door because of her inability to see past her fearful, mistaken interpretive projections.

VI. Conclusion

³⁸ Joyce, "The Dead," 149-50.

³⁹ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Hermeneutik I: Wahrheit und Methode* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1990), 273.

⁴⁰ Joyce, "The Dead," 150.

⁴¹ Joyce, "The Dead," 151.

I do not want to overstate the change that comes over Gabriel. But while it is certainly not the case that he miraculously overturns his sexist prejudgments once and for all, something *does* change – namely, through the experience of hesitation, Gabriel’s interpretive schema becomes accessible to him as an object of reflection in a way that it was not previously. His discomfiting experience of interpretive failure brings his fore-projections into relief, and potentially open to future revision.

This in no way guarantees that Gabriel will successfully revise his fore-projections, or go on to temper his epistemic resilience. It does, however, bring about a phenomenological opening of the sort that Al-Saji describes:

... habit has to be put under pressure, I would argue, and made uneasy. What are required are discomfiting – making uncomfortable – changes of environment, whether social, geographical, political, or aesthetic, where the situation no longer virtually reflects white bodies, familiar lines of action, and lived possibilities.⁴²

I have argued that “The Dead” illustrates the power of such an induced phenomenological opening to unsettle resilient meta-insensitivity and engender new awareness of self-concealing prejudgments. Joyce’s story depicts just one of many possible examples of hermeneutically disclosive affective experiences, such as shame, regret, hesitation, joy, and forgiveness. In my view, hermeneutics, critical phenomenology, and social epistemology all have much to gain from increased attention towards these non-reflective catalysts for change.

⁴² Al-Saji, "Short Feminist Pedagogies: Listening, Hesitation, and Lived Possibilities."

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