

The Ethics of Love

An essay on James Joyce

Benjamin Boysen

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What end but love, that stares death in the eye?
Sing me a song to make death tolerable, a song
of a man and a woman: the riddle of a man
and a woman.

William Carlos Williams: *Paterson* III.i.

Amor familiaris

For my brother and sister, Ulf and Una
In memory of my parents, Henning and Alis Boysen

‘Né creator né creatura mai’,
cominciò el, ‘figliuol, fu sanza amore,
o naturale o d’animo; e tu ’l sai.

Dante: *Purgatorio* xvii.

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Quoted Works by James Joyce

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- 1957. *Collected Poems*. New York: Viking Press.
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I. Preface ('he who loves will see')

I have always felt a deep sense of gratitude towards Joyce for his gift of love. For his work. A work that contains a strong but cheerful gift of love, which points towards human existence in the post-metaphysical world.¹ Like no one else, he steps forth onto the modern stage as the author who not only beheads the metaphysical dragon, but who, furthermore, demonstrates how this dragon-death is the most essential point of departure for a true and relevant ethics of love.

For Joyce, as for many of his contemporaries, the meaning of existence is no longer available. In other words, there *is* no longer any meaning. As little as the world *is* meaningful in itself, just as little *is* anyone of us meaningful in and by ourselves. The world is no longer anthropomorphised in the image of God, and man can no longer mirror himself herein; the mind of man no longer seems to embody a transcendental portal to the absolute (cf. *intra* II.5). But the fact that meaning is no longer inscribed within things themselves, seems indeed to be the very circumstance that Joyce – as one of few of his contemporary modernistic artists – finds fortunate and welcomes wholeheartedly. Not by defiance, narcissistic melancholy, hysteria, spleen or ironic complacency – but for the same reasons that the author was breathtaken by the amorous gesture. For even though the world no longer seems to assist man in his search for these phenomena (meaning and love), and even though none of these can be said to *be*, both are *given*. Neither meaning nor love is something that anyone can *possess* – they can only be given.

By whom is love and meaning given, one might feel tempted to ask? By the other, whose gaze contains an infinite and abysmal heterogeneity, but whose gaze simultaneously contains an inscrutable and inexhaustible source that gives being perpetually.

In spite of the fact that many readers have received this gift with enthusiastic eagerness and euphoric delight, the majority seems to have been negligent of the circumstance that this gift has been entrusted them in love, that this gift essentially originates in a love that has given meaning to us passionately over the decades.

1 By metaphysics (what is beyond or besides (*Gr.* meta) physics) I understand what Heidegger categorized as *onto-theo-logy*. In other words, from its beginning metaphysics has been the science of both ontology and theology. The study of being has thus traditionally been executed with reference to theology, since the world was perceived in terms of religion. Since being traditionally has been conceived of as being the result of a divine order or creation, ontology has been synonymous with grasping the essence of the divinity, thus blending ontology with theology. It is primarily this aspect of metaphysics that I evoke when using the concept. Yet metaphysics also signifies the study of the non-empirical aspects of being, preoccupied with addressing questions relating to freedom, the mind, transcendence, etc. This means that, though I predominantly refer to metaphysics as implying theology, I do not abstain from employing the concept as denoting ontology. I trust, however, that the specific meaning of the word is clear from the context in which it appears.

After more than seventy years of intense studies of James Joyce's monumental works, the attention to the theme of love seems strangely limited and meagre. With one quite recent exception,² there is not one single monograph on the theme of love among the countless metres of library shelves devoted to studies on James Joyce. This is somewhat surprising, partly because the studies on the author, as mentioned, are *ohne Ende*, partly because love – as I will try to show in the following – forms one of the most insistent questions of the whole body of his work. This reluctance might be due to the author's notorious obscenity and his immense and explicit preoccupation with the sexual sphere that, perhaps,³ is supposed to exclude a positive and affirmative presence of the aspect of love. Such a notion is, at any rate, supported by the responses with which people have met my thesis, when I have mentioned it to them. Professors, Joyce-enthusiasts, and other good people have thus, with almost no exception, expressed a deeply seated doubt towards the importance of this theme, asking politely if it was not rather the question of sexuality that I had in mind. To this must be said that a closer and more careful reading of Joyce forces the reader to recognize that the author does not draw a sharp distinction between sexuality and love, since he does not perceive any necessary opposition between these, simply because sexuality is love's speechless, but sublime (and obscene) language.

There are only a dozen or so articles or single chapters available (with the above-mentioned exception of Janine Utell's recent *James Joyce and the Revolt of Love*), which in passing deal with a delimited theme of love, and of these I must particularly accentuate the reflections of Martha Nussbaum and Julia Kristeva.

Martha Nussbaum argues for a reevaluation of the role played by our emotions for ethical situations, and in that respect she emphasizes empathy and love as some of the most important feelings as regards ethical actions. There cannot, she claims, be

2 In her great little book, *James Joyce and the Revolt of Love* (published in 2010), Janine Utell presents a reading of *Giacomo Joyce*, *Exiles*, *Ulysses*, and *Finnegans Wake* that basically investigates why adultery in Joyce's work is accepted and even seen as transformative in respect to ethical questions. She asks why the painful awareness of separate existence is actually celebrated in Joyce, and answers that both circumstances involve a Levinasian recognition of the radical otherness of the other as the site of ethical action. Adultery becomes an ethical site for Joyce to analyse how possession in love is impossible. Obviously, this is a source of bitterness, yet this nevertheless allows for a recognition of the freedom, autonomy, and otherness of the other. Thus, albeit the possibility of adultery and the separateness of the lovers imply incertitude, alienation, and distance, they also form the prospect of an "ethical love" (p. 16) generously giving and acknowledging the autonomy and freedom of the other. It is encouraging and comforting to see Utell affirming the importance of aspects raised by this present study, too; I hope it is a sign signalling that a wider recognition of the amorous theme in Joyce's work is erupting.

3 Many critics were in this manner offended by Joyce's open-minded depiction of the body and the functions and dimensions of sexuality. The review of *Ulysses* in *The Sporting Times*, "The Scandal of *Ulysses*" (1922), is in this respect illuminating, since it has almost achieved legendary status for its philistine condemnation of Joyce's "literature of the latrine" and the author's "stupid glorification of mere filth" (*James Joyce: The Critical Heritage* 1, p. 192). To this must be added Joyce's infinite quarrels with various middle-class censorship authorities. His realism is perhaps harsh from time to time, but – as he says himself – honest: "If *Ulysses* isn't fit to read [...] life isn't fit to live" (Richard Ellmann: *James Joyce*, p. 537). Furthermore, the author does not deem ethereal euphemisms conducive to love or solidarity; a certain scepticism as concerns the idea of man's 'spiritual' autonomy would on the contrary entail a moderate modesty towards oneself and a certain curious openness towards the other.

any adequate ethical theory without an adequate theory about these emotions, as the latter involve questions of compassion, reciprocity, and recognition. In continuation of this, she goes through a great deal of the amorous paradigms of the Occident in her monumental book, *Upheavals of Thought* (2001) – from Plato, Augustine, Dante, Spinoza, Emily Brontë, Gustav Mahler, and Walt Whitman to Marcel Proust – but she nevertheless chooses to close her book with a chapter on ‘The Transfiguration of Everyday Life: Joyce’ (pp. 679-714), which primarily, but not exclusively, deals with *Ulysses*. In contrast to all of Joyce’s precursors, who “repudiate daily life [...] Nobody has a menstrual period in Plato. Nobody excretes in Spinoza” (p. 681), she accentuates Joyce’s “new expression of love” (p. 683). This new understanding of love involves a special ethics that is particularly aware of the recognition and acceptance of our bodily fragility, i.e. a recognition of our *imperfection*, which gives rise to the need for the engaged presence with the other, and which, by way of its empathic tolerance, defies idealism’s immanent resentment of reality.

Only Poldy and Molly, of our sequence, in the very comic fragmentariness of their love, appear to embrace what is most human in love, including the soul – and only this text seems to embrace the love of the real-life reader – in a way that provides a necessary complement to the more idealistic versions of the ascent, lest they collapse in on themselves through their failure to tolerate what is real. [...] By ending with Poldy and Molly, who both endorse and tenderly mock the spirit of ascent, I have tried to indicate that even in their real-life imperfect form, indeed especially in that real form, in which the incompleteness and surprise of human life is accepted rather than hated, love and its allies among the emotions (compassion, grief) can provide powerful guidance towards social justice, the basis for a politics that addresses the needs of other groups and nations, rather than spawning the various forms of hatred that our texts have identified. (pp. 712-13)

I have not yet stumbled upon anyone who has written so eloquently and convincingly about, well, *the ethics of love* in Joyce. Nussbaum has a keen perception not only of the way Joyce’s amorous doctrine reconciles the lover with the world, but also of the way the lover in his courageous engagement with reality is able to stretch his idea of solidarity to involve those who an idealistic paradigm of love would otherwise exclude.

In her article ‘Joyce ‘the Gracehopper’ ou le retour d’Orphée,’ Julia Kristeva in many ways parallels the thesis of this present study, since she emphasizes Joyce’s particular, artistic familiarity with the economy of identification: “c’est à Joyce que revient le redoutable avantage d’avoir mimé, connu et fait connaître [...] les détails de l’identification qui préside à la genèse de l’imagination qu’est la fiction” (*Les nouvelles maladies de l’âme*, p. 256). She nominates Joyce as the modern author who has explored the structure of identification the most, because he, like no other modern author, has comprehended how the identification with the other is indispensable for the expansive operation of the ego. To her, Joyce’s work is an illustration of how identification becomes the pivotal moment for the concretization of the personality as well as for the manifestation of subjectivity and identity: “Entendons donc par

identification ce mouvement par lequel le sujet advient dans la mesure où il se fait un avec un autre, identique à lui” (*ibid.*, p. 264). Joyce’s eccentric perception of the subject and his multi-identificatory artistic strategy are both features which this study will emphasize as significant with respect to the theme of love. Kristeva is in this manner on to something extremely important when she expounds Joyce’s exorbitant *openness* towards the other from his rejection of the notion of the subject as being determined by a specific substance, essence, or plenum. She succeeds in this way in accounting for Joyce’s particular plastic and amorous discourse: “Il s’agit plutôt d’une assimilation *narcissique-et-amoureuse*: capter les pôles externes du narcissisme dans l’identité fluide d’un sujet inconstant, sans intériorité autre que ses possibilités d’assimilation (de personnes, de textes, de mémoire...). Ni dedans ni dehors, mais transfert permanent de l’un à l’autre” (*ibid.*, p. 276). The article is nevertheless somewhat blemished by the more or less naive reference to the amorous paradigms in *Ulysses* as configured around “l’*agapê* de Stephen Dedalus et [...] l’*éros* de Léopold Bloom” (*ibid.*, p. 258). It is, on the contrary, Stephen’s highly intellectual and theological schooling in the Society of Jesus that has rendered him incapable of apprehending love as anything other than brutish and bestial (i.e. in accordance with the Greek *eros*), while Bloom on the other hand certainly represents the more empathic or generous aspect of love (i.e. in accordance with Christian *agapê*), simply because of his tolerance and familiarity with the sensual and temporal determination of human existence.

Another critic, Robert M. Polhemus, who has also written with elegance and insight on Joyce, asserts the crucial importance of love for the author in the chapter, ‘Tristan is Sold: The Joyce of Love and the Language of Flow(er)s (1904-39),’ in his *Erotic Faith*. Here he writes: “If love is a religion, then James Joyce is a defender of the faith. This comedian and skeptic [...] mocked sentimental love fiction and doubted love’s value and very existence; nevertheless he appears in his fashion as a devoted scribe of Venus” (p. 251). Among other things, he stresses how Joyce created “an art that makes language itself the erotic subject and object” (*ibid.*), which is grounded in a perception of language as being “the matrix, medium, and evidence of our desire, and in more than a metaphorical sense it is his true love” (p. 255). Furthermore, he analyses how Joyce is “trying desperately, if crudely, to make language and flesh, word and matter, one” (p. 262). In other words, according to Polhemus, Joyce gives credence to a positive and joyous interpretation of life. When confronted with the questions ‘why love?’ and ‘why life?’ underlying it, Polhemus claims that Joyce would answer without hesitation: “*Because it feels good! Because it’s fun!*” (p. 274).⁴

Darcy O’Brien’s thought-provoking article, ‘Some Psychological Determinants of Joyce’s View of Love and Sex,’ must also be mentioned. Here he shows how Joyce

4 Polhemus’s colleague, Gerald Gillespie, is pursuing a similar line of thought in his re-evaluation of the high modernists, who, contrary to the traditional conception, do not present a debased and nihilistic vision of the world, but rather an insistent return to a sacramental sense of things; in continuation of this, Joyce is said to defy the conventional and grim idea of everyday existence, which, on the other hand, proves to reveal a basic sacredness of existence grounded in his belief in “life and love being a prime miracle” (*Proust, Mann, Joyce in the Modernist Context*, p. 21).

was tortured – personally as well as artistically – by a noticeable ambivalence towards women, who were either perceived as prostitutes or angelic virgins. This complex has been analysed and argued for finely by O’Brien, but he does not seem to have an eye for the fact that Joyce’s work is a grand indictment against such a separation of the more tender from the purely sexual aspects of love.⁵

Finally, I must call attention to Maria DiBattista, who – in her chapter ‘Joyce’s Endearing Form’ – points to Joyce’s particular tribute to first love, which marks an experience that transforms the subject forever: “What Joyce celebrates is a love that would sanctify as it would occupy his life. Through the mystical agency of sexual touch, First Love discloses to Joyce its utopian vocation: to deliver the spirit from its own renegade isolationism, the erotic and social apostasy of life without joy” (*First Love*, p. 172).

Another related aspect that has given rise to scepticism and resistance as regards the possibility of a positive theme of love in the work of the author is probably due to the massive presence of irony in his works. It is very likely that most critics, faced with such an intelligent, reflective, and ironic author such as Joyce, have had strong reservations about the actual presence of such an affirmative theme; if one is arguing in favour of this interpretation, would one not risk to be blamed for romantic simplicity and extreme naïveté? Mary Reynolds – one of the few Joyce scholars who have had an eye for elements of an amorous theme in the Irish – asserts that it is the omnipresent irony which has prevented the critics from arguing for a positive theme of love: “Joyce’s pervasive irony has made his readers wary of claiming for him an affirmative treatment of love anywhere in his fiction” (*Joyce and Dante*, p. 82).

The plurality of meaning, the dissemination of the content, the ambiguity, the irony, and the intertextuality do not designate a melancholy emotion lacking love – quite the opposite,⁶ since these strategies rather signify a loving gratitude and devotion towards the very richness of signification constantly *assigned* to us by language,

5 Commenting on Darcy O’Brien criticism, Robert M. Polhemus rightly maintains: “Joyce has been accused of being unable to unite feelings of tenderness and sensuality towards the same object. I hold, on the contrary, that he directed his life and writings towards such a union, and that in his later works, at least, he renders it” (*Erotic Faith*, p. 260). I might add that Beryl Schlossman, in a study dedicated to the transformation of the Madonna in modern literature (Baudelaire, Flaubert, Yeats, and Joyce), displays how the adored figure of femininity is now seen as both embodying the ideal and the debased: “Obscenity and beauty add up to an aesthetics of desire – Eros sweet and bitter” (*Objects of Desire*, p. 211). Noting that the Madonnas of modernistic writing “are represented as having it both ways” (*ibid.* p. 217), she most convincingly shows how this equivocal doubleness is quintessential to Joyce’s interpretation of the adored woman in his work. Now, since he depicted the whore (sex) and the Madonna (love) within the same character, “Joyce’s twentieth-century virtual woman plays the central role in the revelation of love that Diotima played for Socrates” (*ibid.* p. 46). This fusion of sexuality and love, of the Madonna and the whore, is thus what sanctions how “Joyce locates love at the centre of his writing” (*ibid.*, p. 18).

6 Cf. Janine Utell, who similarly perceives the highly experimental vein of Joyce’s art as substantiating his arguments concerning love and ethics: “In *Ulysses*, Joyce’s deployment of experimental narrative technique and polyphonic voices serves to further his argument for an ethical love” (*James Joyce and the Revolt of Love*, p. 15).

history, and the ambivalent inscrutability of the other. It is herein that the truly radical gesture of Joyce is located, as I will try to show.

Regarding the notion of modernity, it is often suggested that the meaning and the basis for love are lost, and that the absence of meaning is a loss that has made modern existence more diffused and alienated. And as Joyce unremittingly strove to dismantle the metaphysical *telos*, the conclusion seems obvious for some, namely that the author in continuation of this is nihilistic and bears testimony to a soulless and meaningless universe, in which love has no opportunity to gain a foothold.⁷ But, as mentioned above, the dismantling of the metaphysical *telos* – i.e. the proposition that the world and man no longer seem to contain meaning in and by themselves – proves to be the very precondition of love and solidarity between men. The collapse of metaphysics is not perceived as a loss by Joyce (and it is certainly not because he is nihilistic or solipsistic), for we are not rendered any poorer by this; on the contrary, this event has made us richer.

Of what have we become richer, one might ask? Of the abundance of the other, who reversely points towards our plenitude of existence.

I love the other because she forms the condition for my transcendence; it is, in other words, through the other that the ego is given the opportunity to go beyond itself in order to achieve more existence and identity (to put the matter differently, I need the other as the necessary medium for mirroring and recognition, which means that I could not appear to myself without the other). This is the basis for Joyce's revolutionary ethics of love, which – in sharp contrast to the modernistic artists of the time, who negatively perceived the other as an obstacle, as an alienation, and as a crack in the exiled and monadic mirror of the ego (probably best summarized by Sartre's description of the other as hell in *Huis clos*) – surrounds the other with love and gratitude, simply because, in a certain sense, I am the other, as the other is me.

This is how love, which in Joyce's work always includes the sexual aspect, becomes the paradigm for the author's successor to metaphysics, because it is through the coun-

7 Such a reaction is for instance embodied by Henry Miller, who thinks that Joyce genuinely hates mankind as such: "For at bottom there is in Joyce a profound hatred for humanity – the scholar's hatred. One realizes that he has the neurotic's fear of entering the living world, the world of men and women in which he is powerless to function. He is in revolt not against institutions, but against mankind" (*The Cosmological Eye*, p. 128). Georg Lukács, who exerted his influence by a violent attack on the modernistic literature, equally condemned Joyce for lifelessness, sterility, decadence, and emptiness: "Trotz der außerordentlichen äußerlichen Verschiedenheit der Stoffe und der Bearbeitungsweise finden wir in diesem Nebeneinander von falscher – weil toter – Objektivität und falscher – weil leerer – Subjektivität die alte Marxsche Bestimmung der Ideologie der Dekadenz" (*Essays über Realismus*, p. 148). From a more weighty side, the acclaimed Joyce scholar, Clive Hart, must be singled out, since he explains how Bloom is neither a hero nor a villain, and how "*Ulysses* contains no active moral paradigm [...] it depicts a morally static universe in which moral development is neither possible nor necessary, nor even, perhaps, desirable" ('The Sexual Perversions of Leopold Bloom,' p. 131). It is indeed true that the novel (and Joyce's works as such) do not offer the reader any substantially grounded morality – neither in the hereafter, in the political, nor in the nation are there any legitimate guidelines available for man – but it is precisely the absence and the abolition of these metaphysical dogmas that give rise to the possibility of an authentic formulation of ethics. An ethics that is fundamentally anti-essentialistic, and which takes its starting point from the gratitude towards the other, who partly offers us existence, partly designates our horizon of experience.

terpart that a dynamic, identificatory interaction between the other and the same is brought about – concisely expressed in the adorable depiction of Anna Livia Plurabelle and Here Comes Everybody making love: “O I you O you me!” (*Finnegans Wake*, p. 584.34). The other is not an obstacle hampering the endeavours of the ego from making itself visible for itself and comprehending itself; the other constitutes the actual premise for the possibility of a *rendering* of an ego in the first place. This is why the other is not a curse, but a *gift*, and this is, furthermore, the reason why it is important simultaneously to give and to take in the euphoria of love.⁸ The esteem for the other is crucial, and this means that self-consciousness is false (and potentially self-destructive) if it does not recognize the other as its existential stipulation. This would be the case when it fails to recognize the logic of the gift-exchange: To abstain from giving and to abstain from receiving is to degrade oneself – to make oneself unnecessarily poorer – in like manner as if one abstains from returning: “Si on donne les choses et les rend, c’est parce qu’on *se* donne et *se* rend ‘des respects’ – nous disons encore ‘des politesses’. Mais aussi c’est qu’on *se* donne en donnant, et, si on *se* donne, c’est qu’on *se* ‘doit’ – soi et son bien – aux autres” (Marcel Mauss: *Essai sur le don*, p. 227).

When, in this manner, one owes oneself and one’s existence to the other, it means that one essentially *is not everything in and by oneself*. Man is, in a crucial manner, determined as *not-everything*, which means that there is no such thing as a whole or everything for man and that man, furthermore, is not *One*. Consequently, the precondition for the possibility of becoming an *ego* consists in the abandonment of the idea of a substantial, unified ego. One must acknowledge that the ego comes from the outside, and that, for this reason, one is subjected to temporality. Existence is in this manner not in possession of meaning in itself. However, meaning and love are given since *we create and bestow meaning*: “l’être est *avec*, il est *comme l’avec* de l’être même (le co-être de l’être), si bien que l’être ne s’identifie *comme tel (comme être de l’être), mais se pose, se donne ou arrive, se dis-*pose**” (Jean-Luc Nancy: *Être singulier pluriel*, p. 58). Existence is in a most radical manner relational inasmuch as being is “of and on, to and for, by and with, from you” (*Finnegans Wake*, p. 238.4). So, existence is purely and simply considered to be this grammatical relation (the meaning of the Latin case: genitive, accusative, dative, and ablative) stretched out between the ego and the other. To give meaning is to give love, because love is the universal expression for this *Mit-sein* that is to be found in the gift-exchange, which is of a crucial symbolic nature just like love itself. And by doing so, the lovers create a connection between hitherto separated parts, thus creating identity in difference. The two parts that are joined together in the symbolic gift-exchange of love do not contain any essential signification in themselves; but through the establishment of the connection between them, their particular insignificance is

8 Joyce differs substantially from his contemporary modernistic artists, who react with melancholy towards the collapse of metaphysics, and who lament the subject’s decentred alienation in the other. In Luigi Pirandello’s *Sei personaggi in cerca d’autore* (1921) it is correspondingly said that “lei è me” [you are me] (p. 103; English translation, p. 54); but whereas this utterance is associated with enjoyment, sexuality, love, and a surplus of meaning in Joyce, it is here an instance of a disheartening and deeply disillusioned recognition of a fundamental alienation and loss of meaning.

transcended and sublated and lifted up to the level of the universal,⁹ thus giving them a dignity that they did not possess by or in themselves in advance.

I would not possess universal existence without the other,¹⁰ which ensures my esteem and gratitude for her; but she would, on her side, not possess universal existence either, if it was not for me,¹¹ and this gives me a dignity and significance I would not possess in or by myself.

Thus giving is taking and taking is giving.

This is why I love the other, and this is James Joyce's basic formula for a radical ethics of love.

In Humphrey Chimpden Earwicker's bar, *Phoenix Tavern*, someone says that "he who loves will see" (*ibid.*, p. 321.19). Inasmuch as Joyce substitutes evangelical belief with earthly love, let's proceed at his request and see for ourselves...

9 Here and in the following I use the word *sublate* as an equivalent for Hegel's *aufheben*, which in his special usage designates the twofold dialectical transition in which a lower stage is both cancelled and preserved in a higher.

10 By the concept *existence* I am generally speaking about human existence as opposed to the being of things as such, i.e. what Heidegger calls *das Seiende*, and what I, following the tradition of the translators, will render as *beings*.

11 If my identity is stripped of all meaning and importance, this means that the identity and meaning of the others are lost as well. It is indeed for this reason – i.e. because the ego and the other determine one another – that it is necessary, if one wants to take care of the other, to take care of oneself. This logic is, in an inverted manner, utilised to its utmost in the negative subjectivity of Dostoyevsky's hero in the *Notes from the Underground* and in the autobiographies of Jean Genet. Both strive for the pride of degradation consisting in the freedom from the other, who is annulled in the negative annulment of the heroes themselves.