

Becoming-Prose of Our Love: On Joyce and Derrida

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For the day that there will be a reading of the Oxford card, the one and true reading, will be the end of history. Or the becoming-prose of our love.

— Jacques Derrida (*PC* 115)

Love loves to love love. Nurse loves the new chemist. Constable 14A loves Mary Kelly. Gerty MacDowell loves the boy that has the bicycle. M. B. loves a fair gentleman. Li Chi Han lovey up kissy Cha Pu Chow. Jumbo, the elephant, loves Alice, the elephant. Old Mr Verschoyle with the ear trumpet loves old Mrs Verschoyle with the turnedin eye. The man in the brown macintosh loves a lady who is dead. His Majesty the King loves Her Majesty the Queen. Mrs Norman W. Tupper loves officer Taylor. You love a certain person. And this person loves that other person because everybody loves somebody but God loves everybody.

— James Joyce (*U* 12.1493-1501)

My initial aim when I began preparing this inquiry was quite simple: to juxtapose and read together—side by side, if not in contiguous sequence¹⁾—the two

1) In prescribing this nigh-impossible heuristic exercise, one is no doubt following the cue signaled by Stephen Dedalus who, in the third chapter of *Ulysses*, exhorts himself to

passages cited above in order to show what kind of bearings, if any, they may have on one another and how, by extension, they may help us to rethink the event designated by the name of love. Yet, from the outset and before venturing further preliminary remark, I should try to explain what occasions this inquiry in the first place or, more to the point, what brings these two drastically incongruous statements together. That is to say, is there anything, anything other than the apparent coincidence of their thematic reference to love, that is shared by the two passages, the pair of passages which, for all intents and purposes, appear radically incommensurable in both form and content? True, those who are familiar with Derrida's works, in particular, *The Post Card*, from which the quote is taken, may recall the philosopher's explicit acknowledgement as to how his text is indebted to Joyce; in fact, in his seminal essay devoted to *Ulysses* (and his second one on Joyce), the former confesses that his 1980 work was an attempt "to restage the babelization of the postal system [operative] in *Finnegans Wake*" ("UG" 259). Nevertheless, if Derrida's statement fails to proffer anything more than background information, not at least any clue substantial enough to guide the initial trajectory of our inquiry, we had better reread and see what it is exactly that the two cited passages have in common. And that common denominator, to forestall any unnecessary suspense, derives from nothing other than their shared proclivity to citation.

That these passages stand out and so easily, so readily lend themselves to citation may sound like a subjective judgment; and to remind the reader that I am far from alone in saying this may not amount to much, even if numerous critics such as Richard Rorty and Fredric Jameson have respectively seized on those passages to elucidate their own theoretical arguments.²⁾ Yet, if, via a certain leap

reflect "*Nacheinander...Nebeneinander*" (*U* 3.13-15).

2) Regarding *The Post Card*, but no less pertinently vis-à-vis this particular passage, Rorty marvels at its level of "richness achieved by few other contemporary writers, and no other contemporary philosophy professors." Rorty, 129. Jameson, for his part, singles out the passage in *Ulysses* as an exemplary instance of "linguistic games and experiments [that] are rather to be seen as impersonal sentence combinations and variations beyond all

of faith, exceptional status were to be conceded and granted to the two passages, what is surprising about them, as one cannot but admit, is not merely that they stand out in and of themselves but that they stand out from the texts that are themselves as avowedly exceptional as *The Post Card* and *Ulysses*. (Although this would not be the occasion to properly formulate the question, one ought to mark, in passing, that here one comes across a problem whose aporetic implications turn out as irrecusably far-reaching as vertiginous: namely, what is an exception within an exception? Is it an exception raised to a higher power? Or is it the simple obverse of exception, that is, non-exception?) For now, I would like to take a moment in this introductory step to reflect on the idea of ‘standing out’ and what it may signify in multiple registers.

When one says something ‘stands out,’ and not necessarily confining the subject matter to a selective turn of phrase or expressions in a written text but also and more importantly, in regard to a particular thing or a person, what is it that singularizes the given subject from the rest, distinguishing and further exceptionalizing it from the surrounding environment? In posing the question ‘what is...?,’ it may appear as if we have inadvertently stepped into the formidable world of metaphysics, if not surely all the more foreboding and no less grey world of modern-day phenomenology, whose uncompromising scientific rigor may all-too-likely prove, to echo Walter Pater’s prescient warning, inappropriate to our topic. Indeed, when discussing an event as singular as love—for, after all, it is love we are concerned with, not only in terms of how something or someone stands out in that most mysterious of all phenomena known as ‘love at first sight’ but also in ‘love at hindsight,’ unless, of course, contrary to common sense and the instinctual resistance to think otherwise, the two always, already turn out to be the same—one perhaps fares far better in an aesthetic vision like the following by Pater in his semi-autobiographical essay, in which he makes reference to one special dream dreamt by his dramatic persona: “a dream which did for him the office of the finer sort of memory, bringing its object to mind with great clearness, yet, as sometimes

happens in dreams, raised a little above itself, and above ordinary retrospect" (1). Or, if this Paterean description sounds too classically literary or still heavily steeped in the abstract, recall the unforgettable closing sequence of the film *Closer* (2004), whose slow-motioned camera basks in dispensation of its infatuated, unrequited gaze toward Natalie Portman's character who, oblivious to all men staring at her and the camera itself, nonchalantly makes her way through the bustling, sunlit Broadway of New York (One should also recall the heartrending tone in which Damien Rice's closing song blares out in refrain, "I can't take my eyes off you").

In both cases, the object remains itself, still maintains its self-same appearance albeit in heightened intensity and clarity, but with the almost imperceptible, yet crucial difference of being slightly more than itself, quite other than itself. Whatever or wherever its origin, this minimal chasm, this elusive otherness suddenly opened up in the mundane state of things reminds us that standing out is above all and at the same time an act of '*standing apart*' in the sense of not only separating from everything that surrounds the given object in terms of space and milieu, but parting and saying good bye to everything that makes up the existing world in addition to every convention and custom of law that hitherto buttressed the so-called status quo. To find an illustration of this, one need look no further than Joyce's short story "The Dead," where Gabriel Conroy recalls having written in his love letter to his wife Gretta during the days of their youthful courtship: "*Why is it that words like these seem to me so dull and cold? Is it because there is no word tender enough to be your name?*" (215 *Original italics*) Under the beautiful light shed by the proper name of the protagonist's mistress, all vocabularies are reported to have been expropriated of their usual lackadaisical luster. The irony is, of course, that the words thus relegated to the nether level of libidinal/aesthetic cathexis must swarm back to the surface even if only in order to exert the privilege of the mistress' name.

Yet, it is not only the things themselves that face sudden annihilation vis-à-vis love, but people as well. For in so far as the singular, exceptional object *is* singular and exceptional, it is equally evident that that object cannot *stand for* anything other

than itself (allegorical representation is impossible); nor can anyone *stand in* for it (substitution is likewise out of the question); nor, for that matter, could it be *stood by* anything if by 'standing by' one presupposes either being waited upon (hence, the inappeasable impatience to reach the object of desire, to the uttermost limit of the eschatological) or lying next to and even being tied to (the suddenly emergent abyss will break every bond, putting everything and everyone nearby to irrecusable annihilation). If anything, this act of standing out is correlative to an act of *standing against*, bearing along the glaring sign, or a picket, which signals an outright declaration of war. Which explains why Derrida so poignantly and emphatically goes on to equate the act of declaring love with that of declaring war (In *Politics of Friendship*, for instance, he asserts, "Can one speak of loving without declaring love, without declaring war, beyond all possible neutrality?" 228). Is this not, in effect, what the camera lens is doing in *Closer's* finale when, at the price of steadfastly focusing on Portman's visage, it blurs everyone else into the silent background of anonymity? Just as with the ephemeral silhouette of the cherished "old house" in Pater's "The Child in the House," which drowns everything into its labyrinthine porosity, consigning the rest of mnemonic residue into a bottomless limbo. But of course, that is, or so at least we tend to believe, exactly what happens in love, when we are, to resort to a more or less stock idiom of English language, swept off our feet in our sudden encounter with the other, that singular, inassimilable other whose unexpected entry into our life shatters everything in its way and forces us to view everything as if for the first time, while at the same time giving rise to the irrepressible, unsettling movement of desire which we did not think we possessed till that moment. This is not to say that every encounter lacking in such earth-shattering dimension, by necessity, falls short of authenticity. What it does say, as Pater's strategic tracing back to the immemorial backdrop of childhood in his semi-autobiographical essay ingeniously suggests, is that what we consider to be worldly activities of everyday, the myriad relationships that constitute our social, day-to-day existence would not have been possible had it not been for the originary act of preceding violence, the foundational manifestation of

forgotten force that, as the condition of its own-most possibility, could in principle *and* in fact be anytime revived to feed and sacrifice everything on to the all-consuming altar of love, exposing each and everyone, be it a friend or one's family or whomever else one thought one loved, to the violent palpitations of regvanized desire.

For whatever its worth, then, that is the essential measure of violence recalled by the above-cited passages, the two respective passages by Derrida and Joyce which, as different as they are and as unlikely as it may be, seem to almost turn and spin around each other like a couple of complementary, contradictory axioms, a set of axioms that, not unlike a pair of star-crossed lovers, ought to have imposed themselves on each other if not by fate then perforce. For by the look of it, nothing would appear as ill-matched as the two: the one pithy, nigh-lyrical, the other circular, rambling; the first personally, even libidinally invested, the second parodic, removed; the former taut with compressed meanings, the latter jokingly nonsensical to the point of downright absurdity. If love affair this be, surely here would seem to be a blatant case of opposites attract, if attract at all. But that is to see just one side or, like "Cyclops" which incidentally happens to be the chapter title of *Ulysses* whence Joyce's quote stems, with only one eye; and not merely because there is always more than meets the eye or because every couple has its secrets, unknown and unknowable to others. For contrary to how it appears, Joyce's passage is not without its ambiguities. Take, for instance, the starting sentence. Strained to analytical scrutiny, might it not intimate the dissolution of the celebrated binary known as the subject-object split? How are we, and by what right and on what authority, to distinguish the subject from the object in a sentence like "Love loves to love love"? Is this yet another economized formula for self-love, a motto for short-circuited autoeroticism? Or is it, to twist Pater's celebrated slogan, a declaration of love for love's sake? Better still, could it be an indirect echo of the author's personal pledge to his wife Nora, whose necklace is said to have borne the commemorative inscription "Love is unhappy when love is away" (Ellmann xvii)? But then, as the hero of Joyce's play *Exiles* all-too-painfully but aptly

testifies, perhaps “[one] can never know, never in this world” when one is in love, and doubtless, even in love with a single sentence (265).

“For the day that there will be,” reads the inscription on the fictive post card bearing Derrida’s signature, “a reading of the Oxford card, the one and true reading, will be the end of history”; then shifting the gear, it adds in a tone at once inimitably poetic and mournful, “Or the becoming-prose of our love.” As virtually all of Derrida’s deconstructive tropes and quasi-concepts (*différance*, dissemination, trace, iterability, hymen, etc.) illustrate, were a text, or a sign, to find a fixed/fixated con-figuration of meaning, a final anchorage for its signifiatory journey, that moment will have marked both *de facto* and *de jure* death not only for the text itself but death to all possibilities of future as well as to every chance of love. But it is precisely here, in the specific manner of correlating history and love that Derrida’s statement appears to depart from the Irish novelist’s. To begin with, in contrast to Joyce, whose every textual sinew and muscle imparts the feeling of rebelling against the idea of history (most flagrantly epitomized by Stephen Dedalus’ remark, “History… is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake.” [*U* 2.377]),³) the concept of history receives positive valence in Derrida’s works (recall *Specters of Marx* which marked, among other things, the philosopher’s critical intervention against Francis Fukuyama’s *The End of History and the Last Man* and its triumphant celebration of the nascent neoliberal world order). Moreover, history, along with all the baneful, destructive forces in life, looms as the farthest thing from love in the Joycean literary topography, as the central character of *Ulysses* would memorably have us recall: “But it’s no use, says [Leopold Bloom]. Force, hatred, history, all that. That’s not life for men and women, insult and hatred. And everybody knows that it’s the very opposite of that that is really life… Love” (*U*

3) In his 1902 essay “James Clarence Mangan,” young Joyce privileges the faculty of intuition and imagination at the price of undermining the idea of history, when he writes, “Poetry… speaks of what seems fantastic and unreal to those who have lost the simple intuitions which are the tests of reality; and, as it is often found at war with its age, so it make no account of history, which is fabled by the daughters of memory…” Joyce, *CWJJ*, 81.

12.1481-85). In fact, it is immediately following that pivotal moment in the text that our second epigraph by Joyce is introduced, thus giving off the impression of mildly rebuking, if not satirically debunking, Bloom's mustered effort at defending love. How then to reconcile such disparate viewpoints articulated by Joyce and Derrida?

A clue presents itself when we turn to yet another climactic moment in Joyce's work, a moment when the notion of love gets affirmed in its purported universality. While expounding on his Shakespearean theory in the National Library scene, Stephen reflects to himself, "Love, yes. Word known to all men," adding, "*Amore vero aliquid alicui bonum vultunde et ea quae concupiscimus*" (Translated, the statement would roughly read, 'Love truly wishes some good to another and therefore we desire it' [*U* 9.429-31]). As Richard Ellmann lucidly pointed out, the Latin conflates and thereby contaminates Thomas Aquinas' well-known doctrine on love, which sharply distinguishes and demarcates 'love that wishes another's good' from the selfish 'desire to secure one's own pleasure' ("Preface" xii).⁴ If, as Ellmann furthermore argued, our epigraph exemplifies yet another Thomistic parody, namely, on the latter's formula "God is love and loves all things" (xiii) by implicating and impregnating the sacrosanct godhead in the immanent chain of substitutable proper names, then what emerges is not just one more blasphemous joke in a continuing series, but a certain consistent vision of God as that essential, originary being ineluctably caught, like every finite being trapped in the vice of disjointed time and space, in the aporetic torsion at the same time uniting and bifurcating love for another and self-love, whose self-differentiating movement cannot but duly subscribe to the overriding logic of *différance*. Where does this leave love? For one thing, love would be one more name in the long, interminable series in which God finds provisionary shelter, succeeding such unique but ultimately replaceable expressions as "the collector of prepuces" (*U* 1.393), "a shout

4) Richard Rowan the protagonist of *Exiles* articulates the original Thomist take on love when he defines love as the inclination "to wish [someone] well" in contradistinction from the "longing to possess a woman [which] is not love" (*PE* 190).

in the street" (*U* 2.386), "noise in the street: very peripatetic" (*U* 9.85-86), etc.⁵) It would also signal a movement (recall the sentence "Love loves to love love," whose syntactic construction so vividly encapsulates its essential tendency to go out of itself, transforming itself) that threatens and violates its own self-same identity, thereby giving rise to all sorts of conflictive, and often that much creative, misunderstandings and misinterpretations, which are nothing other than history's condition of possibility, not to speak of textuality.

The question of violence, however, receives greater prominence in the second aspect that distinguishes our two epigraphs—the level of libidinal investment which seems to so strikingly lack in Joyce's passage compared to Derrida's. And that pivotal difference hinges on one word, "our," a trope which allows the philosopher to affirm in a poetic flourish of aphorism the privileged sense of intimacy and closeness belonging to that minimal unit of interpersonal community known as 'we.' Rather than reverting to Joyce's work (in which, one should note in passing, the notion of 'we' rarely, if ever, receives favorable emphasis, even the congregation of triadic characters known as Stephen, Leopold and Molly never amounting, or succumbing, to the level of consubstantiality, be it virtual or otherwise), I would like here to briefly examine a more familiar literary work, yet another canonic novel which, by cogently revealing the violent mechanism of sacrifice informing the event called love, will have the effect of recalibrating the status of the first-person pronoun in plural and its visceral logic of exclusion.

Readers of Jane Austen may recall how in the very narrative midpoint of *Pride and Prejudice*, the central character Elizabeth suddenly comes to regard her nemesis-cum-unlikely love interest named Mr. Darcy in a new, entirely transformed light following her receipt of an unanticipated letter from him. The startling content of the revelatory letter hurls the heroine into a surge of emotional/psychological turmoil, leading her to ultimately question the sense of her own identity ("Till this

5) As is well known, in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Stephen furthermore compares God to "the artist...[who] remains within or behind or beyond or above his handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent, paring his fingernails" (*P* 233).

moment,” says she, “I never knew myself.” 159). Indeed, the fact that she has to pore over and minutely scrutinize “the meaning of every sentence” (157) to the point of getting to know it “by heart” (163) attests to the sheer level of shock that has traumatized her ego and irreparably punctured her self-enclosed world. What is intriguing, however, is how the idiom specifically utilized by the sender of the letter belatedly makes its way into her own tongue, when she gets to reconsider her family members in a radically shifted perspective; thus, the “total want of propriety” (152) charged by the former against virtually all of her family members becomes the supplementary index of social values and decorum from which the latter will thence be judged, and not only the female members who were barely held in high esteem anyway but more importantly even her doting father whose behavioral “impropriety... as a husband” (180) finally receives a sudden, official acknowledgement. But of course, that revaluation of morals is preceded by a sacrifice of quite another sort, of a personage on whom she formerly bestowed unstinting admiration and whose words, as she cannot but recognize almost despite herself, might as well be as good as Darcy’s – namely, Mr. Wickham.

In the place of burnt-up offerings of the people she loved, then, and the remains of their smoldering ashes, Elizabeth will see the precarious balance of her compassion swiftly tilt toward Darcy until it reaches its fruition in the newly-acquired sense of ‘we.’ Yet, what is it that is being declared by the pronouncement and the attendant affirmation of this first-person pronoun in plural? More precisely, what happens to the relationship, any relationship, when it is tasked to the throes of the performative violence of such homogenizing gesture? It is interesting to note that in the final exchange of words between the main couple in the novel, the male character, in stark contrast to the heroine who utters the plural pronoun three times, never once mentions ‘we,’ as if, resisting the alluring power of erotic homogenization till the end, he secretly, steadfastly yearned for his sole goal which is self-reconciliation (“I cannot be so easily reconciled to myself,” says he, meaning he will have to find a way of reconciling with himself in his own terms); but that recovered sense of self-identity, as the heroine in her turn cannot but lucidly remind

us (She says, “The feelings of the person who wrote, and the person who received it, are now so widely different from what they were then, that every unpleasant circumstance attending it, out to be forgotten,” 282), is nothing if not elusive. Be that as it may, this newly-formed union has still one more sacrifice in store, if not another beginning in a new series. For it cannot but spell deaths to the two before they became one (or ‘we’), along with the unbridled wit and biting sense of humor, which, weaned from prejudice and pride subtending them, will nevertheless continue to haunt their future household as well as the readers after reading in the residual form of uncanny memories.

Which is why in the preliminary footnote of *The Post Card*, Derrida cautiously states, “doubtless we are several, and I am not as alone as I sometimes say I am when the complaint escapes from me, or when I still put everything into seducing you”(6). In other words, no matter how much one longs to delimit and demarcate ‘we’ into a restricted membership, there is and always will be yet another other, another inassimilable, irreducible other haunting that privileged first-person plural, on account of whose borderline non/presence, or presence-as-absence qua absence-as-presence, the given group cannot but fail to neatly fit into a countable number, let alone a smug self-contained community. Elsewhere, in another context, Derrida goes on to drive home a point which at first seems quite unrelated, or even antithetical, to this supernumerary axiom, when, alighting on his own preceding remark, namely, “I am not one of the family,” he elaborates,

“I am not one of the family” means: do not consider me “one of you,” “don’t count me in,” I want to keep my freedom, always; this, for me, is the condition not only for being singular and other, but also for entering into relation with the singularity and alterity of others. When someone is one of the family, not only does he lose himself in the herd, but he loses the others as well; the others becomes simply places, family functions, or places or functions in the organic totality that constitutes a group, school, nation, or community of subjects speaking the same language. (*TS* 27)

Despite his explicit refusal to join and participate in every exclusive form of filial membership (be it a Habermasean intersubjective community or one partaking in hermeneutic dialogue like Gadamer's), it is more than clear that Derrida cannot himself completely sever the ties that extricate him to such discursive community if only because that underscored gesture of disavowal cannot but presuppose the ineluctable engagement to the other, of the other albeit only in the form of a ghostly third party as the condition of its own possibility. To return to our discussion on the postcard, this would be tantamount to saying that the moment we, or any group of people, get to agree, say on the content of a postcard or of a letter or on the presumed meaning of a literary text such as *Ulysses*, something and, by the same token, someone will be inevitably thrown onto the sacrificial alter, trailing behind its shadow the living, wounding memories of love. Nonetheless and for all that, the necessity inevitably arises and remains thereafter for each and every one of us to affirm at one time or another a certain shared sense of 'we.' Perhaps love would be a name, no doubt one among many, and the binding sign of a promise not to close the doors to the others, not only to the other within you and within me, but as Joyce's epigraph would playfully remind us, the others that bear such unlikely and ultimately unidentifiable names as Li Chi Han, old Mrs Verschoyle with the turned-in eye, a lady who is dead, not to mention Jumbo the elephant, and this all the while withstanding the overbearing weight of multiple aporias that continue to accumulate with every passing hour.

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Abstract**Becoming-Prose of Our Love: On Joyce and Derrida**

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Few perhaps need to be reminded as to how much Joyce's writings influenced Derrida and how the latter's philosophical enterprise known as deconstruction continued to draw its inspiration as well as strategies from the 'revolution of the word' initiated by the former; indeed, the two essays explicitly foregrounding Joyce's works ("Ulysses Gramophone" and "Two Words for Joyce") constitute only a more overt testament to the pivotal position occupied by Joyce in the extended trajectory of Derrida's thinking starting out from his initial essay on Husserl ("Introduction to *The Origin of Geometry*") and culminating in his final 2003 seminar ("The Beast and the Sovereign, Volume II"), in both of which the Irish author receives more than a passing mention. Rather than, however, examining the proximity between the two representative figures of modern literature and philosophy in general terms, the present inquiry focuses on one central topic which apparently has never received proper attention hitherto: love. How does Joyce's problematization of love in *Ulysses*, for instance, makes us rethink about Derrida's flitting remark on the same topic in *The Post Card*? And how in turn does Derrida's differential insight force us to reinterpret Joyce's thematization? Though only coincidental at first, both writers' engagement with the topic will turn out to show that they have more in common as their respective approach attempt to reach the same end albeit from radically incommensurable tradition and geopolitical positionings.

■ **Key words** : Love, Joyce, Derrida, Austen, Pater, *Closer*

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