

JOYCE STUDIES IN ITALY

21

**LANGUAGE  
AND LANGUAGES  
IN JOYCE'S FICTION**

Edited by  
Serenella Zanotti

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“DEAR HENRY” / “DEAR JIM” / “MY DEAREST NORA”:  
FICTIONAL AND PRIVATE LANGUAGE IN JOYCE

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This essay focuses on the intermediary function of Joyce’s private and fictional letters, and their significance from a thematic as well as a textual point of view. In fiction as in life, letters attempt to fill the temporal and spatial gap that separates sender and recipient by means of language. Letter-writing as an act and the letter as an object imply by definition a form of communication which takes place in absence, and therefore bridges the spatial and emotional distance between the correspondents through a medium representing a sort of screen. This screen reflects – or may fail to reflect – the protagonists of the written communication and at the same time both unites and separates them, thus creating an apparently paradoxical condition of presence in absence. As with other self-reflexive devices, Joyce used Martha Clifford’s letter to Bloom in *Ulysses* as a space for linguistic experimentation, focusing on the character’s subjectivity, but also on the textual value of the epistolary form, to comment on the relationship between fiction and reality, language and experience. Martha’s letter may be considered in terms of Joyce’s investigation into the ways in which written language accurately represents, or fails to represent, human consciousness. Furthermore, it can also be said to represent the work containing it in the form of *mise en abyme*, since the author draws connections between letter-writing and fictional writing, directly identifying the letter with his own art. To show this relationship, this essay analyses the thematic and textual value of this fictional correspondence, and particularly the many ways in which its fictional language mirrors Joyce’s own private language. At a close analysis, Martha’s letter can be said to reflect some significant aspects of the real correspondence between Joyce and Nora in two crucial moments of their love story: in 1904, between

their first meeting in June and their elopement to the Continent in October, and in 1909, when, living in Trieste, they were separated for several months during Joyce's trips back to Dublin to find a publisher for *Dubliners* and to launch the Cinematograph Volta. These intimate letters, first published by Richard Ellmann in 1966,<sup>1</sup> have not received the critical attention they deserve. If little scholarship exists on the subject of Joyce's private correspondence, the so-called Nora letters have been partly neglected,<sup>2</sup> to the point that even a general essay such as Mary Reynolds's "Joyce as a Letter Writer" (1984) pays them scant attention, despite commenting on their high degree of intimacy. Reynolds defines this body of correspondence as an "exceptionally candid chronicle of the couple together", as "Joyce's only deliberate effort to reveal himself to another person" (1984: 50), but simply considers it as an aspect, among several others, of Joyce's daily practice of letter-writing.

Joyce's exploration of the gap between subjectivity and language in *Ulysses* is particularly evident in an embedded text such as Martha's letter to Bloom, which both the character as fictional recipient and we as readers of the novel scan in "Lotus-Eaters". In this piece of correspondence, Joyce creates a fictional letter – a fictional text within a fictional text – whose (fictional) author does not seem to have a coherent consciousness or personality. In doing so, Joyce is actually using the epistolary form in a way which is completely different from the eighteenth-

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<sup>1</sup> Of the total of 64 letters making up Joyce's correspondence with his wife, 54 appeared with complete text in volumes II and III of Joyce's *Letters*, edited by Ellmann; 8 with partial text in volume II and with restored passages in *Selected Letters* (7 September 1909, 2-3-6-13-15-16-20 December 1909); and 2, never published before, in *Selected Letters* (8-9 December 1909). These missives follow the relationship between Joyce and Nora from their first meeting until eight years after their elopement, and sporadically afterwards. As Ellmann remarks in his preface, "the correspondence precisely records the tenor of their love and marriage" (1966: xxvii). As is well known, a group of letters addressed to Nora in 1909, when she was in Trieste while her husband was in Dublin, were written purposely for mutual sexual arousal and represent an extraordinary record of Joyce's sexual feelings.

<sup>2</sup> As far as I am aware, critical contributions on Joyce's correspondence are scarce and mostly outdated as compared with other aspects of his writing. See, for instance, Reynolds 1964; Trilling 1968; Ellmann 1976; Faris 1980; Brockman 1998-99, 2009 and 2018; Houdebine 2000. On the theme of Joyce and sexuality see Henke and Unkeless 1982; Brown 1985; Boone 1992; Cotter 2003; Streit 2004; Valente 2004.

century epistolary tradition, that is to hide, rather than reveal, the character's subjectivity:

Dear Henry

I got your last letter to me and thank you very much for it. I am sorry you did not like my last letter. Why did you enclose the stamps? I am awfully angry with you. I do wish I could punish you for that. I called you naughty boy because I do not like that other world. Please tell me what is the real meaning of that word? Are you not happy in your home you poor little naughty boy? I do wish I could do something for you. Please tell me what you think of poor me. I often think of the beautiful name you have. Dear Henry, when will we meet? I think of you so often you have no idea. I have never felt myself so much drawn to a man as you. I feel so bad about. Please write me a long letter and tell me more. Remember if you do not I will punish you. So now you know what I will do to you, you naughty boy, if you do not write. O how I long to meet you. Henry dear, do not deny my request before my patience are exhausted. Then I will tell you all. Goodbye now, naughty darling, I have such a bad headache. today. and write *by return* to your longing

Martha

P. S. Do tell me what kind of perfume does your wife use. I want to know.

X X X X

(U 5.241-259)

Martha's letter is undoubtedly peculiar, since its authorial voice undergoes several radical "tonal shifts", which Shari Benstock, in her seminal essay entitled "The Printed Letters in *Ulysses*" (1982: 418-419), classifies as the following: "business prose, carefully distanced" ("I got your last letter to me and thank you very much for it"), "chastisement" ("I am awfully angry with you. I do wish I could punish you for that"), "sympathetic pleading" ("Please tell me what is the real meaning of that word? Are you not happy in your home you poor little naughty boy?"), "sexual ploys" ("I have never felt myself so much drawn to a man as you"), "threatened retribution" ("Remember if you do not I will punish you. So now you know what I will do to you, you naughty boy, if you do not write"), "promised confession" ("Then I will tell you all"), "stated con-

fession” (“I have such a bad headache today”), “direct requests” (“Do tell me what kind of perfume does your wife use. I want to know”). Moreover, such tone shifts allow us to consider Martha’s letter as polyvocal, and particularly as a polyphony of female voices which can be found in other episodes of *Ulysses*. At the beginning her tone mirrors Milly Bloom’s letter to her father, as both women open their correspondence by thanking Bloom for some gifts he has given them. Then Martha’s language, with its themes of anger and castigation, its continuous references to punishment and its use of nicknames (which imply a sexual, but submissive, male figure), becomes that of a dominatrix. Her words and tone are similar to those of Bella Cohen when she mentally and physically abuses Bloom in “Circe”. Martha’s letter also displays sentimental and romantic rhetoric which imitates the language of a virgin, thus reminding the reader of Gerty MacDowell. Her question “please tell me what is the real meaning of that word?” implies that she apparently ignores sexually-charged terms, thus echoing Gerty’s innocent thoughts in “Nausicaa” on the one hand, and Molly’s earlier request for a definition of the word “metempsychosis” on the other. Moreover, “Are you not happy in your home you poor little naughty boy?” is a provoking question, imbued with seduction and sexual overtones, analogous to the language that the prostitutes use in Nighttown. Finally, the sentence “Henry dear, do not deny my request before my patience are exhausted” resonates with the requests and commands Molly gives her husband during the breakfast scene in “Calypso”. What is so disturbing and interesting about Martha’s letter is precisely the changing quality of her voice and the impersonation of different female stereotypes, to which, in a sense, she gives written expression. For this reason, Martha’s linguistic performance in her letter can be said to parallel the performance of the anonymous narrator/arranger in *Ulysses*, notoriously using many different styles and rhetorical devices, which prevent any attempt to attribute a single, stable identity to “it”. Therefore, also from this point of view, Martha’s letter can be considered as a *mise en abyme*, or a text-within-the-text mirroring the novel as a whole and reproducing some of its formal features. Moreover, in her letter, Martha creates a multifaceted picture of herself which completely conceals her inner state and identity. In this perspective the letter, a means of communication trying to connect people who are distant from



each other, becomes a sort of opaque screen obscuring the correspondents' personalities, ultimately separating them. This is also true of Bloom (even though we are actually unable to read his reply to Martha as a separate text embedded within the text of the novel), since in the correspondence he adopts a fictitious persona, writes under the pseudonym of Henry Flower, alters his handwriting with Greek letters, thereby playing a role. Janine Utell suggests that neither Martha nor Henry are real, and not for the obvious reason that they are mere fictional characters; they are, indeed, "pseudo-erotic constructions" (2010: 88) who can only follow the pre-established conventions of the love letter form. As we can see from Martha's grasping for information, "a true erotic connection is impossible because the sexual/textual construction of the letter is inherently distancing. [...] There can never be full and complete knowledge, as the other always remains separate in difference" (*ibid.*). In fact, Martha's letter prevents external readers as well as the character-reader from making any sort of generalisation about her. No consistent and univocal personality emerges from the language she uses, which completely hides, instead of revealing, her subjectivity.

In addition to the presence of tonal shifts and "opaque" language, Martha's letter is also characterised by many of the attitudes shown by Joyce and Nora in their 1904 and 1909 correspondence, such as the inquisitive and plaintive tone, the self-indulgent dwelling on one's miserable state, the longing for the other's physical presence and the use of sexually-charged words. Although we can read a few extant missives addressed by Nora to her "Dear Jim", it is particularly noteworthy that the majority of the surviving letters exchanged by the couple were written by Joyce. On the contrary, in *Ulysses* we know for sure that Bloom has been carrying on for some time an amorous correspondence with a typist from the inventory of the content of his first drawer in "Ithaca" (listing three missives, among other things), though the only letter we can actually read is the one Martha addresses to "Dear Henry". From these similarities we could assume that Joyce possibly took inspiration from his private correspondence with his lifelong companion in order to create the fictional correspondence between two characters in his novel, thus merging his own and Nora's voice into Martha's voice. If, as Cathy Davidson suggests, "the love letter blurs distinctions between 'private' and 'public' ex-

pression” (1992: 6), it may be particularly instructive that Martha’s letter to Bloom bears an extraordinary resemblance to some of the letters that Nora wrote to Joyce at the beginning of their relationship, and precisely on 12, 16 and 26 September 1904:

Dear Jim *I received your letter* which I return you *many thanks* I hope you did not get wet if you were in town *to day* I will be expecting to see you 8-15 *to morrow* evening hoping it will be fine I feel much better since last night but *feels* [sic] *a bit lonely to night* as it is so wet I was reading your letters all day as I had nothing else to do I read that long letter over and over again but *could not understand* it I think I will take it to you *to morrow* eve – and perhaps you might *make me understand it*  
no more at present from *your loving Girl* NORA XXXXX

excuse writing in haste  
(*Letters II: 52*, my emphasis)

Dear Jim *I feel so very tired to night* I can’t say much *many thanks for your kind letter* which I received unexpectedly this evening I was very busy when the Postman came I ran off to one of the bedroom’s to read your letter I was called five times but did not pretend to hear it is now half past eleven and I need not tell you I can hardly keep my eyes open and I am delighted to sleep the night away when I cant be thinking of you so much when I awake in the morning *I will think of nothing but you* Good night till 7.-P M *to morrow* eve  
*NORA XXXXXXXXXX* (*ibid.*: 54, my emphasis)

Dearest Jim I hope your cold is better I notice you have got very silent lately [...] when I got to bed I sat all the time *like a fool thinking of you I longed for the time to come when I would not have to leave you*  
Dear Jim *I feel so lonely to night* I dont know what to say it is useless for me to sit down to write when *I would prefer to be with you* I hope you will *have good news* when I see you *to morrow* night I will try and get out 8-15 Giving you all my thoughts till then  
NORA (*ibid.*: 57, my emphasis)

In the first letter, for instance, the expression of gratitude at the beginning (which also reminds us of Milly’s letter to Bloom, exactly as the post-script “excuse writing in haste”), the bad form (mistakes and absence of

punctuation typical of another feminine voice in the novel, that is Molly's), the feeling of loneliness, the request for explanations, as well as the closing salutation and signature possibly represent some real-life aspects which may have inspired Joyce while conceiving Martha's missive to Bloom. Furthermore, it is particularly revealing that a letter sent by Nora on 16 August 1904, where she laments again her loneliness, melancholy and miserable state due to the separation from her lover, is written on a sheet of paper decorated with floral motifs, which might have suggested Bloom's *nom de plume* as well as the choice of a flower gift accompanying Martha's letter.

In sum, Martha's missive is interesting not only because, like an opaque screen, it shields, instead of reflecting, the identity of the protagonists of the amorous correspondence, ultimately separating them. This love letter also represents a failed attempt to establish an emotional/textual connection between the lovers, while, as a reflection of the novel, it succeeds in highlighting its metanarrative quality. This aspect of letters in *Ulysses* has strong connections with Joyce's personal use of letters, in life as in fiction, as an attempt to fill the emotional gap which may exist between people involved in interpersonal relationships, as a way of creating an apparently paradoxical condition of presence in absence. In *The Book of Love: Writers and Their Love Letters*, Cathy Davidson suggests that "absence is the love letter's primary requirement. Without separation, the letter has no reason to exist. The love letter is, then, a substitute for intimacy" (1992: 9). For this reason, love letters are "the surrogate for the missing self" (*ibid.*: 10) and "fulfill a need to confide, to testify, and to articulate what is ordinarily left unspoken" (*ibid.*: 6). In addition to this function of voicing the unsaid, or recording a lack, Joyce's letters may also perform the function of outlining a verbal picture of the distant lover, following Linda Kauffman's claim that "the letter is a metonym for the beloved's body" (1992: 120). In her seminal book *James Joyce and the Revolt of Love*, Janine Utell analyses Joyce's use of the love letter as – literally – a mode of *writing* or *inscribing* the lover/other, overcoming both physical and ontological distance by means of the written word. In this view, "the beloved becomes an object of desire in her absence, a fictional construct herself – a creation that is always a function of the text. Even further, the text stands in for the body of the beloved"

(Utell 2010: 19). Similarly, Janet Gurkin Altman defines the love letter through the form's ability "to suggest both presence and absence, to decrease and increase distance" (1982: 15), to record, within the artifact itself, both separation and connection. The love letter, therefore, performs both spatio-temporal continuity and discontinuity, union as well as separation. The form itself is inevitably fraught with problematic desire, trying to reach across a gap that cannot be bridged while acting simultaneously as the bridge itself.

To quote Christine Van Boheemen, Joyce's production of love letters can be interpreted as a kind of "intersubjective experience, linking the act of writing to the drive" (2008: 469) and the need to establish emotional contact. It essentially shows, as Utell points out, that "in his affair with Nora, Joyce sought to write through his desire, to bridge the unbridgeable distance between himself and the beloved" (2010: 17) by means of language, particularly through the language of the love letters, as these words addressed to Nora on 7 September 1909 clearly demonstrate: "It is terribly provoking to think that you are lying waiting for me at this moment at the other end of Europe while I am here" (*Letters II*: 251). Central to this process is the mutual creation of the couple of lovers and their love through text, through the story told by the letters, as this extract shows: "if you read through all my letters from the beginning you will be able to form some idea of what I feel towards you" (*ibid.*: 243). It is mainly for this reason that Van Boheemen has rightly defined the Nora letters as "highly performative" (2008: 469), in that "they feature the characteristics of performative speech. They use the present tense, and they comment on the activity of reading and writing, as well as on the relationship between reading and masturbating [...]. Representing a process of increasing fetishization, the letters stand in for the absent body of the beloved" (*ibid.*). Moreover, as they follow the development of the lovers' personality and of the love story itself, the tone of Joyce's letters changes substantially over the years. Not unlike the several tonal shifts characterising Martha's letter to Bloom in *Ulysses*, the correspondence between Nora and James as a whole is marked by a continuous oscillation between contrary moods, polarised registers of imagery, and by the same mixture of lyricism and crude naturalism, idealisation and scrupulous meanness, which is also the hallmark of Joyce's fiction. From the very beginning of

his correspondence with Nora in the summer of 1904, Joyce was particularly concerned with analysing and defining the emotion of love as well as the identity of the lovers, and he invites his partner to take part in this process by means of the love letter. This represents, in my opinion, one of the similarities that can be traced to associate the real correspondence between Joyce and Nora with the fictional correspondence between Martha and Bloom in *Ulysses*, where the inquisitive tone, the desire to know, the need to establish emotional contact through words can be seen as attempts to overcome the physical distance separating the lovers and to catch a glimpse of the other's interiority beyond the opaque screen of the letter. It is interesting to note that Joyce and Nora's different ways of addressing each other and signing their missives at the very beginning of their relationship shows that the couple used the letters as a means for investigating, giving a name and disclosing their own identity. On 15 August 1904 Joyce sends Nora a letter in which he fails to sign his name, and adds a motif which will be frequently repeated, namely an explicit request for writing, showing the lovers' desperate need to establish contact in the absence of each other: "I have been a half-hour writing this thing. Will you write something to me? I hope you will. How am I to sign myself? I won't sign anything at all, because I don't know what to sign myself" (*Letters II*: 46-47). In a frantic attempt to bridge the spatial and emotional distance which separates himself from Nora, the request for love letters becomes more and more urgent on Joyce's part; on 29 August 1904, for example, he writes: "I don't know what you will think of this letter. Please write to me, won't you?" (*ibid.*: 50). At this initial stage of their romance, the gap is paradoxically increased by the act of writing letters; however, the letters themselves, while being markers of spatial and temporal separation, seek to end that separation, to span the distance between two people still coming to know each other.

As a further similarity between the real and the fictional correspondence, it is remarkable that the emotional tone of Joyce's love letters to Nora seems to be, from the start of their relationship, one of sorrow, melancholy, loneliness and fear of abandonment. In the very first letter, dated 15 June 1904, that Joyce wrote after Nora failed to turn up at the promised time of their meeting, he affirms to have gone home "quite dejected", and asks for another chance (*ibid.*: 42). In late July 1904, he

writes to send her a song at which he found himself “sighing deeply”, and whose words “express very delicately and musically the vague and tired loneliness which I feel” (*ibid.*: 44). Again, Nora’s letter to Joyce dated 16 August 1904, though apparently borrowed from a book, gives voice to the “loneliness which I have so deeply felt, since we parted last night” and to the same fits of “melancholy” (*ibid.*: 47) he, also, often falls into. Much later, on 1 November 1909, Joyce still depicts himself, Nora and their love in dismal terms: “You are a sad little person and I am a devillishly melancholy fellow myself so that ours is a rather mournful love, I fancy” (*ibid.*: 259). Similarly, when Bloom answers Martha’s letter while sitting together with Richie Goulding in the Ormond Bar, we read: “La la la ree. Trails off there sad in minor. Why minor sad? Sign H. They like sad tail at end. P. P. S. La la la ree. I feel so sad today. La ree. So lonely. Dee” (*U* 11.892-894). Although we do not know exactly whether the expressions “I feel so sad today”, “So lonely” correspond to Bloom’s thoughts, or to the words he is writing, or to scraps of a song, there is no doubt that Bloom feels sorrowful resignation as regards Molly’s betrayal which is about to take place, and his quite disappointing conjugal life in general.

Joyce’s other letters preceding his and Nora’s elopement to the Continent in October 1904 reveal a strong need to define the feeling of love merged with a growing awareness of the inadequacy of language with which to talk about it, a shortcoming he would address again and again throughout his fiction. Similarly, when Joyce has Martha Clifford write “I called you naughty boy because I do not like that other world. Please tell me what is the real meaning of that word?”, he is of course questioning the relationship between language and reality and self-consciously alluding to the dichotomy word/world that is of central importance in his own *oeuvre*. On 16 September 1904, quite disappointed with the words he is interposing, like a screen or barrier, between himself and his beloved, Joyce writes: “Letter-writing is becoming almost impossible between us. How I detest these cold written words!” (*Letters II*: 53). On 18 September, again: “What is the good of my writing this stupid letter[?] I want simply to be beside you” (*ibid.*: 54). In a letter dated 19 September he seeks to define his own idea of love (*ibid.*: 55), and yet on 26 September he notes that words are superfluous and fail to capture the reality of this feeling: “How little words are necessary between us! We

seem to know each other though we say nothing almost for hours” (*ibid.*: 56). Language here provokes a kind of frustration, since words prevent the lovers’ union; paradoxically, letters attempt to overcome separation and are themselves separation. In a missive dated 22 November 1909, Joyce gives voice to his dissatisfaction with words as compensation for the lover’s physical absence; by the fact that they strive to bridge the distance, they remind the couple that such distance exists: “How wretched it is to be away from you! [...] I shall long for your letter and yet I thank you for your kind good telegram. [...] I am tired of sending words to you. Our lips together, our arms interwoven, our eyes swooning in the sad joy of possession, would please me more” (*ibid.*: 268). The struggle to find the language with which to give voice to the feeling of love is part of the struggle for an impossible union, as the attempt to establish a connection between love and language clearly demonstrates.

In 1909, following the discovery of Nora’s supposed affair with Vincent Cosgrave, the tone of the letters becomes even more pitiful, since Joyce shows himself to be a wretched victim of betrayal. It is interesting to note that the dark shadow of adultery has now widened the emotional gap, amplified by physical distance, between the lovers, which makes Joyce’s victimisation, his desire to know and his request for Nora’s writing even more forceful. After Nora’s innocence is reconfirmed and heightened, Joyce assumes the childish and dependent attitude of the supplicant that he would later apply to the fictional character of Martha Clifford writing to Bloom. Most of Joyce’s missives from this period express remorse and self-reproach. However, following the reconciliation, the letters to Nora, which had gone so quickly from the extreme of rage to that of penitence, also become full of passion and desire. Such love letters gradually turn into an explicit way to possess the beloved across distance, or to give pleasure in absence. In Joyce’s private life as well as in his fiction, therefore, letters may constitute a space to voice erotic drives, and can be used as a substitute for the lover’s body and for sexual intercourse. The correspondence between Martha and Bloom could be read as a fictional example of how letters represent an intermediary containing explicit language, thus reflecting Joyce’s personal experience of exchanging erotic letters with Nora when they were separated in 1909. At this time, Joyce alternates between detailed account of his desire for Nora’s body

and pious adoration of her spiritual image. As relief releases in Joyce a torrent of erotic fantasy, the figure of Nora comes to be associated in her lover's mind with the most disparate conceptualisations, from the maidenly to the obscene. In their correspondence from this period, frank and extreme sensuality is joined with lyricism and even sacramental reverence. As with Martha's letter, changes in style and tone pervade these missives, whose language is full of oxymorons, contrasts and dualisms, for instance when he defines love as "sweet pain" (*ibid.*: 273). Furthermore, the language revolves around dichotomies such as body and soul, spiritual and carnal, high and low, to describe what Joyce calls "the very madness of desire" (*ibid.*: 239), "the old fever of love" (*ibid.*: 255). Although the merging of sacred and profane imagery had actually appeared in the letters since the very beginning of their courtship, in 1909 Joyce keeps picturing a multifaceted image of Nora that is full of contradictory aspects. On 22 August, for instance, he writes: "I see you in a hundred poses, grotesque, shameful, virginal, languorous" (*ibid.*: 239). The need to unite through erotic writing as a substitute for the merging of bodies can be seen in the same letter: "Give yourself to me, dearest, all, all when we meet. All that is holy, hidden from others, you must give to me freely. I wish to be lord of your body and soul" (*ibid.*). The language of love seeks to span the physical distance between the lovers through an act of verbal prefiguration of the sexual encounter in which words utterly *create* the lover's body and depict carnal embrace. When desire cannot be fulfilled, words represent the only way to possess the beloved. The term "possess" seems to be appropriate, since the language of domination is particularly forceful here; it may pertain to the religious as well as to the secular sphere – the word "lord" applying to both God and a sovereign – and involves Nora playing the part of the dominatrix and Jim of her humble subject, wishing to be treated violently.

It is remarkable that the dichotomies high/low, spiritual/carnal, sacred/profane also appear in other missives where religious imagery merges with voluptuousness and frank carnality, with varying degrees of bluntness. On 31 August 1909, for instance, Joyce writes: "We met and joined our bodies and souls freely and nobly and our children are the fruit of our bodies" (*ibid.*: 242). Then, on 2 December, he goes much further: "side by side and inside this spiritual love I have for you there is also a



wild beast-like craving for every inch of your body, for every secret and shameful part of it, for every odour and act of it. My love for you allows me to pray to the spirit of eternal beauty and tenderness mirrored in your eyes or to fling you down under me” (*ibid.*: 269). It seems clear that there are certain moments in the correspondence from this period when the author, inspired by the innocence of the virginal Nora, concentrates exclusively on the spiritual side of his love and others when, in the grip of bestial craving, he glories in brutal lust, oscillating between blunt sexual excitation on the one hand, and extreme innocence and spirituality on the other. In one of these letters, Joyce even gives voice to his masochistic desire to be flogged by Nora, who plays again the role of a dominatrix and inevitably echoes Bella/Bello abusing Bloom, or Martha Clifford threatening to punish him in her missive<sup>3</sup>. The association of love/lust with brutal madness, of purity and impurity, nobility and wretchedness becomes increasingly recurrent. Joyce himself seems to be fully aware of such oscillation and emotional instability, and his final tone is the usual one of weakness, self-pity and surrender:

Tonight I have an idea madder than usual. I feel I would like to be flogged by you. I would like to see your eyes blazing with anger. I wonder is there some madness in me. Or is love madness? One moment I see you like a virgin or madonna the next moment I see you shameless, insolent, half naked and obscene! [...] Are you too, then, like me, one moment high as the stars, the next lower than the lowest wretches? [...] I want you to say to yourself: Jim, the poor fellow I love, is coming back. He is a poor weak impulsive man and he prays to me to defend him and make him strong. I gave others my pride and joy. To you I give my sin, my folly, my weakness and sadness. (*Ibid.*: 243)

In these letters Joyce outlines an image of both himself and his beloved that is coarse, base and noble, even holy, at the same time. It is instructive that such kind of “mariolatry” – or the veneration of Nora as the Virgin

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<sup>3</sup> Martha’s menacing words actually seem to have been inspired by a real-life incident in which Joyce played the part of a naughty child, as he writes to Nora on 22 November 1909: “your letter is written in your old familiar roguish way. I mean, when you say what you will do to me if I disobey you in a certain matter” (*ibid.*: 268).

Mary and a sacred figure, echoing the supposed innocence of fictional characters such as Martha Clifford or Gerty MacDowell – appears in several other missives: on 31 August 1909, he confesses: “You have been to my young manhood what the idea of the Blessed Virgin was to my boyhood” (*ibid.*: 242), while on 27 October 1909 he writes: “The immense emotion of tender worship for your image which broke out in my voice as I repeated the lines was too much for me. My love for you is really a kind of adoration” (*ibid.*: 257). In an emblematic letter dated 5 September 1909, Nora is addressed as a guide and leading figure, both spiritual and sacred, capable of inspiring deep and noble thoughts and making Joyce the poet of his own race. The words of the love letter prefigure a peculiar kind of carnal and spiritual union in which Nora becomes a maternal figure and Jim – in what Suzette Henke has defined “a fantasy of infantile regression” (1990: 8) – her own child. In a passionate invocation, the crude image of sexual intercourse is transformed into a spiritual image in which their souls merge, and the male lover, like an unborn infant, finds protection nestling inside the woman’s body instead of dominating her through the act of penetration:

Guide me, my saint, my angel. Lead me forward. *Everything* that is noble and exalted and deep and true and moving in what I write comes, I believe, from you. O take me into your soul of souls and then I will become indeed the poet of my race. I feel this, Nora, as I write it. My body soon will penetrate into yours, O that my soul could too! O that I could nestle in your womb like a child born of your flesh and blood, be fed by your blood, sleep in the warm secret gloom of your body! (*Letters II*: 248)

In conclusion, Joyce’s love letters can be pictured as a turbulent mixture of erotic imagery and apologies for it, accompanied by extreme flights of desire and adoration directed at Nora as both a secular and a spiritual ruler. Similar to Martha Clifford’s angry, commiserating and plaintive tone, Joyce’s attitudes and tones are extremely contradictory; like her, he merges supplication with tender rebuke or disapproving reprimand. However, as Ellmann remarks in his introduction, despite such testimony of submission, surrender and dependence upon Nora, Joyce utterly dominates the scene of the construction of the love story and of the identity of the lovers through his missives. As a matter of fact, the letters

of the courtship, of the accusation of betrayal followed by a supplication for forgiveness, those written for mutual sexual arousal but also full of spirituality, show that Joyce constantly had to revise both his own role and Nora's role in the love story, as well as subsequent versions of the story itself. All of this takes place through the act of letter-writing, where Joyce attempts to verbally construct both the amorous relationship and its protagonists exactly as he does in *Ulysses*. In fiction as in life, Joyce's love letters are a performance of the desire to achieve union, of the need to overcome both physical and ontological distance by means of the written word.

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