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Reading Joyce's City

Public Space, Self, and Gender in Dubliners

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Joyce's letters to his brother, friend, and publisher at the time of his writing *Dubliners* leave no doubt about his intention to create a work of urban fiction. His "series of epicleti" comprise a collective biomap of Ireland's capital arranged in the order of individual maturation: childhood, adolescence, maturity, and public life.¹ While much has been made of his stated intention to portray Dublin as a "center of paralysis," little attention has been given to the specific concepts of urbanism that are the master plan for Joyce's imaginary city.² That Joyce's biomap of Dublin assigns districts as analogues for the stages of man's development is clear, but the specific nature of those spaces remains to be explored, as does the social interaction in these stories, especially that between men and women, as it is largely expressed in an urban lexicon.

For Joyce, the city was a text to be read, a code of its own that could sometimes be perceived only through language.³ *Dubliners* begins with a child's knowledge of this urban vocabulary as he literally reads the city, assuming that the reflection of candles on the blinds, as viewed from the street, signals the old priest's death.⁴ Yet he is not persuaded that the priest is dead until he actually reads the announcement on the door, with its formulaic R.I.P., in the company of passersby for whom it is intended. His first act after reading the death announcement is in marked contrast emotionally but still a sign of the city's legibility—he walks along the sunny side of the street, "reading all of the theatrical advertisements" (*D*, 12).⁵

Joyce's characters read city spaces and social encounters according to their lexicon, and we read Joyce's city according to a lex-

icon that is a blend of lived city experience and literary city experience, a cognitive line not always easy to draw. When a woman on a dark street corner presses a coin into the hand of a male, social codes and urban images seduce us into seeing her as a prostitute handing her wages over to her pimp. When this occurs in "Two Galants," we are proven wrong, but if the action is seen as an indication of the contracts made between men and women in this society, we are actually close to the truth. The death of Mrs. Sinico on the train tracks, moreover, speaks to the reader's literary city experience, as it brings to mind that other abandoned and desperate woman struck by a train, Anna Karenina. Though Mrs. Sinico in "A Painful Case" is far from being a passionate Anna, and Mr. Duffy is even further from resembling Vronsky, the tone of this scene is measured in the distance between these two texts, as the story itself invites recognition of cityscape through literature as it demonstrates the extent to which Mr. Duffy's life is mediated by his reading. Joyce drew on the images of "real" cities and on fictional ones to conjure up his Dublin in a literary process that resembles how we read the cities that we actually inhabit.

The first major observation about Joyce's city is that most of the scenes take place in public spaces. Even if the characters are depicted at home, the central scene of the story is usually located in a public setting. Characters appear on the streets, at the docks, on buses and trams, at the laundry, post office, bank, concert and exhibition halls, in pubs, political clubs, churches, shops, and lavatories.⁶ The second and third stories, "An Encounter" and "Araby," trace a movement from small indoor spaces to large romantic public spaces, the exhibition hall and the open field, while two of the stories of adolescence conclude at the docks, with their promise of escape to a world beyond Dublin. Two stories of early adulthood, "Two Galants" and "The Boarding House," contain no real home except those dwelling in the minds of the young people, Lenehan and Polly, and the action in both occurs in public (the streets) or semi-public (the boarding house) spaces. Despite the expectation that the stories depicting married life would center on the home, they are actually shaped by public spaces; the turning points in the lives of the central characters are scenes of humiliation in pubs which affect the subsequent bleak domestic endings. The elderly single adults are seen against a background of rented rooms and public facilities such as restaurants, shops, and trams. In the three stories which Joyce referred to as dealing with public life, the action does take place in public institutions, but the behavior appears to contradict the set-

ting: "Ivy Day" in a public committee room where the canvassers are huddled around a hearth; "A Mother" in a concert hall where a woman is condemned for overplaying her maternal role; "Grace" beginning in a pub lavatory and ending in a church that resembles a brokerage. In the matter of cityscape and public space, as in other matters, "The Dead" is a repository of all of the previous stories, and it repeats, with variations, the settings of street, park, carriage, hotel, and quays, while adding a significant public space, the cemetery.

The effect of the predominance of public space is an emphasis on the Dubliner as a man or woman lacking a personal environment, a person composed of public roles. Public space also means that characters find themselves among passersby, as the contrast of physical proximity and mental distance is one of the characteristics of urban life. The constant presence of strangers both stimulates, as the stranger represents infinite possibilities and the mystery of roads not taken, and alienates, because self-preservation requires anonymity and indifference. The city dweller learns to deal with others intellectually and not emotionally, to type and quantify, to dwell in the mind. The effect of this blasé outlook, according to Georg Simmel,⁷ is that the self-preservation of certain types of personalities is obtained at the cost of devaluing the entire objective world, ending inevitably in dragging the personality downward into a feeling of its own valuelessness. Yet this reserve assures the individual a degree of personal freedom for which there is no analogy in rural or small-town life, for the smaller the circle which forms the environment, the more anxiously the narrow community watches over the deeds, conduct, and attitudes of the individual.

In *Dubliners*, the turning points in most of the stories occur as a result of interaction with strangers. For the children in "An Encounter" and "Araby," strangers are the purveyors of their disenchantment in the vulgarity of the aging pederast and the tinsel-voiced shop girl. Farrington curses his fate in "Counterparts" when the presence of the foreign lady symbolizes his own circumscribed life, and Maria loses her plumcake and her self-possession in the presence of the elderly gentleman on the tram. Furthermore, the presence of strangers in the city has the effect of a general estrangement as well, to the extent that urbanites see themselves as strangers in the eyes of others, take on the role of passersby, and turn the familiar into the strange. At the end of "Eveline," the point of view shifts, depicting Eveline as Frank sees her—a white face in the crowd, a stranger whose "eyes gave him no sign of love or fare-

well or recognition" (*D*, 41). Lenehan pretends to be a stranger as he ambles past Corley in order to get a good look at the servant girl. Mr. Duffy and Gabriel, characters whose tendency is to intellectualize and to maintain a reserved distance from their environment (classic examples of Simmel's metropolitan man), are both intent on preserving the role of stranger for their women. The painfulness of Mr. Duffy's case is clear to him only when he reads of Mrs. Sinico's fate as that of an anonymous woman whose story is reported in the newspaper. And Gabriel Conroy transforms his own wife into a stranger in his epiphany of her on the staircase, an action that inspires lust but not intimacy or understanding.

Joyce's city as it is depicted in *Dubliners* does not draw a clear line between the public and the private, either in terms of space or social interaction, unlike Dickens's London, in which hearth and home offer a clear retreat from the street, Dublin is seen to be a place of indeterminate relations between the public and the personal, which accounts for some of the effect of paralysis that Joyce succeeds in conveying. The first story introduces this disturbing dislocation in the image of the priest sitting in the dark in his confession box "wide-awake and laughing-like softly to himself" (*D*, 18), for a tiny space with a clearly defined function is used for other purposes. It is an extreme instance of an institutional space given over to private occupancy, for the confessional is part of the church and the priest is expected to be seated within as a servant of God before a congregant, not as a private individual seeking an escape from society. Such dislocation borders on the blasphemous. Moreover, the priest occupying this space is normally himself the receptacle of secret confessions for the purpose of cleansing the soul of sins, whereas in this ironic reversal, the congregants are left to wonder what secret thoughts led to the priest's laughter as he sat in the dark box. "The Sisters," the first story in the collection, depicts the maturation of the boy in spatial images—death by the lighted window, crape bouquet, and card on the door—and recognition of sin by the reversal of function of a traditional space. The older narrator's recollection of the child turning from one city sign, the card announcing death, to another, the theatre posters, becomes in light of the story's ending, a comment on the priest's role as he steps out of character, and on the element of performance in social relations.

"The Boarding House" offers another example of the indeterminacy of public and private in *Dubliners*, in this case becoming part of the strategy to ensnare Mr. Doran into marrying Polly. A boarding house binds strangers to each other through rent payment to the

same landlord and through sharing the same shelter. It is an artificial home pretending to house a family, in fact made up of lodgers who eat their meals together or occupy the same parlor in the evening. Polly Mooney is both at home in the boarding house and at work as she is a landlady serving the evening meal to her patrons. The staircase leading from her bath to her bedroom is both private space within her own home, and public, for it is used by the patrons as well. She and her mother use this indeterminate status of the boarding house to trap Doran by emphasizing the familial aspects of the establishment (the hot punch, late dinner warmed, Polly in her bathrobe) and then accusing him of having crossed the bounds. Mr. Doran takes advantage of the situation because an atmosphere of permissiveness is created by the ambiguity of the stairwell and Polly's presence on it, and because of the joking references to Mrs. Mooney as "the Madam" and the bawdy music hall songs in the parlor. The Mooneys exploit the ambiguous spaces and interactions of a boarding house, the artificial intimacy based on financial transactions, and then hold Doran accountable for his actions based on unambiguous norms of respectability. It is implied that Polly's marriage to Doran will be a legitimate and socially acceptable version of the same tawdry exchange of sexual favors for financial security. That is, while society draws clear lines between family households and either boarding houses or bordellos, the division is actually far more ambiguous than the spatial divisions might indicate.

One of the characteristics of *Dubliners* as urban fiction is that strangers and estrangement, generally elements of public life in a city, tend to infiltrate private life, whereas in the stories which Joyce himself referred to as those of public life, the stranger plays almost no part. In the three public stories—"Ivy Day in the Committee Room," "A Mother," and "Grace"—characters tend to know each other as if they were members of the same family or village. The only hearth of any importance is described in "Ivy Day," where fathers talk of sons, while the story of the city's cultural life is actually a drama of a mother protecting her daughter. If anything, the public stories give us more of what we traditionally call private interaction than those of the private life, where the hearth is cold and the stranger shapes experience. In fact, one way to account for the devastating sense of Dublin in these stories is that the private and public spheres are reversed, so that private life suffers from the worst aspect of urbanism—estrangement—while public life suffers from the worst aspects of small town life—fixed identity and stagnation resulting from the social control of familiarity. *Dubliners* are denied

the advantages of both of these social orders in that the presence of strangers does not free the urbanite to entertain new thoughts and identities, nor do the presences of those familiar to these characters provide genuine intimacy or understanding. *Dubliners* demonstrates what it is to be a villager in public and an urbanite at home.

This legacy of the worst of urban and village life has particular consequences for the women of Dublin. Women are central figures in four out of the fifteen stories. They appear or have some effect on all the other stories, with the exception of "An Encounter," "After the Race," and "Ivy Day," which means that at each stage of life as depicted in *Dubliners*—childhood, adolescence, and adulthood—men are seen in an all-male environment as well as among women, a situation which is never true for women, who are always seen in relation to men. The titles of the stories that deal with women—"Eveline," "The Boarding House," "Clay," and "A Mother"—also differ significantly from those of the other stories. In each, the central female figure is identified: by name unlike any of the male protagonists of the other stories; or by her biological role as mother, for which there is no male counterpart among the titles; or through association with a type of home in the boarding house; or symbolically, through an ironic reminder of her earth mother archetype in "Clay." One other story, "The Sisters," refers to women in its title although it is from the viewpoint of, and mainly concerns, a boy; here, once again, women are identified by their family roles. A glance at the titles of the other stories reveals what has been reserved for men: they refer to actions or experiences ("An Encounter" and "After the Race"); romantic symbols ("Araby" and "A Little Cloud"); identities other than familial or biological ("Two Gallants"); political and religious allusions ("Ivy Day" and "Grace").

Men tend to perceive of the women archetypally, as either virgin or whore, so that Mangan's sister is an ideal of womanhood just as Polly is a seductress in Madam's establishment. But the women do not fulfill male romantic illusions about them, either in their purity or in their sinfulness. Little Chandler regrets the lack of passion in Annie's eyes, as they stare at him within the picture frame, prim and pretty. Mrs. Sinico's gentle desires and painful end do not confirm Mr. Duffy's misogyny. When portrayed from their own point of view, the women subvert male perceptions of them. Polly is a simpleminded girl luxuriating in and hesitant about her sexual awakening; Eveline is a timid and dutiful child, fearful of the demands of the male world as embodied in her father and Frank; Maria, likewise, loses what little self-confidence she has in the presence of

males. Mrs. Kearney is bullied by men who damn her for not conforming to their definition of being a lady; and Gretta, whom we never actually see through her own eyes, leads Gabriel to discover that she is a separate human being with her own memories and inner life, and not only his possession as an image of either chaste womanhood or female lust.

The urban aspects of the fiction and the portrayal of women overlap in that often the indeterminate spaces, where public and private remain ambiguous, exist in a context of gender. In "The Boarding House," the financial arrangement among the strangers with Mrs. Mooney and her daughter are deliberately invested with vulgar connotations, so that the indeterminate spaces, such as the stairwell leading to Polly's room, become part of the indeterminacy of her role as wife or as whore, with the implication that these may not be mutually exclusive in that society. Maria is also portrayed in a city institution that is associated with prostitution, the Dublin by Lamplight Laundry, and it, like the boarding house, pretends to be a home for the women who are housed there. As an establishment for reformed prostitutes, the laundry symbolizes the society's attitude toward fallen women as they are rehabilitated by purifying the bed-sheets of those whose sexuality is sanctified by marriage. When Maria, alone in her chastity and propriety, celebrates a holiday, she travels to a "real" home, where the children trick her mercilessly and where her romantic song only underscores the seamy aspect of Joe's home and her own dismal unromantic chastity.

The converging boundaries of private and public as they affect women's roles is most evident in "A Mother" and "Eveline." The former is one of the public stories, presumably about the artistic life of the city. It actually becomes a power struggle between Mrs. Kearney and the Eire Abu society, which has arranged a series of concerts to include a performance by Mrs. Kearney's daughter, Kathleen. Despite the setting of a public concert intertwined with the Irish Revival Movement, the story largely takes place in a stultifying backstage setting, with a small group of characters, all familiar to each other as part of the Nationalist and musical worlds. By insisting on full payment for her daughter before she appears, a condition that she sees as "asking for my rights," Mrs. Kearney's suspicion that she is being mistreated by the Committee because she is a woman is linked with the rights of the national revival movement. "They wouldn't have dared to have treated her like that if she had been a man" (*D*, 148). But in this case, the national movement, in the form of Mr. Holohan, condemns Mrs. Kearney for being assertive about

her daughter's payment, because it is not in keeping with acceptable behavior for women: "I thought you were a lady," said Mr Holohan" (*D*, 149). Mrs. Kearney is perceived to be a threat to Dublin's cultural life because she assumes her domestic role as "a mother" in a public setting in which men expect her to act the only public role they consider suitable for women, that of a lady, by which they mean demure passivity. By insisting on the payment for her daughter, she is behaving both professionally and maternally, but both of these roles are considered inappropriate by the men who define public life. This maternal behavior and this small circle of the Dublin musical establishment with its petty alliances introduce domestic and village interactions into the cultural life of the city, a personal world into the public sphere. "A Mother" demonstrates the stagnation of Dublin as a city, where familiarity replaces strangeness which, at the level of public interaction, sharpens the intellect and stimulates the senses.

"Eveline" is the exact inverse of "A Mother"; here, the public world infiltrates the private. It begins with Eveline framed in her window, "watching the evening invade the avenue" (*D*, 36), as few people pass by except for "the man out of the last house" (*D*, 36). In short, it begins with a lonely view of Eveline at home gazing at the figure of the regular passerby, the city phenomenon of the familiar stranger who remains inaccessible. When she turns to the interior of her home, she is drawn to the yellowing photograph of the priest, another nameless stranger who is a constant presence in her personal space. Since Frank's proposal, asking her to leave Ireland with him, is weighing heavily on her mind, it is not surprising that she contemplate the picture of a man who left for Melbourne and was never heard from again. And even when her mind wanders to the memory of her mother, her anchor in Ireland, she remembers the last night of her illness in an urban context—the Italian organ grinder outside her window, ordered to go away by a payment of sixpence, and her father's contempt for the foreigner. It is a memory of her father's anger and the seeming indifference of the organ grinder more than it is a memory of the loss of her mother's presence, unless her mother's life can be summed up by her husband's stormy vanquishing of sentimental music outside her window with the power of his money.

Her thoughts of home, then, as she considers leaving, are made up of the regular presence of men who are strangers to her, much as her father is to her; Eveline's inner life in this story is testimony to the infiltration of the public world of the street into the private sphere of the home. And it is not coincidental that both the priest

and the organ grinder are men who became foreigners, as Eveline fears the prospect of leaving home, both from the perspective of becoming merely a yellowing picture for her family (she is first seen framed at her window) and from the perspective of herself becoming a foreigner on the street, an object of ridicule and contempt like the Italian organ grinder. In the privacy of her home, Eveline's life is defined by the city street, so that when she herself is on that street among strangers, she becomes a white face among the crowd, "with no sign of love or farewell or recognition" (*D*, 41). She is a woman so shaped by men who are strangers to her that she cannot distinguish Frank from among the many male passersby on the street. For Eveline, "home" is the security of being framed by the same circle of male strangers, and not taking the risk of becoming a strange passerby herself.

Most of the spatial elements from the rest of the stories are represented in "The Dead": home, street, parks, coffins, hotels, public transportation, and quays. The story begins indoors at the party which is social but not intimate, moves to a somewhat romantic interlude on the city streets, and ends with thwarted desire for intimacy in an impersonal space, a hotel. Gabriel and Gretta are never depicted in their own home. Many of the female types who have appeared in the previous stories are also represented here: the two elderly unmarried sisters, the servant girl, young single women, a mother, and a young wife, and their ambiguous roles also create awkward moments between men and women, such as Gabriel's insult to Lily when he tips her in a household where she considers herself to be family. While the party is presided over by the two maiden aunts, the city that Gabriel observes from the window and the carriage is made up of masculine political landmarks, all reminders of Ireland's oppression by the English: the monument to the Duke of Wellington, the statue of Daniel O'Connell, and that statue of King Billy. Gabriel feels superior to both the female tradition within the house and the masculine nationalism in the city outdoors, a posture which alienates him from his environment. Like Simmel's metropolitan man, Gabriel lives in the mind.

In *Dubliners*, the intrusion of an urban atmosphere into the private world, particularly the effect of estrangement in domestic life, is taken to its extreme. In this story, Gabriel is aroused by his own wife only after she has been transformed into a stranger during his epiphany of her on the stairs, and when he recalls "moments of their secret life together," half of them are city scenes—standing on a

crowded platform and slipping a ticket inside her glove or her silly remark to a stranger making bottles. In both cases, the scenes have an erotic connotation. As Gabriel follows his imaginary stranger up a flight of stairs to their hotel room, the setting contributes to his sense of erotic adventure. But he soon discovers, ironically, that Gretta has been a stranger to him not because of the aura of mystery which he has cast over her in the role of the exotic passerby, but because of her personal self with its store of private memories.

Before setting out for the hotel, Gretta and Gabriel join the other partygoers in bidding farewell to each other in a series of "Goodnights" that, by virtue of their repetition without attribution to any specific speaker, reach into a dusky area between the unearthly sounds of a city in the early hours of the morning and the disembodied speech of literary dialogue. "Good-night, Good-night" begins to drift into Ophelia's distracted "Good night, sweet ladies, good night, good night," in a significant literary parallel with *Hamlet*: a country after the death of a king (Parnell), corruption and stagnation in the kingdom, an intellectual hero (Gabriel) who remains locked in his own thoughts, and women who have been the victims of their men's imaginations.

"The Dead" ends with such dissolving of distinctions, as Gabriel feels his soul approaching the regions of the dead, as night meets day in the grey period of dawn, as "the solid world itself which these dead had one time reared and lived in was dissolving and dwindling" (*D*, 223). *Dubliners* ends outside the city, as the snow falls indiscriminately on city and country, and Gabriel's thoughts about the state of his soul transcend questions of the public and the private self. In Gretta's memory of Michael Furey's song she truly hears "distant music," the title Gabriel would have given to the portrait of his wife as an anonymous woman in the city. Of the characters who hear music on the streets, that of the organ grinder outside Eveline's home who plays for profit or the harpist in "Two Gallants" whose instrument and melody are a general symbol of Ireland's lost glory, Gretta alone knows that the song is exclusively for her rather than sung for strangers as is characteristic of city life. While *Dubliners* is Joyce's cityscape, designed to capture the soul of a metropolis, it ends beyond Dublin, and even beyond the countryside it caresses in its last words. Although Gabriel gazes at the lamplight from his hotel room, he no longer relives the street scenes that capture for him his secret moments with his wife, but rather envisions the country scene that symbolizes Gretta's secret life apart from him, and, by exten-

sion, the separateness of every human being's universe. The snow that first covered both Gabriel and the city's parks and monuments, finally falls through that universe.

Notes

1. James Joyce, *Letters*, vol. 1, ed. Stuart Gilbert (New York: Viking Press, 1957), 55.
2. Other studies dealing with the spatial aspects of *Dubliners* are: Arthur McGuinness, "The Ambience of Space in Joyce's *Dubliners*," *Studies in Short Fiction* 11, no. 14 (Fall 1974); William Keen, "The Rhetoric of Spatial Focus in Joyce's *Dubliners*," *Studies in Short Fiction* 16, no. 3 (Summer 1979); and Joseph K. Davis, "The City as Radical Order: James Joyce's *Dubliners*," *Studies in the Literary Imagination* 3 (October 1970). McGuinness draws on Bachelard's concept of topophilia (*The Poetics of Space* [Boston: Beacon, 1964]), felicitous space, to demonstrate that the characters of *Dubliners* are usually indifferent to any intimate spaces that could offer security or refuge, and that they are alienated from their surrounding spaces. Keen has pointed out that the shifting spatial focus, from higher (upper floors, sky, hills) to lower (ground floors, streets, depths) are related to moral attitudes. Davis discusses Joyce as parallel to Spengler in his indictment of the city as a place of intellect, rootlessness, and sterility, and he claims that Joyce saw the city as something to be escaped. None of these readings examines the urban lexicon of Joyce's fictional city.
3. Environmental psychology has concerned itself recently with cognitive mapping. For discussion of the subject, see Kevin Lynch, *The Image of the City* (Cambridge, Mass.: M.I.T. Press, 1960); and Stanley Milgram, "A Psychological Map of New York City," *American Scientist* (1972).
4. As part of his discussion of the concinnity of *Dubliners*, Jackson Cope has observed that "the boy of 'The Sisters' peers at a lighted window to discern an old man's death; Gabriel Conroy peers out of a darkened window at the universality of death symbolized by a boy long dead" (*Joyce's Cities: Archaeologies of the Soul* [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981]), 20.
5. All quotations from *Dubliners* are from the New York Viking Press edition of 1969.
6. For a record of the actual edifices mentioned and described of the city pertinent to the fiction, see Terence Brown, "Dublin of *Dubliners*," in *James Joyce: An International Perspective*, ed. Suheil Badi Bushrui and Bernard Benstock (Totowa, N.J.: Barnes and Noble Books, 1982).
7. Georg Simmel, "The Metropolis and the Mental Life," *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, tr. Kurt Wolff (New York: Macmillan, 1950).
8. For a discussion of how Joyce depicts the conditions of women in Ireland in *Dubliners*, see Florence Walz, "Dubliners: Women in Irish Society" in *Women in Joyce*, ed. Suzette Henke and Elaine Unkeless (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1982).

City Spaces and Women's Places in Joyce's Dublin

SHARI BENSTOCK

In *The Odyssey*, as so often elsewhere throughout our culture's poetic text, one encounters moments of abyssal self-representation when the poem tries to occupy a place in two different and mutually exclusive spheres, that is, when it slips between representing something and being the something represented.

In trying to place women in the spaces of Joyce's fictions, it may be helpful to look again at the relation of Joyce's texts to myth and history.¹ Initial responses to *Ulysses* were guided by Stuart Gill's elucidation of what has come to be termed in Joyce criticism "Homeric parallels" of that text.² The underlying interpretive assumption was a double one: that Joyce's text presupposed Homer's epic as forerunner and counterpart to *Ulysses*; that Homer's *Odyssey* could provide explanations for the difficulties posed by gaps, laps, junctures, transferences, and contradictions of Joyce's work. Homer's *Odyssey* served as an interpretive tool for Joyce's work by offering itself (almost) as an ur-text for the modern *Ulysses*. According to this critical convention, Joyce's epic superimposed itself on an earlier narrative form which could be read through the later work apparent in the gaps and open spaces of *Ulysses* through which the reader glimpsed the hard rock of Homer's Ithaca. Since the publication of Gilbert's study, a work that maintained its authority in the proximity to Joyce himself, many critics have directed their attention to these textual "parallels" in an effort to chart the Joycean-Homeric terrain. Many of these readers have since discovered that terra