

## The Gift of Negativity: The Theme of Love in James Joyce's *Exiles*

BENJAMIN BOYSEN

### *Abstract*

James Joyce's only play, *Exiles* (1918), is in many ways a passionate attempt to formulate an existentialist ethics of love, which takes its point of departure from a decentred subject that can never be concentric with itself or the other. The play demonstrates that this internal and external difference forms the very basis of love, consequently staging love's paradoxical quest for universality. The play thus seems to argue that the essential aspect of love is not what each of us *is* in ourselves, but precisely what we are *not* and what we do *not* have—namely the universal. No one, neither the lover nor the beloved, contains the desired universal plenum, but we do, through the desire of love, give what we do not have, and vice versa. The negative is in this manner eliminated through this double negation—not *in* the lovers themselves or *in* their enchanted, amorous sphere, but outside themselves in the amorous gift-exchange that exceeds their individual particularity in favour of a universality, which they cannot be—but can only give.

Séparés, on est ensemble.  
Mallarmé, *Le Nénuphar blanc*

A gaze back at the work that preceded *Exiles*, for instance “The Dead” in *Dubliners* (1914), discloses an intimate situation in which a lover is not reconciled with his beloved in a romantic union, but rather is left in a renewed and reinforced sense of isolation and separation, which nevertheless gives rise to a renewed and reinforced feeling of love, generosity, and solidarity.<sup>1</sup> However, for a moment the lovers are strangers to each other, and this theme of exile from the other and oneself

is repeated in *Exiles*, where Bertha and Richard rediscover each other—not in everyday familiarity, but as strangers to each other. When Richard refuses to condemn Bertha's meeting with Robert or to insist on her fidelity, she bursts out: "You are a stranger to me. . . . A stranger! I am living with a stranger" (*E* 149). Paradoxically, the outcome of such an intensified freedom and alienation toward one another is a renewed and passionate devotion, a love that is conditioned by their recognition of the other's otherness. "Forget me, Dick. Forget me and love me again as you did the first time" (*E* 162), as Bertha says toward the end of her impassioned speech.

The primary conflict of the drama consists in how Richard will handle the attempt of his old friend, Robert Hand (who has been of assistance in helping them and their son in their return from exile in Italy), to seduce his partner. After his return to Dublin, Richard seems content to be in contact with Beatrice (Robert's cousin), with whom he has had a correspondence over the years. Beatrice is a kind of *anima inspiratrix*, which the far too earthbound and sensual Bertha has never been able to be. When Bertha explains to Richard the friend's plans for seduction, begging him to intervene, he refuses, giving her the free choice of her own. Nevertheless, he appears in the house to which Bertha has been invited but leaves shortly after, because he prefers to have no knowledge of what will go on this particular night. Masochism plays a crucial part in this play, and Richard is clearly taking Sacher-Masoch's part. In the end, Richard still has no certain knowledge whether Bertha has slept with Robert or not, but in spite of this they renew their promises and declarations of love, choosing to base their love not on a bourgeois feeling of certainty given by marriage, but on doubt perceived as "restless living wounding doubt" (*E* 162). Richard and Bertha revise and redefine their love, not as a relationship between two complementary male and female partners, but as incommensurable and isolated subjects, who are capable of accepting an unavoidable difference. Though this recognition causes pain—and takes its point of departure from this doubt—it is nothing compared to the ethical feeling of freedom and self-authorisation which they enjoy at the end.

The idea of free love is not just constituted by the fact that Richard and Bertha are living without the blessings of the church, or that they are considering adultery. Rather, free love consists in the conception of the individual as fundamentally isolated in its interests and moral choices—isolated in the sense that individuals can never originate in the actions, consciousness, or moral sense of the other. Love is presented not as a union, but as a peculiar separation between two partners, and the

ethics of love in this play, as Joyce emphasises in his notes for it, consists in “the very immolation of the pleasure of possession on the altar of love” (*E* 164).

As Frank Budgen says, “the Joycean conception of sexual love (at any rate on the male side)” is an expression of an “irreconcilable conflict between a passion for absolute possession and a categorical imperative of absolute freedom” (349). This is a quality of which Theo Dombrowski is similarly cognisant when he asserts that “part of the point of the play seems to be that love, especially when sought as an ideal, creates an insoluble problem: love purports to be selfless but by its very nature involves affection that is self-directed and possessive” (118). So, love is stretched out between two positions in this play—Narcissus’s and Echo’s, i.e. the self-obsessed and the self-sacrificing, both (according to the ancient myth) leading to perdition and annihilation. Joyce suggests something similar when he characterises the play as “a rough and tumble between the Marquis de Sade and Freiherr v. Sacher Masoch. Had not Robert better give Bertha a little bite when they kiss? Richard’s Masochism needs no example” (*E* 172). Thus, there are two positions within this dramatic world: either one chooses the “sadistic” position, where the other is reduced to an instrument or object for one’s sovereign and absolute freedom (whereby one is taking the place of the omnipotent Other), or on the other hand the “masochistic,” where one is reducing oneself to an instrument or object for an other, who is raised to the dignity of an Other (who enjoys the unlimited freedom that one has renounced oneself). These notes outline several dominant features, but this hardly exhausts the potential of the play, since the centre of male desire, Bertha, subverts this dialectics of master and slave (as we shall see later). Nevertheless, Richard seems to be controlled by a masochistic drive toward degradation, while Robert embodies stereotypical sadistic impulses, but both of them take part passionately in each other’s narcissistic staging. One is only capable of *taking*, but not of *giving*, while the other merely wants *to give*, but not *to take*. As will be demonstrated, both positions reveal themselves to be possessive and acquisitive, since neither of them is capable of acknowledging the freedom of the other, that is, of acknowledging the other as more than an instrument.

In his first seminar Jacques Lacan characterises love as an attempt to “devenir la limite consentie, la forme d’abdication de la liberté de l’autre.” The subject desires to capture the other in its own absolute particularity. In this way love limits freedom to “tout ce que peuvent avoir de capricieux” in its “captivation par cette objet que nous sommes

nous-même" (*Les écrits* 334). It is precisely this egoistical and self-centred aspect of love, which accentuates the imaginary nature of the other at the expense of Bertha's particular reality, that the two male protagonists aim at. The play, all in all, seems to give evidence of the distinct narcissistic aspect of love: "C'est son propre moi qu'on aime dans l'amour, son propre moi réalisé au niveau imaginaire" (*Les écrits* 225). Furthermore, the narcissistic aspect of the two male protagonists is supported by Joyce's notes, in which he describes Richard as "an automystic" and Robert as "an automobile" (*E* 163), which obviously is a characterisation of the spiritual and soulless principles, respectively. What they have in common is their immense preoccupation with their self (*auto*).<sup>2</sup> Thus, there is in addition a latent, unspoken homoerotic relationship between these men, who desire each other spiritually, mirroring themselves in each other, and this desire seems to be defined by a third part, namely Bertha: "Bertha wishes for the spiritual union of Richard and Robert and *believes* (?) that union will be affected only through her body, and perpetuated thereby" (*E* 172). The craving and mirroring between the two men is elucidated further by Joyce, who notes: "The bodily possession of Bertha by Robert, repeated often, would certainly bring into almost carnal contact the two men. Do they desire this? To be united, that is carnally through the person and body of Bertha as they cannot without dissatisfaction and degradation—be united carnally man to man as man to woman?" (*E* 172). The logic of this perversity—which evokes a response in a narcissism which is only capable of understanding love as an exploit for one's own benefit at the expense of the other—is eminently expounded by James Duffy in "A Painful Case," who explains how love is impossible because one cannot transcend oneself by giving oneself to others: "Love between man and man is impossible because there must not be sexual intercourse and friendship between man and woman is impossible because there must be sexual intercourse" (*D* 108). Since love between two of the same sex can be nothing but spiritual, and since love between two of the opposite sex can be nothing but physical, love must principally be destined to fail in creating a connection between body and mind. This binary logic is indisputable, but it ruins the substance of life, and in order to prove the worth of life and love Joyce therefore moves from a dichotomised logic (consisting in exclusive, self-contained categories) to a dialectical logic of oscillating and contrary terms. But since such a synthesis would imply recognition of their dependence on contingency and the conditional, Robert's and Richard's homoerotic relationship annuls it. Contrarily, they desire each other through a third part, namely Bertha, who works as a

*means or instrument*—a mirror—for their yearnings for the other's being or qualities which they lack themselves. Richard is physically weak and unselfish, but strong and egotistical in his mental life; Robert is strong and selfish physically speaking, but spiritually weak and servile; Richard is in his sensual nature "masochistic," his spiritual instinct is "sadistic"; and Robert's spiritual adoration, on the other hand, is "masochistic," while his physical praxis is "sadistic."

Both have lost faith, and both see themselves as freethinkers, but they respond quite diversely to the experience of the absence of ideals: "You have fallen from a higher world, Richard, and you are filled with fierce indignation, when you find that life is cowardly and ignoble. While I . . . I have come up from a lower world and I am filled with astonishment when I find that people have any redeeming virtue at all" (*E* 57-8). Robert claims (in his confusion of existential, nietzschean liberation with sybaritic enjoyment of erotic libertinism) to be the freer spirit of the two, since he has never had any ideals or credos. But he does not understand that it is *only* if one is not passionate or strong enough to substitute the absence of morality or metaphysics for new worldly values or goals that this loss of faith will entail a bestial devaluation of life. Unlike Robert, Richard faces this challenge enthusiastically in his desperate struggle for spiritual dignity: "Robert is convinced of the non-existence, of the unreality of the spiritual facts which exist and are real for Richard, the action should however convince Robert of the existence and reality of Richard's mystical defence of his wife" (*E* 165). This so-called mystical defence of Bertha and their love consists in absolute freedom, i.e. the separation of the couple into two individuals, who each possesses absolute freedom. This will inevitably cause one or the other (or both of them) to be hurt. Love's tragic paradox is thus that it only can be passionate if it is all-embracing and free, since the greatest gift of love is to give the absolute freedom to the other; but since love would be meaningless without a renunciation of such a freedom, it is necessary to continuously face the fact that such a gift would risk everything anew. When Richard forces unrestricted freedom upon Bertha, Beatrice, and Robert, he is actually enslaving them—in order to enjoy *unrestricted* freedom *himself*.

Richard and Robert represent two principles of love that can be classified as *nature* and *spirit*. Richard says: "I am afraid that longing to possess a woman is not love," to which Robert retorts: "No man ever yet lived on this earth who did not long to possess—I mean to possess in the flesh—the woman whom he loves. It is nature's law" (*E* 88). The latter is precisely what Richard opposes, because he considers this basic premise

of man to be inhuman, since one is disappearing in the anonymity of sexuality. So, he argues on the contrary that one should reject one's desire to *take* and also refuse to be taken by others, i.e. to *give* oneself:

Richard: What is that to me? Did I vote it?

Robert: But if you love. . . . What else is it?

Richard: To wish her well. (*E* 88)

Robert refuses to think of love as anything other than taking, while Richard refuses to think of love as anything other than giving. What Robert characterises as nature's law—what Stephen in *Ulysses* describes as the Maker's "*lex eterna*" (*U* 3.48)—is common and brutish and aims at nothing but a physical, voluptuous union, and what Robert perceives to be the only attainable objective of love, Richard proclaims to be "a death of the spirit" (*E* 95). For Richard, ideal love involves no self-realisation, but rather passivity: "To wish her well" (*E* 88).<sup>3</sup> This is why he claims that his own love is self-sacrificing. This adorable but anaemic definition of love dates back to Aristotle and is crucial for the scholastics, who—in the words of Thomas Aquinas (1227-1274)—affirm: "An act of love always tends toward two things; to the good that one wills, and to the person for whom one wills it: *since to love a person is to wish that person good*. Hence, inasmuch as we love ourselves, we wish ourselves good; and, so far as possible, union with that good" (I.20.1; my emphasis). It is interesting to note how both male characters isolate the premises in such a manner that they reject the synthesis that is the overall conception of love by Aquinas: thus, Robert only acknowledges the first premise that love depicts the desire to *possess a good* (for oneself), while Richard can only recognise the second premise that depicts love as desire *for the good for another*. But nevertheless, in the language of the doctrine that Richard applies for his own use, it is crucial that one cannot love the other (and eventually this means God) without loving oneself, since "the lover stands in relation to that which he loves, as though it were himself or part of himself" (Aquinas II.i.26.2). Their common strategy is thereby to annul any synthesis between the transitive *attachment* and the reflective *possession*, and the final unformulated goal is the annulment of the reality of absence and lack.

Richard, trying to explain to Robert feelings that are almost incomprehensible to himself, says that he is longing to be betrayed "in the dark, in the night—secretly, meanly, craftily" (*E* 97-98). If one leaves his obviously strongly agitated frame of mind and his conflicting longings out of account, it seems that—when he is assuring Bertha that she has

absolute freedom to make a choice of her own free will—he is actually seeking to insure her infidelity, thus fulfilling his own desire. The desire to be humiliated and the desire for Bertha’s infidelity are partly due to his finding her fidelity choking, because it makes his amorous demands more difficult to uphold. He claims in addition that this desire is originated in a mean longing “to be dishonoured for ever in love and in lust” (*E* 98.), i.e. a longing that he can hardly comprehend, but which appears to be very strongly tied to an irrational wish for martyrdom. This is implied by his choice of words (such as *betrayed* above) showing how his subliminal enjoyment proves to be of the same nature as the martyr’s. This is furthermore accentuated by his answer to Robert, who equals his fascination for Richard with the disciple’s submission to the master (Richard), who on the other hand declares his “faith of a master in the disciple who will betray him” (*E* 58). Their relationship is for this reason analogical to the relationship between Jesus and Judas; however, Joyce’s parallel to Jesus is not meant kindly, for in his notes he portrays a Jesus who wanders alone, without any spouse or sister, pitiless and lonely, whose inhumanity comprises the absence of any emotional relation to his mother (cf. *E* 170). In this manner, Jesus is the icon for the narcissistic ideal as a figure, who is untouched by others or by anyone but himself (*noli me tangere*), and who, for this reason, appears to be “unloving” (*E* 169), which explains the apparently unlikely comparison between Richard and him. Love and hate are mixed in Richard, who is humiliated by his admirer. The craving for Robert to make him a martyr is due to a strong self-centred fascination that proves to be anything but idealistic or self-sacrificing: “Richard accepts Robert’s homage for Bertha as by so doing he robs it from Bertha’s countrywomen and revenges himself and his forbidden love upon them” (*E* 172). The craving for “self-sacrifice” appears to be a matter of pride and self-absorption rather than humility and love for another.

When Richard gives Bertha—what to a superficial view appears to be the ultimate, amorous self-sacrifice—unconditional freedom, he is merely arrogantly presuming that he is responsible for what he never has or *can* control—that is to say her freedom. In this manner, the greatest gift is just another word for the greatest egoism, which hereby strives to capture and enslave the other by means of a fictive debt of gratitude. Richard’s so-called self-sacrificing longings are impossible to distinguish from his extreme self-absorption. Craving for the satisfaction of his narcissistic needs, he has, through nine years of exile in Italy, sought to create and develop his spouse spiritually and intellectually. “I tried to give her a new life” (*E* 94), as he says, being totally unaware of the

arrogant and haughty implications of such a statement. He sees himself as a Pygmalion and Bertha as his own work of art, which is obvious in the words of Robert, who says: "She is yours, your work" (*E* 87). Later he adds that it is due to Richard that Bertha is what she is—whereby she *owes* her very being to him: "You have made her all that she is. A strange and wonderful personality" (*E* 93).<sup>4</sup>

The untamed and unlimited desire to possess oneself without the disturbing interference of the other that was expressed in the homoerotic relationship between the friends, who desired each other as another self (*allos autos*), is repeated here in Richard's fantasies about Bertha. She at one and the same time serves as his daughter and his mistress, whereby he incestuously takes a twofold part as father and lover. The haughty fantasies of divine omnipotence toward the other are furthermore accentuated in the dramatic note sheets, which substantiate his ideas about having fostered, created, and given being to Bertha:

Robert: You are so young and yet you seem to be her father and mine. . . .

Richard: I feel as if I had carried her within my own body, in my womb.

Robert: Can a man feel like that. . . .

Richard: It is my work and the works of others like me now or in other times. It is we who have conceived her and brought her forth. Our minds flowing together are the womb in which we have bourne her. (*Exiles: A Facsimile* 64-65)

Despite his "masochism," Richard seems to be just as controlling as his antagonist, Robert, taking full *authority* over the other, whom he believes himself to be the *author* of.

Robert's amorous virtue (or vice) consists in the fact that he *takes*. This is why he (as his name suggests) is *a robber*, and he is consequently characterized as such no less than eight times during the play (*E* 47, 51, 69, 70, 73). He is entirely self-absorbed in his attitude toward women and has merely a desire to take and receive, since he, like the young and immature Stephen Deadalus, is unable to give: "I like a woman to give herself. I like to receive" (*SH* 181). This undeveloped and self-centred attitude to love-matters is in addition reflected in his last name, "Hand," which has strong overtones of masturbatory characteristics in Joyce's universe.<sup>5</sup>

In the play, Robert kisses a pretty stone, which they found on the beach, just as he would kiss a woman, simply because (as he says) it is



beautiful and evokes his pleasure: “For me it is quite natural to kiss a woman whom I like. Why not? She is beautiful for me. . . . And what is a woman? A work of nature, too, like a stone or a flower or a bird. A kiss is an act of homage” (*E* 54-55). A woman is comparable to a soft, nice, and silent stone—a beautiful object that you can pick up and do with as you like. In this manner, love is associated with an aesthetic judgment, because as a man he desires everything that is beautiful and entails pleasure. As such, any woman is loveable, and the desire for her is justified in term of naturalness: “You were made to give yourself to many freely!” (*E* 90). As in Marquis de Sade’s erotic utopia, in which no one is allowed to say no to anyone, and in which everybody is supposed to go to bed with everybody, Robert can, roughly speaking, conclude that: “Une jolie fille ne doit s’occuper que de foutre” (de Sade 18). Thus, the most desirable aspect of a woman is what she has in common with other women—i.e. what negates her particular existence in favour of her universal, erotic anonymity: “After all, what is most attractive in even the most beautiful woman? . . . Not those qualities which she has and other women have not but the qualities which she has in common with them” (*E* 55).

The two men’s narcissistic and autoerotic desire that they confuse with philosophical freethinking proves contrarily to disguise the fact that they each represent a certain masculine type of  *pornosophical philotheology* (*U* 15.109). The phallogocentric discourse of this “*phallusaph[y]*” (*FW* 72.14) is effectively and entirely undermined by Bertha by means of her passionate, feminine desire.

In the absence of love or friends, Bertha is living a marginalised existence in order to be together with Richard: “I gave up everything for him, religion, family, my own peace” (*E* 143). Although she is isolated, she is proud despite the fact that she is being tested by Richard, courted and manipulated by Robert, and envied by the barren Beatrice. When she pleads for emotional help or engagement from Richard, he predictably spurns her, refusing to give her any advice: “Your own heart will tell you. . . . Who am I that I should call myself master of your heart or of any woman’s?” (*E* 106). Richard, who claims to have given spiritual birth to Bertha, is stubbornly refusing to help his subordinated creation. He is taking upon himself the part of Jehovah, who declines to guide and help his creations in the Garden of Eden; but as Eve desperately cries, what is love if it does not imply an active commitment to the other?

And what is faith, love, virtue, unassayed  
Alone, without exterior help sustained? (Milton IX.335-6)

This frustration is correspondingly shared by Bertha, who is a victim of a narcissistic and self-absorbed patriarch as well.

In a conversation with Beatrice, she, for this reason, attacks (and deconstructs) the male's phallogocentric discourse, which she depicts as nothing but: "Ideas and ideas!"—asking bitterly: "Do you think I am a stone?" (*E* 143). She continues: "I am very proud of myself, if you want to know. What have they ever done for him? *I made him a man*. . . . He can despise me, too, like the rest of them—now. And you can despise me. But you will never humble me, any of you" (*E* 143; my emphasis). By subverting the dichotomy between Pygmalion and Galatea, and by displacing the determining centre of meaning, she is contrarily able to assert (with an intense, passionate, and almost maternal pride) that it is *she* who has made Richard into what he is.<sup>6</sup> She has given birth to Richard by way of her intense love and devotion, and having done so she asserts herself as a strong and independent woman, who in her own way has established a creative freedom that transcends and destabilises Richard's attempts to define himself as an almighty Other, who generously bestows being on others, but erroneously.

Bertha is the only person in the play not mentioned by her family name, and this implies that she is *not* characterised by social or patriarchal institutions, since in a certain sense she is the only person to define herself in authentic and life-affirming gestures. For this reason it is no coincidence that her name, "Bertha," paronomastically brings the concept of "birth" to mind, accentuating her as a paradigm for life's generous and maternal aspects. The immense *alma mater*, which Joyce developed to perfection in *Ulysses*, is here preconceived by Bertha, who embodies a boundlessness that both gives and takes: "She is the earth, dark, formless, mother, made beautiful by the moonlit night, darkly conscious of her instincts" (*E* 167). In sharp contrast to Richard's beliefs, it is Bertha who transcends life by her all-embracing and affirmative love that not only includes herself, but everything else: ". . . she embraces that which is hers alone *and not hers and his also*" (*E* 169; my emphasis). Thus, a woman's love is inclusive, while the love of a man is exclusive; men seem to be doubtful in their self-centred love, while women in their self-transcending love tend to believe. So, when Sigmund Freud, in his *Zur Einführung des Narzißmus* (1914), claims that men sincerely love the object of their love in opposition to women, who are merely capable of loving to be loved, Joyce disagrees entirely, disclosing reversely in his work that the contrary is the case.

In spite of the overwhelming accumulation of doubt and

ambivalence in *Exiles*, one thing proves to be constant and continuing, namely Bertha's unswerving and consistent love for Richard: "I have been true to you," she insists: "Last night and always" (*E* 160). While Richard's chimaeras of self-sacrifice remain unrealised in the real world, Bertha has actually abandoned quite a lot for his sake: "I gave up all for you. You took me—and you left me" (*E* 160). And even though Richard in many ways has forsaken her, she has nevertheless been true and remained devoted to him: "Not a day passes that I do not see ourselves, you and me, as we were when we met first. Every day of my life I see that. Was I not true to you all the time?" (*E* 161).

Bertha is the only one who understands the mercifulness of love and its gift; she is the only one who is not economically reducing the gift to a instrument of personal benefit—as formulated for instance by Aristotle in his ethics: ". . . it is the thing that a man happens to need that he sets his heart on, and only to get that is he ready to give what he does" (IX.1164a). Aristotle's definition of the gift-exchange adds an enlightening view on the men in *Exiles*, who are merely capable of giving in order to receive something in exchange, whereby they essentially are unable to give. Robert is only capable of taking in regard to the erotic, while he is unable to give in regard to the spiritual—just as Richard can only give in spiritual regard, refusing to take, erotically speaking. Bertha is the only one who recognises that giving (principally speaking) is the same as taking, and that the gift-exchange represents an acknowledgement of the other as *another* self-consciousness without which self-consciousness would be denied any realisation of itself. To be more precise, the gift-exchange acknowledges the importance of the other *as* a self-consciousness, and signifies symbolically that self-consciousness is subjected to temporality, i.e. that it is always embedded in a fundamental situation of lack or absence in its relation to itself: I would be lacking being and meaning in your absence, and without you, who are *not* me, I would have no knowledge or consciousness about myself. The recognition of the other symbolically brought about in the gift-exchange is consequently a destruction of any narcissistic utopia, since alienation and temporality in this manner is given a progressive and active part in the dynamics of human existence. This is why Jacques Derrida, in his essays on the gift, validates how the gift is intrinsically linked with mourning and loss: ". . . la question du don ne se séparera jamais de celle du deuil" (165n1).

Furthermore, this is precisely, I think, what Lacan understands by love when he claims that: "l'amour, c'est donner ce qu'on n'a pas" (*Écrits*, 618). Nevertheless, this is a fact of which only Bertha seems to

be cognisant; she is the only one who understands that it is impossible solely by oneself to receive what one does not have—i.e. being that transcends temporality. It is, in other words, solely the other who can give one shelter against the fundamental contingency and temporality of human existence.

Thus, to love is to give what one does not have. But who is the lover, and who is the beloved, one could ask? The lover is missing something, namely the universal, which designates what one can never possess, but what one will always pursue. The immediacy of the universal implies, furthermore, that he does not know what it is he is missing, and what it is that he pursues in the beloved. The beloved, on the other hand, has what the lover has not, but knows it not herself, since the beloved does actually not possess what the lover finds in her. What he loves in her is what she has—not in or by herself—but exclusively *for* him (and *vice versa*). What the lover is missing, and what he desires in the beloved, is not identical with what is hidden in the beloved. In this manner, love can be localised neither in the loved nor in the beloved, but in the relation between the two, i.e. in what each one of them is for the other. The lover sees something in the beloved, and he wants something of her, but she does not on her part know what it is he wants from her: she does not know by herself what it is that stirs up his love. But this ignorance is only suspended for the moment when she returns his love, whereby she takes part in the lover's role, and this means an acknowledgement of *her own* lack of universal being too. Through their recognition of their lack of universal being, they recognise their mutual dependence on each other, whereby they receive the gift of love—which necessarily amounts to the giving and receiving of what one does not have. By giving one's very lack of being—and this implies a recognition of the fact that one cannot *be, embody, or possess* the universal—one is giving what the other does not have, and receives what one does not have.

Though Richard himself is not living in accordance with his thoughts on the gift (as he conveys them in the following), he does nevertheless give a clear and consistent explanation of the nature of love's gift-exchange:

Richard: Do you understand what it is to give a thing?

Archie: To give? Yes.

Richard: While you have a thing it can be taken from you.

Archie: By robbers? No?

Richard: But when you give it, you have given it. No robber can take it from you. It is yours then for ever when you have given it. It will be yours always. That is to give. (*E*)

The nature of love is thus that by giving freedom, recognition, and self-consciousness to the other— notions which must necessarily remain unrealised within the isolated autonomy of the self—one is symmetrically receiving what one would never be able to give oneself (by oneself). Only by giving that away which one does not possess by oneself is the gift realised, and only then can it truly be called one's own. This is in a certain way also what Richard is pursuing: "To hold you by no bonds, even of love, to be united with you in body and soul in utter nakedness—for this I longed" (*E* 112). But this goal remains nevertheless unfulfilled, because he fails to understand that love simultaneously presupposes a constraining of freedom, being essentially a synthesis of freedom and bondage, contingency and determinism.

This paradoxical synthesis of love is eminently illustrated in the gift-exchange which only Bertha masters, and which, according to the French anthropologist Marcel Mauss (cf. *Essai sur le don*, 1923), consists in the following paradox: on the one hand, there cannot be a gift without a bond, without a limitation of freedom due to the obligation; on the other, there cannot be a gift if there is no freedom from any bond, from any limitation, duty, or obligation. In continuation of Jean-Paul Sartre's phenomenological analysis of love in *L'être et le néant* (1943), Lacan gives an elucidation of this paradoxical synthesis, stressing the particular dialectics of the subject-object relation in love:

Nous voulons devenir pour l'autre non seulement ce en quoi sa liberté s'aliène—sans nul doute, il faut que la liberté intervienne, puisque l'engagement est un élément essentiel de notre exigence d'être aimé—mais il faut aussi que ce soit beaucoup plus qu'un engagement libre. Il faut qu'une liberté accepte de se renoncer elle-même pour être désormais limitée à tout ce que peuvent avoir de capricieux, d'imparfait, voire d'inférieur, les chemins dans lesquels l'entraîne la captivation par cet objet que nous sommes nous-même. (*Les écrits techniques*, 334).

However, in the closure of the last act of *Exiles* we do finally catch a glimpse of such a freedom of bondage or bondage of freedom that makes love possible: They sacrifice themselves—or rather: they give themselves—for each other, and the strength of the one part diminishes the weakness of the other, while the weakness of the other spellbinds the stronger. In the last act Richard says that he will never know whether

Bertha committed adultery with Robert or not, but it is paradoxically this *lack*, this *absence* of knowledge or certainty that binds him stronger to her, and rekindles his love: "He is jealous, wills and knows his own dishonour and the dishonour of her, to be united with every phase of whose being is love's end as to achieve that union in the region of the difficult, the void and the impossible is its necessary tendency" (*E* 164). This fundamental uncertainty toward the other gives rise to respect, but also gratitude, because it is this otherness that offers them what they do not have themselves, which is why this doubt does not designate any kind poverty, but a prosperity originating in the other. They win strength and being through their mutual otherness, and it is furthermore by means of the gift that they confront the unknown in the other, which is the very psychological space from which love obtains its powers. It is the unknown in the other, and this means to a large degree the unknown in themselves, that the lover desires in the beloved. The lover is alone, recognising the impenetrability of the other, but this solitude is transcended by sharing this uncertainty and lack with the other.

There is no better characterisation than *exiles* to express the unconsumed relationships displayed here, where Beatrice wants Richard, who wants her in return—but it never adds up to anything other than a correspondence of letters over nine years. Robert wants Bertha, and Bertha wants Robert, but remains true to Richard.<sup>7</sup> The state of exile denotes that there is no such thing as a *true* sexuality, which means that though sexuality does certainly appear on a concrete, particular level, it is nevertheless negating the singular and unique features of the particular in favour of the universal's alienated lack of differences—"well as well him as another" (*U* 18.1604-5), as Molly casually says at the end of her monologue. This is what alienates every lover in regard to sexuality, namely that a woman will always be nothing but a woman among other women, which furthermore implies that a man always will be nothing but a man among other men as well—on the strictly sexual level. On a strictly sexual level there is, therefore, no reason why one should prefer one man or one woman to another (besides what one's arbitrary taste decrees). The particular feeling of identity is dissolved in the universal and contingent sphere of sexual desire.

Thus, *Exiles* tells us that we are all in a state of exile toward each other, freely or not, and that when we approach some kind of union with each other, we are actually about to organise the very space that constitutes the difference and separation from the other: "Have you the luminous certitude that yours is the brain in contact with which she must think and understand and that yours is the body in contact with which her

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body must feel? Have you this certitude in yourself?" (*E* 88). Joyce is definitely arguing that love would be meaningless without uncertainty, doubt, and a special unfamiliarity with the other, and that by the grace of negativity to love is to give what one does not have.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Gabriel is not the only character who experiences an epiphany in *Dubliners*, but he is the only one who does not arrive at this insight too late, and though Joyce portrays him ironically, he is never a complete victim of the author's *scrupulous meanness*. Even though he is characterised as a well-meaning sentimentalist, and in certain ways is portrayed as a pitiable and foolish person, Joyce makes sure that it is Gabriel himself who tells us so. I am, in other words, pleading for a *positive* interpretation of the ending, yet I must admit that the ending of "The Dead" has divided the critics. In this respect, Phillip F. Herring is entirely right when he writes that the ending "seems to promise everything at once—death and resurrection, defeat and triumph, paralysis of the will yet a new beginning" (75). On the other hand, Edward Brandabur diagnoses Gabriel as a neurotic victim of "compulsive sadomasochism" (122) who remains unredeemed from his psychological paralysis, and Charles Peake similarly depicts the end of the story as "a critical evocation of resignation to spiritual death" (53). Finally, Mary Reynolds compares the novel's closing "vision of a frozen Ireland" with Dante's description of the icy landscape in his last song of the *Inferno*: "The closing sentence of the 'The Dead' recalls frozen Cocytus, Dante's last image of despair" (124). Contrarily, the vast majority of critics argue for a *positive* closure. In his distinguished biography, Richard Ellmann has the following to say: "The snow that falls upon Gabriel, Gretta and Michael Furey, upon the Misses Morkan, upon the dead singers and the living, is mutuality, a sense of their connection with each other, *a sense that none has his being alone*" (251; my emphasis). Likewise, Florence Walzl perceives "The Dead" to be a story that culminates in an insight of love and solidarity: "For 'The Dead' is a story of maturation, tracing the spiritual development of a man from insularity and egotism to humanitarianism and love" (21). Joseph Buttigieg interprets the last scene as a necessary frustration of Gabriel's attempts to master the other, the frustration consequently to result in a hitherto unseen capacity for empathy and identification: "What Gabriel experiences in this scene is a loss of control. . . . Gabriel suffers a defeat or a fall, but he also obtains, for a brief moment, a new vision. . . . His egocentrism surrenders to generosity and sympathy" (38). Finally, Donald Torchiana perceives the closure as a symbolic vitalisation of a resurrection of Ireland's emotional decay: "The grace of snow . . . has indeed about it something of the harbinger of the Easter Lily. Moreover, a wise man from the East of Ireland has experienced an epiphany, just as the feast, service, and ending of the book demand. . . . 'The Dead' in the long run is a story of growth and life and spring" (253). Comparing the end of the story with the rest of Joyce's work, it seems, I think, difficult to argue convincingly for a negative interpretation of the closure, since *Exiles*, as well as *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*, emphasise the experience of otherness as the primordial source of love

and solidarity.

<sup>2</sup> Their friendship is thus an excellent (but perverted) illustration of Aristotle's definition of the friend as another self, *allos autos* (*Ethica Nichomachea* IX, 1166a), and it is precisely as such that they desire each other.

<sup>3</sup> In his note sheets for the play, Joyce equally characterised love as "the desire of good for another" (*Exiles: A Facsimile* 163).

<sup>4</sup> The idea of creating a woman according to his own artistic image seemed to be attractive to Joyce, who on a certain level mirrored himself in William Blake, who, Joyce claims, chose a simple woman with the purpose of installing her as a refined mirror in his own artistic mirror room. Joyce affirmed in this regard: "Like many other men of great genius, Blake was not attracted to cultured and refined women. Either he preferred to drawing-room graces and an easy and broad culture . . . the simple woman, of hazy and sensual mentality, or, in *his unlimited egoism*, he wanted the soul of his beloved to be entirely a slow and painful *creation of his own*" (*CW* 217; my emphasis).

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Here Comes Everybody in *Finnegans Wake*, who is described as "Finnegan, of the Stuttering Hand" (*FW* 4.17), and Buck Mulligan's ballad in *Ulysses* that is partly entitled "A Honeymoon in the Hand" (*U* 9.1173). Furthermore, allow me to mention the comic anecdote Ellmann records, whereby Joyce is reported to have met an admirer in Zürich who asked if he could kiss the hand that had written *Ulysses*, to which Joyce replied: "No, it did lots of other things too" (110).

<sup>6</sup> Joyce's own attitude toward women and femininity is probably most outspoken in his letters to Nora, in which he compliments her for having enlarged and enriched his mind (cf. for instance *Letters* II, pp. 236-37, 21 August 1909, and *Letters* II, pp. 247-48, 5 September 1909). Echoing Bertha, who proudly announced that she made Richard a man, Joyce acknowledges symmetrically that it was Nora, his beloved, who "made me a man" (*Letters* II, p. 233, 7 August 1909), as he writes to her.

<sup>7</sup> In order to evade erosion, love presupposes a certain degree of exile in relation to the other—otherwise it might end up as in D. H. Lawrence's *The Rainbow*, where Ursula Brangwen declines Anton Skrebensky's offer of marriage, because "She knew him all round, not on any side did he lead into *the unknown*" (447; my emphasis). When John Clark is incapable of considering any positive elements in the closure of the play—"[Richard's] state at the end is marked by a total frustration of his ideals" (74)—he essentially disagrees with Joyce himself, who in one of his letters characterised *Exiles* as "a comedy in three acts" (*Letters* I, p. 78, 5 April 1915), just as the following year he referred to it as "my comedy" (*Letters* I, p. 97, 30 October 1916). The repeated description of the play as a comedy substantiates an interpretation of the ending as felicitous—in accordance with another of Joyce's beloved poets, Dante Alighieri, who entitled his magnum opus *The Comedy* simply because it had a joyful ending. Thus Joyce supports a reading that accentuates how Richard's position at the end is marked by redemption rather than frustration.