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## Love in Joyce: A Philosophical Apprenticeship

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# Love in Joyce

## *A Philosophical Apprenticeship*

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RUBEN BORG

This essay reads Joyce's fiction as an *apprenticeship in love*. With this term, I would like to suggest that love is not only a prominent theme in Joyce, but a dominant concept within a philosophical and artistic trajectory, part and parcel of an artist's progress as he experiments with the power of images and with modes of representation. My argument turns on three interconnected points: first, that early on in his career Joyce adopts a scholastic framework according to which love is the supreme philosophical emotion and the source from which all other emotions proceed; second, that he puts this framework to the test by pitting the concept of love against a cluster of related passions, most notably desire, pity, and joy; and finally, that in exploring these passions, he grapples with the problem of reconciling a scholastic interpretation of love with a modernist approach to representation.

Joyce originally adheres to the hierarchy of dramatic passions established by the scholastic tradition; but in the course of his artistic evolution he is led to question the sustainability of that hierarchy. We will see that this shift is best illustrated by a comparison between *A Portrait of the Artist* and *Giacomo Joyce*. In the former, tragic and comedic passions are distributed along a learning curve that privileges pity over desire—and joy over both. Pity is preferred to desire as the more charitable and less possessive emotion. But already in *Giacomo Joyce*, and again in *Finnegans Wake*, Joyce experiments with a different kind of image (and thus with a different distribution of the passions). As he becomes increasingly aware of the impossibility of grounding a modern experience of Love in a scholastic-theological framework,<sup>1</sup> he revises his understanding of the relation between Love and the passions that proceed from Love. Under this

new regime, Love, pity, and desire are seen to be inextricably bound up; pity is suspected as the most equivocal of the passions, while desire is recognized as an indefeasible component in all amorous experience.

I will argue that that this shift coincides with a modern reinterpretation of the scholastic notion of comedy. By the end of his apprenticeship Dante understood Love as a binding together of all things, a moment of communion—joyous, comedic—with the universe as a whole. For the Joyce of *Finnegans Wake*, Love retains the value of a joyous and universal affirmation; but now, the sense of the connectedness of all things is reflected in images of utter indeterminacy, images that come into being in a space *between* ontological determinations—between fact and fiction, memory and dream, truth and untruth. Joyce's later writing is comedic precisely in so far as it affirms such indeterminacy as a defining predicate of reality.

#### THE TRAGIC PASSIONS

An early instance of Joyce's scholastic treatment of Love in relation to the tragic passions is found in *Stephen Hero*, where we encounter Stephen as a student engaging the syllabus of his English Literature class.

He [Father Butt] took "Othello" more seriously [than "Twelfth Night"] and made the class take a note of the moral of the play: an object-lesson in the passion of jealousy. Shakespeare, he said, had sounded the depths of human nature: his plays show us men and women under the influence of various passions and they show us the moral result of these passions. We see the conflict of these human passions and our own passions are purified by the spectacle. The dramas of Shakespeare have a distinct moral force and "Othello" is one of the greatest of tragedies (*SH* 29).

The excerpt appears to ironize the moral reading of tragedy promoted by Stephen's teachers, who, as Stephen wryly observes, would refuse "to allow two of the boarders to go to a performance of 'Othello' [. . .] on the ground that there were many coarse expressions in the play" (*SH* 29). Father Butt's lesson is undermined by his school's Jesuitical policy. Yet, to be sure, his claim that *Othello* probes the moral effects of various human passions is not challenged on point of merit. Nor does Joyce ever quarrel with the idea that tragedy is an essentially moral genre.

*Othello* itself remains an under-analyzed intertext in Joyce scholarship. As an example of Shakespearean influence it is overshadowed by *Hamlet*,

and if referred to at all, it is along the lines sketched out by Stephen's teacher: as a drama on sexual jealousy.<sup>2</sup> But it seems to me that the play has a specific appeal for Joyce beyond the themes of jealousy and suspected cuckoldry: namely, that it is a play in which *pity* is eroticized, in which, in other words, the dangers of confusing pity with sexual desire are put to the test.<sup>3</sup> Othello's monologue detailing the origin of Desdemona's love for him sets up the premise of this enquiry:

I did consent,  
 And often did beguile her of her tears  
 When I did speak of some distressful stroke  
 That my youth suffered. My story being done  
 She gave me for my pains a world of sighs.  
 She swore, in faith, 'twas strange, 'twas passing strange,  
 'Twas pitiful, 'twas wondrous pitiful.  
 [. . .]  
 She loved me for the dangers I had passed,  
 And I loved her that she did pity them.  
 This only is the witchcraft I have used.  
 Here comes the lady. Let her witness it.<sup>4</sup>

Stephen knows that pity is a key passion in the construction of any tragic plot—that the force of a tragic scene, the very ability of tragedy to move us, is dependent, inevitably, on the rhetorical effects of pity. The reference to *Othello* as “one of the greatest of tragedies” illustrates this notion. But as a formative text in Stephen's education, *Othello* also brings a specific moral lesson into relief: that the confusion of pity and desire is liable to have devastating effects on the lover's soul. Within such an interpretive framework, the passion Othello elicits in his courtship of Desdemona must strike us as a false image of love. Their bond is a sentiment that is poisoned at the source.

An extension of this idea is found in The Paris Notebook of 1903—in an excerpt that will serve as the basis of Stephen's aesthetic theory in Chapter 5 of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. This time, Joyce's exploration of the overlap between love, pity, and desire involves a hierarchy of emotions that is articulated over five terms: loathing, desire, pity and terror (which are, in fact, twin faces of a single tragic impulse), and finally joy. As before, our chief concern is with the distinction between pity and desire; but also with the value system that Joyce elaborates in

order to sustain that distinction. What these two passions have in common is that they orient the self toward the world or toward objects in the world. They are motions toward the other (the very opposite of loathing). Yet pity is distinguished from desire on the grounds that it is static and non-possessive. As Stephen famously explains, desire “urges us to possess, to go to something” (*P* 205), whereas pity “is the feeling which arrests the mind in the presence of whatsoever is grave and constant in human sufferings and unites it with the human sufferer” (*P* 204). In other words, pity is the superior emotion because it does not provoke the mind into jealous action but holds it at rest, in fascinated communion with its object.

While the name of love remains unspoken throughout Stephen’s analysis, its effects are implied precisely in the attempt to conceive the superiority of one emotion over the other. Love is the transcendental term, the standard that motivates the distinction between the passions and determines their hierarchical distribution.

Within this hierarchical framework, both pity and desire are treated as partial (that is to say, privative or imperfect) modifications of love, where joy, the highest term on the scale, is its full expression, and loathing, the lowest term, its negation.

Desire, it has been seen, is the feeling which urges us to go to something but joy is the feeling which the possession of some good excites in us. Desire, the feeling which an improper art seeks to excite in the way of comedy, differs, it is seen, from joy. For desire urges us from rest that we may possess something but joy holds us in rest so long as we possess something.

And a few lines down:

All art which excites in us the feeling of joy is so far comic and according as this feeling of joy is excited by whatever is substantial or accidental, general or fortuitous, in human fortunes the art is to be judged more or less excellent: and even tragic art may be said to participate in the nature of comic art so far as the possession of a work of tragic art (a tragedy) excites in us the feeling of joy. From this it may be seen that tragedy is the imperfect manner and comedy the perfect manner in art. (*CW* 144)

The excerpt brings three issues to our immediate attention: First, Joyce’s definition of joy as “the feeling which the possession of some good excites

in us” resounds in his later definition of love as “the desire of good for another” (*E* 113), and both statements are informed by Aquinas’s distinction between love, desire, and joy in the *Summa*. Notably, Aquinas argues that joy “regards good [as something] present and possessed,” whereas desire relates to good as something absent, and love “regards good universally, whether possessed or not. Hence love is naturally the first act of the will and appetite; for which reason all the other appetite movements presuppose love, as their root and origin.”<sup>5</sup>

Second, the idea that tragedy is an imperfect art form carries the implication that pity, the tragic passion par excellence, lacks the plenitude of joy, and in turn this suggestion draws on Aquinas’s discussion of pity as a deficient ethical virtue.<sup>6</sup>

Finally, the claim that comedy is the perfect manner in art calls to mind the spiritual journey of Dante, which also takes the form of a philosophical apprenticeship beginning in “fear” (the emotional focus of the first Canto), proceeding through various tragic passions, foremost among them “pity,” and ending in Love, the *Commedia*’s declared goal (“l’amor che move il sole e l’altre stelle”).<sup>7</sup>

Together these associations superimpose a theological and moral framework onto Joyce’s hierarchy of emotions. But to what extent does Joyce continue to buy into that framework in his later writing (after, say, *A Portrait of the Artist*)? I would like to approach this question by focusing on *Giacomo Joyce*, a short autobiographical piece written sometime around 1914, in which Joyce describes his infatuation with a Triestine student, nameless in the text, but identified by critical consensus as Amalia Popper. *Giacomo Joyce* signals a bold attempt to test out a new type of image, one that seems to do away with received standards of faithful and false representation. Whereas the method of *A Portrait* still displays the need to disentangle one emotion from another, and to assign to each a specific philosophical value, the Triestine fragment seems to question the very possibility of these distinctions. In the case of the *Portrait*, the form of the Bildungsroman militates in favor of a progressive refinement of Stephen’s emotional life: as the young boy’s inchoate perceptions emerge into the clarity of self-consciousness, so too his confused emotions mature into moments of self-understanding—we go from the fear and shame associated with the taboo of a barely experienced sexuality, through scenes of terror and pity inspired by the religious fervor of Chapter 3, to the famous “outburst of profane joy” at the sight of the bird-like girl (*P* 171). By contrast, the method of *Giacomo Joyce* is that of

phantasmagoria, a technique to which Joyce will return in *Finnegans Wake* and in the later episodes of *Ulysses* (most notably “Circe”), and that relies on a conflation of names and identities, on the merging of multiple settings and on a contraction of narrated time.

To date, readings of *Giacomo Joyce* have focused mainly on the autobiographical contexts that inform the narrative, and, extrapolating from those contexts, on the way in which it interrogates the ethical implications of the author’s desire. Many critics view it as a transitional text in Joyce’s artistic and ethical maturation, perhaps not a great achievement in itself, but a pivotal stage in his understanding of male desire, and a frank depiction of that desire in all its ugliness. Vicki Mahaffey sums up the stakes in the following, highly influential analysis:

*Giacomo Joyce* focuses on the antagonism of mutual regard in a world where privilege is precariously uneven. Regarded sympathetically, the piece seems to represent Joyce’s desire to reverse the power flow in an unequal relationship by asserting his prerogative as a writer. [. . .] The *story* of *Giacomo Joyce* presents Joyce as Popper’s suffering victim, but its *mode of presentation* makes her utterly subject to his representation of her. In short *Giacomo Joyce* has sexist and anti-Semitic overtones that are essential to an understanding of the operations of prejudice and the power of art.<sup>8</sup>

The “sexist and anti-Semitic overtones” to which Mahaffey alludes stem from a complex power dynamic that requires Joyce to elevate Amalia and somehow to degrade her at the same time.<sup>9</sup> The contradiction clearly feeds the writer’s desire. Amalia’s affluence and her Jewish identity are objects of his fascination; but they are also the target of his resentful attack after she spurns his advances. Joyce recycles ethnic stereotypes and wears his envy of Amalia’s social standing on his sleeve. Still more tellingly, upon her final rejection he expresses his sense of betrayal with the scriptural quotation “*Non hunc, sed Barabbam*” (*GJ* 16)—“Not him, but Barabbas”—implicitly equating himself with Jesus, and identifying Amalia with the Jewish rabble that clamoured for the release of a common criminal instead of Christ.

To be sure, the figure of Christ is often associated with the theme of betrayal in Joyce’s works, but what interests me here is that the identification carries with it a note of self-pity; and further, that through self-pity the act of betrayal is itself eroticized. Joyce’s phantasmagoric method is

crucial to this effect. By rendering Amalia in the ill-defined tones of dream and hallucination, Joyce removes her from the world, turns her into a distant, partially realized image and thus endows her with an uncanny passivity. As we shall see, this passivity is no mere submissiveness, but a feature of reality itself—reality as the later Joyce saw it, opaque, ghostly and resistant to representation. In this sense, Amalia is the prototype of those composite characters developed in “Circe” and in *Finnegans Wake*; she is already invested with what Mahaffey calls (in reference to the *Wake*) “the libidinal and spiritual energy of the unconscious mind” (*States* 180), an energy that, for all its violence and aggression, must remain unpoliced and unpoliceable if it is to have any ethical purchase at all.

Ultimately, the phantasmagoric quality of the narrative into which Amalia is written gives Joyce license to pitch his desire in an ethical (and ontological) grey area. His representations are neither simply private nor quite public, neither fictional nor simply autobiographical. This textual dynamic is ideally illustrated by the semiotics of the phrase “*Non hunc, sed Barabbam*” (*GJ* 16). The quotation, from the gospel of John, is uttered by Joyce to Joyce himself, yet its effect is to put words in Amalia’s mouth without actually letting her speak. At the same time, by modulating the phrase through the prism of his own self-pity Joyce makes his desire, rather than Amalia’s identity, the focus of the reader’s judgment. The bigotry triggered by Amalia’s resistance is represented as a banal sentiment, expressed in a sequence of clichés that constitute their own implicit critique.

Here Joyce is able to chastise himself for the ugliness of his desire and simultaneously to enjoy his status as a powerless victim of love. Indeed, what many readers of *Giacomo Joyce* have failed to remark is that Joyce himself is strangely passive throughout the narrative. But his is not the passivity of a figure in a dream; rather, that of a helpless lover who indulges narcissistically in his own helplessness, who sees himself as a victim of his emotions and who suffers his desire as a disease.

#### LOVE AND HEALTH

The association of love with good or bad health is, in fact, one of the key conventions of amatory discourse thematized in *Giacomo Joyce*. Aside from the repeated references to Amalia’s death-like paleness, the text returns to this trope at least three times: first, when Joyce pictures Amalia cut open by the surgeon’s knife; later, when he describes her gaze as “a



jet of liquorish venom" (*GJ* 15); and finally, in the climactic seduction scene, when Amalia finds her voice and delivers the line: "I am not convinced such activities of the mind or body can be called unhealthy" (*GJ* 15).

All three scenes seem to slide effortlessly between memory, fantasy, and literary citation. In the first, Joyce is seized by the panic of losing his beloved when he learns that she has been hospitalized, but what appears to be a genuinely painful memory soon gives way to jealousy at the thought that a cruel God might be claiming Amalia for himself. The image is, of course, overblown, and, as Joseph Valente points out, rendered in utterly conventional terms.<sup>10</sup> The effect is to redirect the focus of the scene from the realm of actual grief to that of narcissistic self-pity.

The housemaid tells me that they had to take her away at once to the hospital, *poveretta*, that she suffered so much, so much, *poveretta*, that it is very grave. . . . I walk away from her empty house. I feel that I am about to cry. Ah, no! It will not be like that, in a moment, without a word, without a look. No, no! Surely hell's luck will not fail me!

Operated. The surgeon's knife has probed in her entrails and withdrawn, leaving the raw jagged gash of its passage on her belly. I see her full dark suffering eyes, beautiful as the eyes of an antelope. O cruel wound! Libidinous God! (*GJ* 11)

Here we cannot escape the impression that for Joyce romantic pain is, above all, a literary affectation. The love-sick writer indulges in his misery as in the repetition of a well-loved cliché. Compare his "O cruel wound!" and "I feel that I am about to cry" with the housemaid's simple, artless sentiment—*poveretta, poveretta* ("poor darling").

Crucially, and pertinently, this sequence also contains the manuscript's most explicit reference to Dante: "She walks before me along the corridor and as she walks a dark coil of her hair slowly uncoils and falls. Slowly uncoiling, falling hair. She does not know and walks before me simple and proud. So did she walk by Dante in simple pride" (*GJ* 11). It is customary to unpack this allusion by focusing on the acquired cultural significance of Beatrice as an idealized, angelic woman, as the pure but remote face of love and as the poet's muse.<sup>11</sup> But in my view, the full significance of the Amalia-Beatrice analogy has to do precisely with the

rhetoric of good or bad health that attaches to the figure of love in the Dantean text.

The *Vita Nuova* is a study in the ethics of love developed through the theme of love-sickness. The narrative follows Dante's career as a young poet in love and in search of the proper style in which to express his emotion; all the while it relates his attempts first to emulate, then to overcome, the influence of rival poet Guido Cavalcanti, who was widely admired for his interpretation of love as a source of anguish (and thus a gateway to self-pity).<sup>12</sup>

The first part of the work is written under the influence of Cavalcanti and shows Dante pining for Beatrice while imagining the God of Love as a cruel, victimizing tyrant. The section ends when Beatrice refuses to return Dante's greeting in public, a snub that triggers a deep emotional crisis, and, eventually, the resolution to write about love in a new style. To emphasize this storyline, the *Vita Nuova* plays with the resonance between the Italian word for "greeting" (*saluto*) and the word for "health" (*salute*).<sup>13</sup> By denying Dante her greeting, Beatrice denies him his health. But it is his false interpretation of love as a cruel tyrant that makes him unworthy of her favor in the first place and that predisposes him to love-sickness following her rejection.

Dante reprises this theme at least three times in the *Commedia*: in Canto V of the *Inferno*, which shows the poet's will at its weakest, and which ends, famously, in a fainting spell induced by feelings of "pity" toward Paolo and Francesca (*Inferno* V.140–1); in Canto X, when, in conversation with Cavalcanti's father, he defends the moral superiority of his mature poetic style over Guido's (*Inferno* X.52–72); and finally, in *Purgatorio* XXX, soon after the reunion with his beloved.

It is a highly dramatic moment, but not the heart-warming encounter one might expect. Beatrice welcomes Dante to the top of Mt. Purgatory by reprimanding him for falling prey to love-sickness again after her death. That crisis is recounted in Chapters XXXV–XXXVIII of the *Vita Nuova*. Overcome by grief, Dante seeks comfort in the arms of a "gracious lady" whom he characterizes repeatedly as compassionate and full of pity.

I saw at a window a gracious lady, young and exceedingly beautiful, who was looking down at me so compassionately, to judge from her appearance, that all pity seemed to be concentrated in her.

And because whenever an unhappy person sees someone take pity on him, he is all the more easily moved to tears, as if taking pity on himself, so I immediately felt the tears start to come. Fearing that I was revealing all the wretchedness in my life, I turned away from her eyes and left that place. And later I said to myself: "It must surely be true that with that compassionate lady there is present most noble Love." (Dante, *Vita Nuova* 74)

And again in the next chapter:

After that, it always happened that whenever this lady saw me, her face would become compassionate and turn a pale color almost like that of love, so that many times I was reminded of my most noble lady who always had a similar coloring.

And many times when I was unable to vent my sadness by weeping, I used to go to see this compassionate lady whose expression alone was able to bring tears to my eyes. (Dante, *Vita Nuova* 75)

Beatrice makes it clear that this predisposition to mistake true love for pity is the final weakness of which Dante must be rid before crossing over into the Garden of Eden. Her stern reception equates his betrayal with the profound moral crisis from which he had to be saved at the start of the *Commedia*, and, crucially, references the key-word *salute*, translated by Hollander as salvation: "He fell so low that all means for his salvation [*salute*]/had already fallen short" (*Purgatorio* XXX.136–7).

I mean to argue that the discourse on love and health in *Giacomo Joyce* functions as a direct commentary on this Dantean plotline. Yet Joyce's instinct is to affirm the impossibility of repeating Dante's moral trajectory within modern experience. The phantasmic images deployed in the Tries-tine fragment allow Joyce to explore a point of indeterminacy between love and its simulacra. This is why Amalia can be a Beatrice figure and an object of adulterous jealousy at the same time. Like Beatrice, she has the power to deny or to return Joyce's greeting and this action is said to have a direct bearing on the writer's health: "She answers my greeting by [. . .] averting her black basilisk eyes" (*GJ* 15). And again later: "she greets me wintrily and passes up the staircase darting at me for an instant out of her sluggish sidelong eyes a jet of liquorish venom" (*GJ* 15). Within the space of a single paragraph, Amalia is alternately seductive and distant, a paragon of restraint and a fantasy of sexual provocation:

—I am not convinced that such activities of the mind or body can be called unhealthy—

She speaks. A weak voice from beyond the cold stars. Voice of wisdom. Say on! O, say again, making me wise! This voice I never heard.

She coils towards me along the crumpled lounge. I cannot move or speak. Coiling approach of starborn flesh. Adultery of wisdom. No. I will go. I will.

Jim, love!—(*GJ* 15)

Here, at last, Joyce lays his cards on the table; we are faced with an ethical project that merges in a single image the pursuit of wisdom and its “adultery.” Much of the scene’s rhetorical force is in the strategic juxtaposition of two phrases: “Voice of wisdom” and “Adultery of wisdom.” At first glance, Joyce seems to privilege the remoteness of a voice without body, and to suggest that the beloved’s wisdom is tainted by her approaching physicality. In this sense, the passage from “weak voice from beyond the cold stars” to “starborn flesh” might suggest a fall from purity. Yet it is far from clear that Joyce intends this moment as a setback. On the contrary, the sequence suggests that adultery (the rejection of any pure form, be it an object of “mind or body”) is an integral part of his apprenticeship.

The rest of the scene adds to the ambiguity by superimposing Nora’s voice onto Amalia’s approaching figure. As Sheldon Brivic observes “it is his wife that Giacomo hears saying ‘Jim love,’ for Nora called Joyce Jim.”<sup>14</sup> The interruption saves Joyce from adultery but affords him some of the shame and most of the pleasure of an adulterer’s transgression (in this sense, the moment is analogous to the scenes in which Joyce chastises himself for his sexist and anti-Semitic sentiments even while enjoying his own Christ-like victimization). As Brivic concludes, this marks an important development in Joyce’s career whereupon he is able to test a mode of understanding that is “mixed or adulterated, [and] that sustains several levels at once” (Brivic 260). Janine Utell agrees that the sequence takes on its full (ethical) significance only with the sudden appearance of Nora, but she insists that such an appearance invites us to read *Giacomo Joyce* as a powerful reaffirmation of marriage—a return to Ithaca—made possible, paradoxically, by the trials of adultery.<sup>15</sup>

We do not realize it is the wife who has called [Joyce’s] name until he responds, and we see that his fantasy has been transformed into a

sexual encounter within the bounds of marriage—except, of course, those bounds have been transgressed. The adultery of wisdom, or perhaps the wisdom of adultery, is that desire knows no bounds, marital or otherwise. Wife and lover merge on the penultimate page of the notebook, bringing desire beyond the margins of marriage, even as Giacomo Joyce seeks so desperately to construct and contain it.<sup>16</sup>

By this reading, Joyce's narrative becomes an exploration of the indefeasible sovereignty of the other (that is to say, of the impossibility of taking full charge of the other's desire) within the marriage bond. As Janine Utell points out, "In order to have a truly ethical love, it is necessary to acknowledge the separateness of the beloved, and the ultimate unattainability of the oneness that is so desperately craved" (67).

My understanding of the rhetoric of adultery in *Giacomo Joyce* takes its place alongside these two interpretations, but is attached to the broader discussion of the treatment of ideal and material images in Joyce's narrative.<sup>17</sup> I view "adultery of wisdom" as a programmatic phrase, as an equivalent of the *Wake's* method of "putting truth and untruth together" (*FW* 169.8–9), or of blending the ideal with the real to record an "ideareal history" (*FW* 262, R1). In this context, the figure of Amalia's "starborn flesh" stands for a philosophical practice that jettisons the very idea of fidelity as an ethical value and a criterion of truth in representation. Thought learns to embrace its own betrayal—the false memory, the hallucination, the lapse.

The experiment of *Giacomo Joyce* is thus born of a dual impulse: a nostalgia for Dante's understanding of love as life's prime mover and as the source of all other passions; and an exploration of the love-pity-desire triad that repeats Dante's philosophical apprenticeship within a secular context. At this point, Joyce is still willing to maintain a distinction between love and pity; but he re-evaluates desire as an original and indispensable component of love. It is the beginning of a new stylistic trajectory that will reach its full maturity in *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake* (Joyce's two overtly comedic works). What remains there of the original hierarchy theorized in the Paris Notebook is the privilege accorded to Comedy over Tragedy, and therefore to joy over sorrow.

#### TRAGICOMIC TRISTAN

But in what sense, precisely, is the *Wake's* treatment of love comedic? In addressing this question we are made aware of an apparent incongruity:

that while the novel is commonly (and justifiably) billed as a comic masterpiece, its treatment of love is more often than not bound up with images of loss, and, as in *Giacomo Joyce*, expressed in feelings of shame or betrayal.

This thematic focus is evident throughout the *Wake*. If I choose to discuss the issue in relation to the Tristan and Isolde motif, it is because of the myth's obvious pertinence to the themes of love, desire, and adultery. The intertextual allusions to the Tristan myth come to full prominence in Book II.4, but, as David Hayman has argued, they are a pervasive element in the novel and an original building block of Joyce's narrative.<sup>18</sup>

From the outset, the medieval story invites us to distinguish between two conflicting passions: an illicit love that holds the young couple in thrall; and a lawful love that ties King Mark of Cornwall to his promised bride. Both these emotions are anything but joyous. The latter is doomed to remain unrequited, whereas the former is presented as a helpless compulsion, akin to madness. Additionally, the classical trope that opposes passion to duty is made more poignant by the threefold betrayal of Mark—as a husband, as a King, and as a beloved uncle.

The *Wake* integrates this setup into a broader plot-structure that deals with generational conflict, with the fall and rise of an aging father, and the emergent sexual threat posed by youth. Joyce accentuates the pathetic overtones of Mark's character (associated with the disgraced paterfamilias HCE), but dispenses with the tragic elements of the story by turning Tristan and Iseult into parodic figures.

The parody is reinforced by a cluster of motifs that link the episode with the epiphany of the bird-like girl from *A Portrait*. In the earlier text, Dante's bird-imagery famously serves as a backdrop to the description of Stephen's "outburst of profane joy." Dante compares the souls of the lustful (among them Tristan) to three species of bird: the starlings for the pattern of their flight, the cranes for the quality of their song, and the doves, because they come in twos and allegorize desire. Joyce integrates these images in the description of the girl's "long slender bare legs [. . .] delicate as a crane's"; the slateblue skirts that "were kilted about her waist and dovetailed behind her"; and her bosom, "soft and slight, slight and soft as the breast of some darkplumaged dove" (*P* 170–1). It is always tempting to read these Dantean references as an intensification of Joyce's lyrical style. But Canto V is, in fact, already an imitation of the language of tragic, courtly love—and implicit in that imitation is a criticism of the kind of literature that led Paolo and Francesca to perdition.

“See Paris, Tristan,” and he showed me more  
 than a thousand shades, [. . .]  
 whom love had parted from our life.  
 When I heard my teacher  
 name the ladies and the knights of old  
 pity overcame me and I was almost lost.”

(*Inf.* V. 67–72; translation modified)

In other words, a critique of Tristan—of the literary and amorous conventions that the myth exemplifies—is already encrypted within Stephen’s outburst of profane joy, but it remains dormant, buried beneath layers of intertextual allusion, and perfectly camouflaged by the lyrical flourishes that characterize Joyce’s epiphanies from time to time.

Book II.4 of the *Wake* brings that critique to the surface. The chapter opens with a cry of seabirds, “*Three quarks for Muster Mark*” (*FW* 383.1); then the view pans out to reveal the birds hovering above Tristan’s boat:

Overhoved, shrillgleescreaming. That song sang seaswans. The winging ones. Seahawk, seagull, curlew and plover, kestrel and capercallzie. All the birds of the sea they trolled out rightbold when they smacked the big kuss of Trustan with Usolde. (*FW* 383.16–19)

A running commentary of Tristan’s seduction of Iseult completes this picture. The young knight is rendered as a strapping rugby jock with a sensitive soul. Time and again the text draws attention to the near homophony of his name with *tryst* and *triste*, Italian for sad. But even his *tristesse* is no more than a cliché, an affectation to match the stereotype of a hero in a romantic novel: “Tristan, sad hero, hear” (*FW* 398.29)!

Both lovers are framed in a pattern of contradictory character traits. Tristan’s personality, love-sick and mawkish but also athletic and sexually self-confident, is a composite of Shem and Shaun, who rival each other for Issy’s affections throughout the novel (tree + stone = Treestone; *FW* 113.19). In appearance, he is a “bleauyeddeal of a girl’s friend, neither bigugly nor smallnice, meaning pretty much everything to her then, with his sinister dexterity, light and rufthandling, vicemversem her ragbags et assaucyetiems, fore and aft, on and offsidés . . .” (*FW* 384.24–8). The word “bleauyeddeal” immediately conveys the senses of “blue-eyed” and “beau ideal,” while on a second reading “eau-eyed” suggests perhaps a teary-eyed hero. Yet Tristan’s behavior is far from irrepachable. The

sentence goes on to describe the light and rough handling of Iseult's curves<sup>19</sup> by this "brueburnt sexfutter" (*FW* 384.28) whose conduct remains "palpably wrong and bulbubly improper" (*FW* 384.29). Here the discourse of love oscillates between high and low registers, between stylized abstraction and the vividness of slang. "Sexfutter" suggests six footer, but also sex + fucker, from the French *foutre*; "brueburnt" brings to mind brow-bent, possibly a reference to *Antony and Cleopatra*: "Eternity was in our lips and eyes, / Bliss in our brows' bent."<sup>20</sup>

Iseult is rendered in similar tones. She is an "angel being, [and] one of romance's fadeless wonderwomen" (*FW* 395.30–1), a faithless bride, but also an ideal, unfading beauty. We are asked to imagine her as a picture of youth and a paragon of traditional values, "a strapping modern old ancient Irish prisscess" (*FW* 396.7–8), prurient and prissy at the same time. The point of these contradictions is not simply to revel in the inconsistency, but to pre-empt any clear determination of true or false love based on courtly paradigms. Once again, it is an overdetermined image, the same marriage of faithless and unfading beauty already tested out in *Giacomo Joyce* (recall the lover's "starborn flesh"; her coiling, boneless approach, her poisonous glance, paired with a voice "from beyond the stars") that carries the brunt of Joyce's ethics. Only this time, the image is played out for laughs.

The scene is somewhat complicated by the narrative situation of the chapter. Where *Giacomo Joyce* is written in a continuous present tense that contracts time and emphasizes the oneiric quality of the narrative, *Finnegans Wake* II.4 oscillates between layers of the past—the idealized past of legend, the immediate past of voyeuristic testimony, and the ageless memory of the sea. Notably, the four old men of Mamalujo to whom the narration is entrusted do not only incarnate the four hate-driven felons from Bédier's version of the story<sup>21</sup> but are also identified with the sea itself. Their strange blend of memory and forgetfulness follows the impersonal ebb and flow of the waves. Yet their "gossiple" (*FW* 38.23) is anything but disinterested. As Mark's spies, they stand in for the cuckolded King, or at the very least provide him with a clandestine viewpoint on the lovers. At the same time, they are the chroniclers of his shame, and quite possibly jurors in his own masochistic dreamscape.<sup>22</sup>

As indicated earlier, much of the pathos of the *Wake's* Tristan narrative is reserved for King Mark whose character is wholly defined by the pain of Iseult's betrayal and a loss of sexual vigour in old age.



With that so tiresome old milkless a ram, with his tiresome duty peck and his bronchial tubes, the tiresome old hairyng orangogran beaver, in his tiresome old twennysixandsixpenny sheopards plods drowzers and his thirtybobandninepenny tails plus toop! Hagak-hroustioun! It were too exceeding really if one woulds to offer at sulk an oldividual [old individual; but also *virid*, verdant] a pinge of hinge hit. (*FW* 396.14–20)

The repetition of tiresome (four times in the foregoing quote) echoes the repetition of “poor,” an epithet used persistently throughout the chapter with reference to the four old men. Later, again, the same tag will be employed to identify HCE with the dying Wilde of *De Profundis*, and his resurrected avatar in Hester Travers Smith’s book *Psychic Messages from Oscar Wilde*.

Pity poor whiteoath! Dear gone mummeries, goby! Tell the woyle I have lived true thousand hells. Pity, please lady, for poor O.W. in this profundust snobbing I have caught. Nine dirty years mine age, hairs hoar, mummery failend, snowdrift to my ellpow, deff as Adder. I askt you, dear lady, to judge on my tree by our fruits. I gave you of the tree. I gave two smells, three eats. My freeandies, my celeberrimates: my happy bossoms, my allfalling fruits of my boom. Pity poor Haveth Childers Everywhere with Mudder! (*FW* 535.27–35)

The significance of Oscar Wilde in the *Wake*’s mythology has been widely discussed by scholars, and further analysis is not within the scope of my essay. It will suffice to note that the Wilde of *De Profundis* would have appealed to Joyce on account of his identification with Christ, of his Irishness, his betrayal, his ability to speak from the grave (as per Hester Travers Smith’s book), and his image as a self-styled sufferer.

But most of all, Wilde fits into the vast Joycean gallery of historic figures who were put on trial for a love that was deemed misguided, unlawful, or shameful: Dante in *Purgatorio* XXX, Othello, Parnell, Bloom, and now Mark/HCE.

Yet if King Mark is on trial, it is not because his love has fallen foul of the law. Rather, it is his diminished potency (contrasted with Tristan’s vigor) that demands our pity. Under the scrutiny of the four felons of court, Mark’s shame feeds into the story of HCE’s downfall and resurgence, and constitutes the premise for HCE’s reunification with ALP in the final chapters of the novel.<sup>23</sup>

The lovemaking scene of Book III.4 is an oft-quoted moment in this particular plot. It is customary to view it as a scene of frustrated sex,<sup>24</sup> the main evidence for this interpretation a remark by which ALP unceremoniously sums up the act: “Withdraw your member! Closure. This chamber stands abjourned” (*FW* 585. 26–7), followed by what sounds like a complaint: “You never wet the tea!” (*FW* 585.31). Some readers have taken this last phrase to imply that HCE fails to ejaculate; others, more simply, that he uses contraception. No matter the exact meaning of ALP’s words, we may agree that they sound an anti-climactic note. As Bernard Benstock suggests, not only is “the final coitus [. . .] a failure” (64), but HCE is revealed here as “a cuckold and a sexual has-been” (277). In the same vein, Edmund Epstein points out that “this bedroom scene is yet another scene of less than satisfying sexual contact between aging couples in the works of Joyce” (244).

In short, at this late point desire is still bound up with expressions of pity (*FW* 585.12–13), preparing us for the lyricism of ALP’s final monologue. “I wisht I had better glances to peer to you through this baylight’s growing. But you’re changing, acoolsha, you’re changing from me, I can feel. Or is it me is?” (*FW* 626.34–6). Yet even this melancholy note coexists with cries of joy that famously announce the dawn, and that accompany one last love-making tableau at the very end of the book. And while the monologue insists on images of loss, of relinquishing any sense of discrete identity and slipping away unnoticed, that loss is somehow also experienced as sexual arousal and rejuvenation: “Yes, you’re changing, sonhusband, and you’re turning, I can feel you, for a daughterwife from the hills again. Imlamaya. And she is coming. Swimming in my hindmoist. Diveltaking on me tail. Just a whisk brisk sly spry spink spank sprint of a thing theresomere, saultering. Saltarella come to her own. I pity your oldself I was used to” (*FW* 627.1–6). At this precise moment, with the son rising, and the daughter coming, ALP’s pity for the old, weary couple she and HCE used to be is inseparable from her joy for the young, “sprint of a thing” she herself is becoming. As Epstein explains, dawn finds both characters divided between two generations, their identities mirrored in those of their children: “The older generation having failed in their sexual adventures, the way is clear for the new generation, and for the great climax of the book [. . .] the failure of III.4 is only temporary. True love is only one chapter away” (244).

By this reading, the *Wake*’s treatment of the Tristan myth, and the comedy of remarriage that concludes its narrative, may be seen to repeat

a pattern already observed in Joyce's earlier fiction. In the first place, love and desire are folded into each other as the distinctions between ideal and carnal, faithful and adulterous, or lawful and illicit passion are invalidated. At the same time, the *Wake* continues to acknowledge a difference between pity and love (though pity itself is seen to have an enduring erotic component). In the tension between these two moments, the novel seems to want to reaffirm the primacy of a joyous love over a love that is based on shared sorrow. Thus, in principle, Joyce keeps faith in the generic distinction between comedy and tragedy, and still maintains a preference for the comedic image over the tragic. Yet this preference is complicated by a revalorization of desire as an originally joyous impulse or at the very least as a passion that is none too easily set apart from joy—one thinks of the Gracehoper's uninhibited "joyicity" that is an indispensable aspect of his exaggerated appetite (*FW* 414.23).

We may read this ambiguity, this manner of having one's cake and eating it too, as a peculiar, modernist re-appropriation of Aquinas's claim: that love is the ground of all ethical discourse in so far as it encompasses good both present and absent, in the joy of possession and in the desire or the pity which accompany its defect (see notes). *Finnegans Wake* jettisons the theological premise supporting this ethics, but retains the notion of love as an all-inclusive state, a melding of all dramatic passions in a single comedic gesture. On the one hand, the *Wake* understands comedy as the overcoming of tragic passions (still following Aquinas and Dante); on the other, it practices comedy as the form of representation—as the deployment of a *type* of image—that unsettles the generic boundaries on which Scholastic ethics is based. Without recourse to theological paradigms, Joyce emphasizes the plenitude of reality in erotic experience and finds therein the very condition of modern philosophical thought: a faith in the connectedness of all things, and a measure of indeterminacy in every connection.

## NOTES

1. Joyce already shows an awareness of the gap between a modern and a medieval episteme in *Stephen Hero*. But the solution put forth in that text is irony: "The *Vita Nuova* of Dante suggested to him that he should make his scattered love-verses into a perfect wreath and he explained to Cranly at great length the difficulties of the verse-maker. His love-verses gave him pleasure: he wrote them at long intervals and when he wrote it was always a mature and reasoned emotion which urged him. But

in his expressions of love he found himself compelled to use what he called the feudal terminology and as he could not use it with the same faith and purpose as animated the feudal poets themselves he was compelled to express his love a little ironically" (SH 174). For an excellent discussion of this excerpt, see Jed Deppman, "The Return of Medievalism: James Joyce in 1923," *Medieval Joyce*, ed. Lucia Boldrini. *European Joyce Studies* 13 (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2002), 45–77 (especially 49–51).

2. See, for instance, Richard Brown, *James Joyce and Sexuality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 24. A more exhaustive treatment of the Joyce-Othello connection is forthcoming in Laura Pelaschiar, "Othello in 'Bloomusalem': Alterity and Adultery in Shakespeare's *Othello* and Joyce's *Ulysses*," *Joyce/Shakespeare*, ed. Laura Pelaschiar (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 2015). Of particular relevance to my analysis is Pelaschiar's insistence on the phantasmagoric nature of reality in "Circe," which strongly resonates with the importance of fantasy and imaginary events in the plot of *Othello*.

3. For a reading of *Othello* that elaborates on this theme see, Tzachi Zamir, *Double Vision, Moral Philosophy and Shakespearean Drama* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), especially pp. 151–67; and Shawn Smith, "Love, Pity, and Deception in Othello," *Papers on Language and Literature* 44.1 (Winter 2008): 3–51.

4. William Shakespeare, *Othello*, ed. E. A. J. Honigmann, *The Arden Shakespeare*, 3rd ed. (Walton-on-Thames: Thomas Nelson, 1997), I.iii.157–73.

5. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Benziger Bros, 1947) § I.20. Further references will be cited parenthetically with part, section, and question numbers.

6. To this effect, Aquinas notes that joy and sorrow both "proceed from love, but in contrary ways. For joy is caused by love, either through the presence of the thing loved, or because the proper good of the thing loved exists and endures in it. [. . .] On the other hand sorrow arises from love, either through the absence of the thing loved, or because the loved object to which we wish well, is deprived of its good or afflicted with some evil" (Aquinas II–II.28). In the same vein, Aquinas defines pity as "grief for another's distress" which may come about in one of two ways: either through identification with the friend who suffers, or through the recognition that one is vulnerable to the same kind of suffering as others. Accordingly, he concludes, "a defect is always the reason for taking pity, either because one looks upon another's defect as one's own, through being united to him by love, or on account of the possibility of suffering in the same way" (Aquinas II–II.30.2). For an early, illuminating commentary on Joyce's interpretation of pity in light of Aquinas see William T. Noon, *Joyce and Aquinas* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963), 36–9.

7. Dante Alighieri, *Divina Commedia*, ed. Giorgio Petrocchi (Milan: Mondadori, 1966–67), trans. Robert Hollander and Jean Hollander (New York: Doubleday, 2000–07). *Paradiso* XXXIII.145. Further references to the *Divine Comedy* will be cited parenthetically by Cantic, Canto, and line numbers.

8. Vicki Mahaffey, *States of Desire: Wilde, Yeats, Joyce and the Irish Experiment*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 151.

9. I depart from the critical convention of referring to the protagonist of the narrative as Giacomo for a number of reasons: First, there is no indication of this name except in the title. Second, and most important, I find that a clear-cut distinction between “Joyce the flesh-and-blood author,” and “Giacomo the character” only serves to undermine the texts’ systematic conflation of categories such as autobiographical memory, hallucination, dream, and so on.

10. Joseph Valente, *James Joyce and the Problem of Justice: Negotiating Sexual and Colonial Difference* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 113.

11. See for instance Vicki Mahaffey, “Giacomo Joyce,” in *Giacomo Joyce: Envoys of the Other*, ed. Louis Armand and Clare Wallace (Prague: Litteraria Pragensia, 2006), 26–70. Mahaffey argues that in “*Giacomo Joyce*, Joyce [. . .] illustrates his view that the Beatrice of any artist is the idealised woman who served him as the first great inspiration of his youth” (Mahaffey, “Giacomo Joyce” 62). Joseph Valente complicates this idea by noting that the association of Amalia with Beatrice, supplemented by other literary identifications (most notably, Shelley’s Beatrice Cenci), places Joyce’s beloved “in the role of the Crucified, with all of the resonance that such martyrdom carries in Joyce’s family romance” (Valente 110).

12. The following poem is an excellent example of the approach for which Cavalcanti was famous:

A me stesso di me pietate vène/per la dolente angoscia ch’i’ mi veggio:/di molta debolezza quand’ io seggio,/l’anima sento ricoprir di pene./Tutto mi struggo, perch’io sento bene/che d’ogni angoscia la mia vita è peggio;/la nova donna cu’ merzede cheggio/questa battaglia di dolor’ mantene:/però che, quand’ i’ guardo verso lei,/rizzami gli occhi dello su’ disdegno/sì feramente, che distrugge ’l core./Allor si parte ogni vertù da’ miei/e ’l cor si ferma per veduto segno/dove si lancia crudeltà d’amore. Guido Cavalcanti, *Rime. Poeti del Duecento Vol. II*, ed. Gianfranco Contini (Milano: Einaudi, 1960), 12.

[Within me a pity for myself springs forth,/For the agony I witness in myself:/An overwhelming weakness when I sit,/I feel my soul brimming with pain/I am distressed, for I feel strongly/That my life grows worse with every agony;/The new lady whose mercy I beseech/Keeps up this painful struggle:/For when I look upon her/Those eyes full of disdain return my gaze,/So proudly, that my heart is shattered./Then all virtue departs from mine,/And the heart stops, a sure sign/That love’s cruelty has made its mark. (My translation)]

13. See Dante Alighieri, *Vita Nuova*, trans. Mark Musa (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1973), especially Chapters III, X–XII, XIX; and Robert Hollander, *Dante: A Life in Works* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 19–20.

14. Sheldon Brivic, “The Adultery of Wisdom in *Giacomo Joyce*,” *Giacomo Joyce: Envoys of the Other*, 259.

15. In line with this reading we might also take note, here, of a certain symmetry between Joyce’s “No I will go. I will” (*GJ* 15) and the “yes I will yes” that crowns Molly’s expressions of renewed fidelity at the end of *Ulysses*.

16. Janine Utell, *James Joyce and the Revolt of Love: Marriage, Adultery, Desire* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 66–7.

17. I have developed this theme elsewhere focusing on the notion of the simulacrum in Joyce and Deleuze. See Ruben Borg, "Mirrored Disjunctions: On a Deleuzo-Joycean Theory of the Image," *Journal of Modern Literature* 33, no. 2 (Winter 2010): 131–48.

18. David Hayman, *The "Wake" in Transit* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), 50–1, 58–64. And see also Jed Deppman, "A Chapter in Composition: Chapter II.4," *How Joyce Wrote Finnegans Wake: A Chapter-by-Chapter Genetic Guide*, ed. Luca Crispi and Sam Slote (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2007), 315–17.

19. Roland McHugh glosses the phrase "ragbags et assaucyeties" as "Rugby & Associational," but of course the more overt reference is to the Princess's breasts and ass.—*Annotations to Finnegans Wake*, 3rd edition (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006).

20. William Shakespeare, *Antony and Cleopatra*, ed. John Wilders, *The Arden Shakespeare* 3rd Series (London: Routledge, 1995), I.iii.36–37.

21. "The four felons at court who had hated Tristan of old for his prowess, watched the Queen; they had guessed that great love, and they burnt with envy and hatred and now a kind of evil joy. They planned to give news of their watching to the King, to see his tenderness turned to fury, Tristan thrust out or slain, and the Queen in torment; for though they feared Tristan their hatred mastered their fear."—Joseph Bédier, *The Romance of Tristan and Iseult*, trans. Hilaire Belloc (New York: Vintage Classics, 1994), 55.—I am grateful to Paul Fagan for drawing my attention to this quote and for his insightful comments on this section of my argument.

22. In this context, the references to the drowned Martin Cunningham (*FW* 387.28, 392.2–6, 393.5), who had served as jury foreman in Bloom's masochistic fantasy in "Circe," are telling.

23. I subscribe to Utell's suggestion that this section of the *Wake's* plot aligns it with the Hollywood genre of the comedy of re-marriage. See *Revolt of Love*, 137–9, 145.

24. See, for instance, Bernard Benstock, *Joyce-Again's Wake* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1965), 64, 277; William York Tindall, *A Reader's Guide to Finnegans Wake* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1969), 283–4; Philip Kitcher, *Joyce's Kaleidoscope: An Invitation to Read Finnegans Wake* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 19; and more recently Edmund Epstein, *A Guide Through Finnegans Wake* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2009), 244.