

JOYCE STUDIES IN ITALY

13

**WHY READ JOYCE
IN THE 21ST CENTURY?**

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THE LIMITS TO LITERATURE IN *ULYSSES*
IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Fundamental to understanding the limits to being in relation to literature in the 21st century is James Joyce's *Ulysses*. In this text, Stephen Dedalus questions the nature of existence as he searches for an origin in the space of literature. Indeed, Stephen demands to know who signs what in the name of the word as he encounters the thought of absence following his mother's death. The thought of absence leads him to step outside the self and compare his disposition with Hamlet's encounter with absence. The subject's inquiry into the name that remains unfolds into a negative dialogic of thought as he is not able to uncover an origin in the text as the truth is not to be found. Hence, Stephen becomes afflicted with the impossibility of knowing his maker that calls his being into question. His being before affliction begs one to ask, how it is possible to respond faithfully to the question of being in lieu of the problem of separation that exists in relation to being before the word. Maurice Blanchot's work on the "limit-experience" will help to shed light on Stephen's being that presents the dialogical thought of being before alterity (2003, 202-217). Also, Blanchot's work on the Jewish ethic of separation in "being Jewish" will help shed light on Stephen's ethical exegesis as he confronts the limits to being in literature (*Ibid.*, 123-130). Iran B. Nadel asserts that while "for some, Joyce as a 'Jew' may only be an alluring myth" for "others, it is a key to understanding his life" and indeed his work on being that stands in relation to the word (1996, 242).

Following his mother's death, Stephen puts his being into question as he turns around and looks for an answer to the final question of being, being before death, as he begs to know: "Who chose this face for me? This dogsbody to rid of vermin" (*U*, 6). The subject demands to know the answer to the first question of being in genesis as he questions existence in the face of absence when all there is is the word. He turns "around to look at what exists before" in the word when all that is left behind is the

dead corpus of the thing missing (Blanchot 1995, 327). Likewise, Blanchot calls being into question as he searches for an origin in the word in his work on the limit-experience. Ostensibly, he affirms “something like a new origin” seen as a “gift [...] (that) affirms Presence without anything being present” in the being at the limit, caught between the clandestine of being between two thoughts, being and nothing (2003, 209). This radical thought stems from the limit experience that is the “response that man encounters when he has decided to put himself radically in question. This decision involving all being expresses the impossibility of ever stopping, where it be at some consolation or some truth” (*Ibid.*, 204). Blanchot proceeds to argue that this “movement of contestation that traverses all of history” is a refusal to stop and believe or “entrusts himself to an absolute term (God, Being, the Good, Eternity, Unity)” because in each case he “disavows” presence itself (*Ibid.*, 204). The refusal of unity begins with the experience of language as man confronts an essential lack in nothing that always comes in question.

From this perspective, Stephen is stigmatised by the affliction of death as he begins to question the origin of the word that fails to embody the real truth. In turn, Haines asks Stephen if he is a believer as he calls him into question from the outside: “You’re not a believer, are you [...] I mean, a believer in the narrow sense of the word, Creation from nothing and miracles and a personal God” (*U*, 16). Haines proceeds to interrogate Stephen as he asks him if he believes in the name of God itself: “Either you believe or you don’t, isn’t it. Personally I couldn’t stomach the idea of a personal God” (*U*, 17). Stephen confesses that Haines must see him as an “example of free thought”. This liberal thought begins to emerge in the subject’s dual way of thinking as he sees himself as being between the “servant of two masters [...] English and an Italian” (*U*, 17). Emerging from the British language and the Roman Catholic Church, Stephen perceives he is divided. However, he also recognises something other that cannot be accounted for in his understanding of being that is seen as being separated by thought. The question of what is present in the word looms in the background as Stephen is compared to Friedrich Nietzsche who also criticised truth in the moral sense as he depicted being as nothing more than a “mobile of army of metaphors” (1976, 47). So too, Stephen faces a parade of letters seen soldiering “across the page the symbols moved in grave morrice in the mummery of their letters, wearing quaint caps of squares and cubes” (*U*, 23).

It should be noted that Stephen is told by Deasy that there is darkness in Jewish eyes, which is comparable with Stephen's dark gaze of negativity. In his work on the question of language in relation to being Jewish, Blanchot asks: "Is there not in Judaism a truth that is [...] important for the thought of today—even if this thought challenges every principle" (Blanchot 2003, 124). He states that Jewish thought begins with Abraham's ethical decision to separate the self in the movement of exodus, byway of "stepping outside" which fathoms a "just relation" (*Ibid.*, 124). This just relation begins with "the exigency of uprooting: the affirmation of nomadic truth. In this Judaism stands in contrast to paganism", meaning to be "fixed" (*Ibid.*, 124). Blanchot recognises a critical justice for the "people without a land and bound by a word" (*Ibid.*, 125). Indeed, the incomprehensible malediction of affliction stages the Jewish presence of non-presence. Thus being Jewish is a being that is seen without origin, as the origin is "a decision to separate the self" and to affirm that being exists as a foreigner that answers an ethical truth (*Ibid.*, 126). This ethical exegesis teaches that negativity finding justice in separation and righteousness is the positive aspect of man's creative cooperation with God. The Jewish God is perceived as pure spirit that "conceives man as having been chosen" as a partner for fulfilment of creation and that the gift of speech and hearing" alone is proof on an all-seeing and all-hearing providence (Epstein 1990, 138).

It is here, in genesis so to speak, that Blanchot formulates the notion of the limit-experience. In genesis "the first words that come to Adam from on high after he has lapsed" are "Where are you?" It falls to God to express the pre-eminent human question: 'Where is man?'—as though, in some sense, there had to be a God speaking a human language, so that the depth of the question concerning us is handed over to language" (Blanchot 2003, 128). Here emerges a problem for being in relation with a presence that remains at a distance, at a limit. Man's relation with language is according to Blanchot an "impossible relation", and this thought runs head on with the philosophy of negative theology once "what is disappears in what names it" (*Ibid.*, 128). Here, Blanchot's work on negativity extends beyond Jewish thought as the subject's experience with language is seen as being doubly negative, as he incorporates Hegel's thought of death. He argues: "Language is of a divine nature, not because it renders eternal by naming, but because, says Hegel, 'it immediately overturns what it names in order to transform it into something else,' saying of course only what is not, but precisely in the name of this nothingness that dissolves all things, it being the becoming of

speech” in negativity (*Ibid.*, 35). Thus, what is present disappears into what names presence. Indeed Stephen faces’ this very problem as he too searches for an origin of truth in Shakespeare’s dead name itself.

Beginning with the word, in the Library, Stephen searches for a prior truth as he questions the nature of being in relation to literature. He states that literary:

Art has to reveal to us ideas, formless spiritual essences. The supreme question about a work of art is out of how deep a life does it spring. The painting of Gustave Moreau is the painting of ideas. The deepest poetry of Shelley, the words of Hamlet bring our mind into contact with the eternal wisdom (*U*, 152).

In retrospect, like Nietzsche, Joyce’s central experience, as for Romanticism, is concerned with “man’s degradation by capitalism, which tended to reduce everything to the mode of the thing” (Blanchot 2003, 142). In his work on the death of God, Nietzsche does not aim, at the “personal phenomena of unbelief” but a challenge of putting to test his trust in humanism seen in negative thought, as Blanchot notes (*Ibid.*, 142). He argues that Nietzsche recognised being freed from “the ideal of some absolute meaning conceived on the model of God, it is man who must create the world and above all create meaning. An immense task, intoxicating task” (*Ibid.*, 143). This task is perceived in the “overman” Joyce adopts in his approach to creation (Davidson 1998, 111). It is in the image of the overman that leads man to surpass himself (Blanchot 2003, 143). The overman is the extreme negation of nihilism, the man that confronts the void in being, in negative thought as he overcomes absence. Blanchot argues that the “overman is he in whom nothingness makes itself will and who, free for death, maintains this pure essence of will in willing nothingness” (*Ibid.*, 148). So too, Epstein argues that man’s relationship with God, grounds all knowledge, in the “first instance, intellectual” that includes all “physical and metaphysical sciences—logic, philosophy, medicine [...] which leads to true perception of the being and the essence of God” (1990, 212). By acknowledging being in relation to absence one can justify all relations seen in all.

The limits to knowledge are put to the test as Stephen faces the thought of absence as he is compared to Hamlet’s being before the dead ghost.

In a dream, silently, she had come to him, her wasted body within its loose graveclothes giving off an odour of wax and rosewood, her breath bent over

him with mute secret words, a faint odour of wet ashes. Her glazing eyes, staring out of death, to shake and bend my soul. On me alone [...] all prayed on their knees [...] Ghoul! Chewer of corpses! No, mother! Let me be and let me live (*U*, 9).

Interlaced with these observations, Stephen calls the dead ghost into question as he demands to know who signs what in the remains of Hamlet's dead father: "What is a ghost? Stephen said with tingling energy. One who has faded into impalpability through death, through absence" (*U*, 154). The emphasis on absence proceeds as Stephen repeats the question in search of an origin: "Who is the ghost [...] Who is King Hamlet?" (*U*, 154) In lieu of the problem of separation, Joyce foresees Blanchot's dialogic of negativity which coincides with Stephen mimicking Hamlet as he turns to his father, Shakespeare, for a possible answer to question being as he demands to know the answer to the final question in search of an origin: "Is it possible that the player Shakespeare, a ghost by absence, and in vesture of buried Denmark, a ghost by death, speaking his own words to his own son's name" (*U*, 155). Nadel argues that Joyce uses the play of Jewish "Maieutic reading" to interrogate the text while "closely studying the language" (1996, 108). Indeed, Stephen searches backward like a crab, interrogating the text, while trying to retrace a prior presence in *Hamlet*. However, all that is left behind is the name in the text where meaning is reconstructed within the boundaries of the re-reading doubling. Hence, there is a sense of a repetition unfolding in the narrative as one name haunts the second, as Shakespeare replaces Hamlet in the search for a prior truth in the word.

To understand Stephen's exegesis, the double act of conception is conceived in the dialogic of death and destruction. Blanchot states that language implies a metaphysic, in order to say, "This woman" for example; one must first "annihilate her" (Blanchot 1995, 322). The absence of the thing is transferred to the presence of language that substitutes being: "The word is the absence of that being, its nothingness, what is left of it when it has lost being" (*Ibid.*, 323). Hence language is understood as the corpse of negativity that embodies the absence of the thing in the trace of the memory. This negative conception of language allows being to establish presence in the blank space because "we cannot do anything with an object that has no name" (*Ibid.*, 322). Likewise, Jacques Derrida argues that "God separated himself from himself in order to let us speak [...] negativity in God is our freedom" (1978, 67). Freedom is embodied in the gift to humanity which

allows man to create presence. This thought runs in accord with Nietzsche who regards the world of man as the text that is open to infinite interpretation. Blanchot notes Nietzsche's "play of endless discontinuity" in "perpetual redoubling" (2003, 164). He recognises that in interpretation there is the source of becoming into existence (Nietzsche 1990, 31). While Nietzsche regards the act of interpretation as being multiple he disregards the "who" that interprets. Blanchot, however, does not, as he questions the world of the text that refuses all unity in the text: "text back to text that refers the world back to affirmation of the world" that is not (2003, 167).

The infinite thought of negativity is put into play as Stephen falls pray to "things that were not" as he too repeatedly questions an origin in "possibilities of the possible as possible: things not known". Indeed, "Cofined thoughts" surround his being in "mummycases" as he tries to prove that Shakespeare is Hamlet (*U*, 159). The question of being is described as a double material cloth, or textile tissue that Derrida compares to language: "if *text* [*texte*] means *cloth* [*tissue*]: the word *texte* is derived from the Latin *textus*, meaning cloth (*tissu*), and from *texere*, to weave (*tisser*); in English we have *text*" (1978, xii). Stephen pre-empts Derrida's myriad of intertextuality as he foresees the word shuffle as a double:

As we, or mother Dana, weave and unweave our bodies, Stephen said, from day to day, their molecules shuttled to and fro, so does the artist weave and unweave his image [...] my body has been woven of new stuff time after time, so through the ghost of the unquiet father the image of the unloving son looks forth. (*U*, 159-160)

By stepping outside the self, Stephen recognises the movement of separation that casts a different perspective on being as he proceeds to argue that the mind in the "intense instant of imagination [...] Shelley says, is a fading coal, that which I was is that which I am and that which in possibility I may come to be. So in future [...] I then shall be" (*U*, 160). Stephen's method of reversing perspectives evokes an ethical strategy seen in his vision of stepping outside the self in the act of separation and difference.

Seen in this light, the subject foresees positions reflected back not only from his own perspective but he is able to judge difference in being an absent presence. This stance stands close to Blanchot's thought on the limit-experience because the subject is witness to being "between two" separated. This logic opens up thought at both ends. Hence, in the movement of de-

flection, Stephen questions plural perspectives as he responds to a double movement that exceeds common measure. He states that: “there can be no reconciliation [...] if there has not been a sundering” (*U*, 160). Hence the strategy of breaking up the text via separation paves the way for opening up the reading of being multiple. He states that “all sides of life should be represented” as the narrator brings the reader to the image of sacrifice: “He Who Himself begot, middler the Holy Ghost, and Himself sent himself, Agenbuyer, between Himself and others, Who, put upon by His fiends, stripped and whipped, was nailed to a bat to barndoor, starved on crosstree, Who let Him bury, stood up, harrowed hell” (*U*, 162). The image of death can also be compared to the act of reading intertextual references of being in relation to language as creator faces destruction. The subsequent, reversal of perspectives in the dialogue between text and reader perceives old “nobodaddy” at the limit “unknown”.

Fatherhood, in the sense of conscious begetting, is unknown to man. It is a mystical estate, an apostolic succession, from only begetter to only begotten. On that mystery and not on the Madonna which the cunning Italian intellect flung to the mob of Europe the church is founded and founded irremovably [...] like the world, macro and microcosm, upon the void. Upon incertitude, upon unlikelihood [...] subjective and objective genitive, may be the only true thing in life. Paternity may be a legal fiction. Who is the father of any son that any son should love him? (*U*, 170)

Clearly, what is at stake in the subject's relation with separation from the maker is non-knowledge itself. Stephen recognises the impossibility of the dialectical reversal as he faces the creator separate to the name of the father. He recognises that “being is an empty fiction”, as he follows Nietzsche's strategy of breaking up relations through separation and negativity as he searches for a hidden truth (1990, 46). This reversal is according to Blanchot, “the principle feature of the new sciences. Foucault significantly calls it the redoubling of the empirical into the transcendental. Redoubling-repetition-is the important word here” (Blanchot 2003, 249). It is possible to compare the thought of redoubling with Stephen's interpretation of his being seen in the image of the dead. However, his dark gaze that recognises the self in the piece of fiction remains unknown apart from the work. Blanchot goes further into his inquiry into the relationship between being and language as he asks: “How is the ‘repetition’ that opens this very possibility itself possible? How can the empirical redouble itself and, in so doing, be-

come possibility? To say this differently, how does rebeginning—the non-origin of all that begins—found a beginning?” (2003, 249). Pertinent to this question is the fact that not only is God displaced when we go looking for him, but “where is man when we encounter a man?” (*Ibid.*, 249). Both are absent in the form of an alterity that cannot reduce being to nothing. Being refuses to remain silent in the space of language.

It is precisely the space of language that is put on trial as Stephen singles out “names” in his search for an origin. He proceeds to interrogate the word that is lacking: “what’s in a name? That is what we ask ourselves in childhood when we write the name that we are told is ours” (*U*, 172). The critic uses the dialogical practice of reversal and displacement to justify his position in relation to the limit: “He has hidden his own name, a fair name, William, in the plays, a super hero here, a clown there, as a painter of old Italy set his face in a dark corner of his canvas” (*U*, 172). Hence, Hamlet, the black prince, is also seen as “Hamnet Shakespeare” as the subject steps outside the self to question the real author. However, each time the position is reversed the question remains unanswered because truth is seen “midway”. Stephen argues that ultimately, he is all in all: “The boy of act one is the mature man of act five. All in all. In *Cymbeline*, in *Othello* he is bawd and cuckold. He acts and is acted on” (*U*, 174). Ironically, each time Stephen makes a comparison, he interrupts the relation that is “without reference to the same” as “language now represents. It does not exist, but functions” as Blanchot would say (2003, 257). Therefore in this thought itself literature turns away from what it names in the “reverberation of space opening to the outside” as the limits to experience spill outwards, anterior to the text without content that affirms itself in relation to infinity.

The revelation of being in relation to infinity as perceived by Joyce heralds the affirmation of presence that returns in the difference of repetition that unwinds itself. Stephen sums up this “unworking” of negativity” that exceeds the limits to being a unified presence, in the life which stands in relation to all (*Ibid.*, 205).

Every life is many days, day after day. We walk through ourselves, meeting robbers, ghosts, giants, old men, young men, wives, widows, brothers-in-love. But always meeting ourselves. The playwright who wrote the folio of this world [...] (and the) hangman god, is [...] all in all in all of us, ostler and butcher, and would be bawd [...] (and even seen as) wife unto himself (*U*, 175).

There is little doubt that Eglinton fails to comprehend Stephen's negative philosophy that sees a fragment not part of all, as the subject maintains a dark gaze in his refusal to believe in the word. The word is "not" being. He cries out: "I believe, O Lord, help my unbelief [...] Who helps to believe? Egomen. Who to unbelieve? Other chap" (*U*, 176). Stephen's ethical exegesis remains faithful to the question of language he sees in the open play of fragmentation. He is ultimately left standing with no relation even to himself. Blanchot states that "Nietzsche's project of tearing apart—the breaking up—of Dionysus [...] in the discontinuous" is a play with the text seen as a sign of overcoming the absence in being (Blanchot 2003, 157). Here too, "fragmentation is this god himself, that which has no relation whatsoever with a centre and cannot be referred to an origin" (*Ibid.*, 157). Indeed, Stephen confronts the extreme limit to being as he overturns being in language as he interrogates the name that refuses to speak back. The subject encounters the limit to presence that is fundamental to the subject's displaced position that occupies a dual existence, situated between being and nothingness, at the limit. Ironically, the limit reveals the lack of an origin as the text keeps "unworking" itself, revealing something that cannot be accounted for in the silence that calls Stephen into question. His response seen in the strict refusal to unity maintains pure negation in negativity that carves up being open to the thought of becoming exterior into infinity itself.

Joyce's contribution to the field of knowledge is invaluable for scholars of the 21st century because he gives us an insight not only into the power of death and negativity seen in Stephen's theorising Hamlet's dead ghost, but he also gives us an insight into the limits of literature itself. By reading critically and reading ethically, Joyce recognises being is twofold, infinitely separated from God. Hence the task of creation is left to man to work on in the space of literature that is seen as the gift to being in relation to humanity, a huge ethical task. He takes the risk of challenging the thought of being as he questions the word. In doing so, he reveals the creative act of negation that unfolds in the theme of separation pertinent to Jewish thought. Indeed, by stepping outside the self to the exterior, being the subject is able to justify relations seen in the image of the other. He reveals that infinite separation is union with the infinite. Moreover, infinite thought exposed in the redoubling effect shows the limitless possibilities of becoming otherness. The fragmentation of being leads to the multiplicity of being seen from a myriad of textual positions that always return to the same question, the question of being. Admittedly, the desire to know who signs the text

remains in the clandestine unworking of the word that is forbidden knowledge. However, Joyce's ethical strategy shows a just critical literary model that can be adopted for future readings of being a gift in relation to literature in the 21st century.

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