

**“Still, it was a kind of language between us”:
Desire, Identity and Ethics in ‘Nausicaa’**

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April 11, 2013
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Throughout *Ulysses*, we are confronted with the body in all of its uses and forms. As we accompany *Bloom* in his travels throughout the day, Joyce delivers Bloom's innermost and private thoughts with brutal honesty, allowing us to gain access to a character in a wholly different way. While Joyce refers to Bloom's bodily functions throughout the novel, he also chronicles the evolution in Bloom's thoughts regarding his own body in relation to desire. Indeed, Joyce locates the body as the site of desire, in both sexual and self-affirmative terms: the body plays a key role in Bloom's creation and assertion of his identity, and he often uses it as an entryway into the world around him. We follow Bloom's undulations of carnal desire, for example when he sees the woman at the butcher's, but they stay often brief and inconclusive: "To catch up and walk behind her if she went slowly, behind her moving hams.... The sting of disregard glowed to weak pleasure within his breast. For another: a constable off duty cuddling her in Eccles lane."¹ Even in this momentary pleasure, Bloom realizes he remains outside the realm of reciprocal desire. While his sexual imagination remains highly active in his chance encounters throughout the day, the memory of his shared sexual past with Molly, and the exclusion of her sexual present, come to haunt him cyclically. Indeed, his fantasies often directly reference the forbidden thought of Molly and Blazes Boylan, the very situation preventing him from coming home.

Bloom's reflection on his body begins much earlier in the day, and his thoughts provide a helpful framework for 'Nausicaa'. Joyce's emphasis on Bloom's body is particularly revealing in the concluding bath scene of the fifth chapter:

¹ James Joyce, *Ulysses*, ed. Hans Gabler (New York: Vintage, 1986) 5. 172-179 Print.

This is my body.

He foresaw his pale body reclined in it at full, naked, in a womb of warmth, oiled by scented melting soap, softly laved. He saw his trunk and limbs riprippled over and sustained, buoyed lightly upward, lemonyellow: and saw the dark tangled curls of this bush floating, floating hair of the stream around the limp father of thousands, a languid floating flower (5. 566-572).

The bath represents one of the strongest moments of self-affirmation for Bloom, evidenced by the simplicity and declarative power of the sentence: “This is my body.” His declaration is of course an alteration of what he has heard at the Mass earlier that day, and turns the sacred into the profane. Unlike Christ, Bloom’s body is not transformed in any way, and in this way remains grounded in its physicality. The ease and serenity of the scene, expressed in the sensuousness of the passage— “womb of warmth”, “scented soap”— and in the fluidity of the language, expressed in Joyce’s playful “riprrippled” and “lemonyellow”, contribute to establishing a strong sense of embodiment. Bloom’s body here allows for a moment of even textual freedom in which invented or combined words prove to be more adequate. This embodiment seems striking because of its fullness, and the sense that in this moment Bloom fully inhabits his body, looking at it in all of its complexities, flaws and beauty. Joyce delivers an unidealized description that takes into account Bloom’s portly frame, with the mention of his “trunk and limbs buoy[ing]”, but bears no mark of external judgment: this body is not held in contrast to standards of health, beauty or fitness, but rather exists in the *hic et nunc* of the moment.

The mention of the phallus as the “limp father of thousands”, and the implied loss of Rudy, will gain importance in ‘Nausicaa’ as well. Though Joyce represents Bloom as an Adamic figure of sorts, Bloom remains “sonless and fatherless” and “is defined in

terms of phallic lack.”² Henke foregrounds here Bloom’s lack of an heir, as well as the importance Bloom places on sex as an act of procreation. This emphasis contributes to the poignancy of the non-procreative sexual encounter with Gerty. The loss of his son becomes one of many forces that shape Bloom’s desire and gives more weight to their shared exchange.

This scene remains an important backdrop in considering the future instances of connection to the body in *Ulysses* as a whole. While at times the body may be considered a site of exclusion and trauma, as we see with Molly and Boylan, Joyce offers a first moment of respite for Bloom in this bath scene, in which Bloom can experience his body positively on his own, and a more profound moment of respite later on in ‘Nausicaa’. Unlike the concluding bath of the fifth chapter, ‘Nausicaa’ represents a meeting of two bodies: Bloom’s and Gerty MacDowell’s. His encounter with Gerty marks a shift in the way he negotiates a new, desiring body and views his own identity. Faced with their shared desire, both Gerty and Bloom are changed through their encounter.

Though parody runs throughout ‘Nausicaa’, the episode contains an underlying poignancy that transcends even initial ironies. Critics such as Stanley Sultan and Toby Foshay have argued that this episode is merely a vulgar example of Bloom’s “self destruct[ive]” onanism and of Gerty’s “vain, petty, and self-deluded” nature.³ Yet, the episode seems much more nuanced “to the two-eyed reader” than what these reductive readings have to offer.⁴

² Suzette A. Henke, *James Joyce and the Politics of Desire*, (New York: Routledge, 1990) 113. Print.

³ Stanley Sultan, *Critical Essays on James Joyce's Ulysses*, (Boston, MA: G.K. Hall, 1989) 170,172. Print.

⁴ Harry Blamires, "Nausicaa," *Joyce in the Hibernian Metropolis: Essays* (Columbus, OH: Ohio State UP, 1996) 178. Print.

The title of the chapter provides several important and generative connections between its initial Greek origins and Joyce's adaptation of the episode. All chapters in *Ulysses* accomplish this to varying degrees, at times drawing very limited inspiration from the *Odyssey*, or, on the other hand, providing the reader with a meaningful key into the text. In the *Odyssey*, Nausicaa first appears on the seashore accompanied by servants. While washing her clothes, she notices Odysseus on the shore, naked and exhausted. Nausicaa, similarly to Gerty, tends to Odysseus: she "takes charge, cleans Ulysses [sic] and clothes him, then leads him home."⁵ While Odysseus initially scares off all the maids, Nausicaa remains and tends to him. The relationship between Nausicaa and Odysseus is one of providing for an 'Other', a stranger with whom she becomes intimately linked through a mutual understanding. Like Nausicaa, Gerty is also a young woman of nearly marrying age, and in both cases Odysseus and Bloom are thought of as potential husbands. As Bloom takes on Odysseus's role in his own wandering, the fact that Gerty represents Nausicaa strikes us as particularly meaningful in light of her role as a caring other, who helps Bloom/Odysseus in a moment of need.

We will see that this encounter, characterized by Gerty's attention to Bloom and the fulfilling nature of their exchange, can be seen as a moment of responsibility towards the other. While the exchange is undoubtedly imperfect, we might consider viewing it in terms of Levinas's conception of alterity and responsibility. Indeed, we will see how the Nausicaa episode captures in many ways Joyce's ethical concern, as well the ways in which it represents, according to Marian Eide, "an exploration of ethical desire.... In experiencing desire as an interplay of identification and difference, the subject of Joyce's

⁵ Blamires, 177.

texts is in a constant process of becoming.”⁶ Eide’s attention to the ethical nature of Joyce’s work helps to unearth an ethical narrative even in what could be seen as a simply vulgar and self-deluding encounter. She traces Joyce’s experience of ethics and alterity back to his mother’s death, as captured in his correspondence with Nora during their courtship. According to Eide, the letter of August 29, 1904 acknowledges “the systems” in place that precipitated and even caused his mother’s death. We might see this as helpful in better understanding the systems that surround Gerty and influence the shaping of her personality—such as the consumer culture which defines ideals of beauty— but also in understanding her strength in creating desires that remain her own. Perhaps more importantly, Joyce also “indicated the necessity of experiencing sympathy with another, and from the core of that sympathy rejecting any system that would make the other a victim.” Eide continues:

For Joyce, then, the first ethical obligation is to experience and express sympathy while preserving the differences between oneself and the other.... Joyce emphasized that the ethical subject is responsible for that other, not matter how incommensurable the differences between them.⁷

We will see the ways in which their alterity is preserved throughout the exchange between Bloom and Gerty, and is in fact the basis for their self-actualization. Through being recognized and acknowledged by the ‘Other’, both Bloom and Gerty leave their encounter with a more fluid and nuanced vision of their own identities.

Gerty enters into the novel as a pivotal character, similar to Bloom in her vulnerability. Fed on the romance offered to her by magazines and novels of the time, Gerty appears to some as mere product of her environment, her desire a result of the conditioning she has undergone. The mention of “iron jelloids”, “eyebrowline”, and of

⁶ Marian Eide, *Ethical Joyce* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002) 2. Print

⁷ Eide, 2.

her carefully chosen “undies” certainly suggests a consumerist belief that beauty is directly correlated to the money and effort put into appearance, as well as to the acquisition of essential products without which Gerty would somehow not reach her full feminine potential. (13.83,111,170) Yet, this flurry of materialistic concerns is precisely what makes this episode a turning point for Gerty as well: though she does buy these products, they are ultimately not what shape her identity. Rather than passive and conforming, Gerty remains active in driving forward her own idiosyncratic desire into action.

While the childlike aspect to Gerty’s character is apparent in her lack of an actual, lived romance, her perceptive nature confers her with maturity beyond that of her peers. Joyce places her at a delicate transitional age in which she does not quite situate herself either way. Similarly, Gerty knows just enough to excite Bloom, thanks to her sexually aware friend, but not through any previous sexual experience:

...she knew too about the passion of men like that, hotblooded, because Bertha Supple told her in dead secret and made her swear she’d never about the gentleman lodger ... that had pictures cut out of papers of those skirt dancers ... and she said he used to do something not very nice (13.700-705).

Indeed, Gerty fully knows how to obtain the desired reaction in Bloom, and demonstrates her control in the situation. Drawing on past conversations with Bertha, Gerty adopts a similar position to the “skirt dancers” of the papers, but with Bloom there is “all the difference because she could almost feel him draw her face to his,” (13.708) which suggests a more emotionally rich encounter brought on by this shared gaze despite physical limitations.

In Gerty’s interior monologue, her descriptions of herself idealize her physical beauty: “Her figure was slight and graceful. Inclining even to fragility but those iron

jelloids... had done her a world of good.... The waxen pallor of her face was almost spiritual in its ivory like purity. Her hands were finely veined alabaster”(13.83-90).⁸ Joyce’s use of “slight”, “graceful”, “waxen pallor”, “ivory like purity”, “finely veined” all seem to emphasize the delicate quality of her beauty, perhaps the most direct way for Gerty to construct her own femininity, to establish superiority over her peers, and to compensate for a sense of physical lack. The focus on her femininity also further marks the difference between her and Bloom, whom she sees as masculine, contrary to his more feminine aspect that is foregrounded throughout *Ulysses*. In this regard, the contrast between both characters seems (in Gerty’s monologue) to elevate them into paradigms of their respective sexes: “she was a womanly not like other flighty unfeminine girls that he had known... she just yearned to know all, to forgive all... make him forget the memory of the past then mayhap he would embrace her gently, like a real man, crushing her soft body to him” (13.294).

Gerty’s feminine qualities permit her to maintain a certain power over Cissy Caffrey, who has “a lot of the tomboy in her” (13.294). During the episode, Cissy runs in order to show off her legs– an act that Gerty cannot reproduce (gracefully) due to her lame leg. Rather than dwell on her physical inequality, Gerty transforms it into a source of power and of pride: “There was an innate refinement, a languid queenly *hauteur* about Gerty which was unmistakably evidenced in her delicate hands and higharched instep,” (286). Joyce’s choice of words such as “innate” and “unmistakably evidenced” almost

⁸ Joyce uses religious imagery throughout the chapter, intentionally contrasting with the profane nature of Bloom and Gerty’s encounter. The use of “waxen pallor” and “finely veined alabaster” creates a link between Gerty and devotional statues Virgin Mary and consists of a Mariolatry of sorts, as Gerty takes on the same physical attributes. The religious backdrop to the episode of the Blessed Sacrament, where other men are actively engaged, remains interesting to trace, but perhaps not essential to this particular reading of Nausicaa.

seem to pertain to the semantic field of a scientific proof. The hyperbolic nature of these words, along with the rest of her self-description, reveals the true poignancy of the episode. As Henke writes on this passage, Gerty is “desperately trying to like herself... in an effort to mold a positive self-image”.⁹ Though other critics have taken Gerty’s choice of words as proof of her narcissism, the persistent quality of her effort to convince herself of her superiority might in fact unearth the extent of her isolation and how much the injury affects her. At the same time, her choice to transform her physical deficiency into a contributing factor to her beauty also implies that Gerty does maintain a certain level of agency and control in this situation: Gerty’s attitude is a “bold act of defiance of isolation. Once we learn of Gerty’s lameness, we have to admire the bravado of her self-assertion in the competitive sexual market of 1904.”¹⁰

Similarly, Gerty plays an active role in determining the nature of her sexuality, and takes the lead in her encounter with Bloom. Even in the choice of her “undies” (her “chief care”), Gerty demonstrates a simultaneous awareness of her desires and an underlying emotional fragility. The attention paid to detail in her undergarments, for example, captures the “fluttering hopes and fears of sweet seventeen”, an age characterized by constant anticipation and intoxicating feeling of possibility, and in which an encounter with an ‘other’ might signify a deeper connection (13.172). The deliberate choice in wearing “blue for luck... and for lovers’ meeting” in itself implies a possibility that she might show them, or that she might act in function of this secret knowledge (13.185). Her underwear in turn fulfills the role Gerty intended; the knowledge that she has them on—even if they remain hidden at first—imbues her excursion

⁹ Suzette Henke and Elaine Unkeless, *Women in Joyce* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1982,), 133. Print

¹⁰ Henke, *Women in Joyce*, 134.

to the beach with excitement and potentiality. The open-ended quality of the summer evening incites Gerty to transform a chance encounter with a stranger into a meaningful one, and the thought she puts into choosing her underwear creates a space that allows for an eventual expression of sexuality and self-actualization.

While Bloom's visible desire for her fuels her actions, Gerty's interest in him remains the precipitating driving force behind the sexual nature of their meeting. Gerty does not consider his interest in her coincidental or situational, but rather a marker of his refined and discerning nature: he can see that she is the more "ladylike" choice, unlike the "vulgar", "flighty", and "unfeminine" others (13.293). To her, this sense of refinement extends to the quality of her stockings: "Three and eleven she paid for those stockings... and there wasn't a brack on them and that was what was he was looking at, transparent, and not at her insignificant ones...because he had eyes in his head to see the difference for himself" (13.499-504). The passage suggests that she does not display herself simply in order to get his attention, but rather that she already has secured it, and is bringing it to an even more sexual level. In his gaze, Gerty not only finds a mutual attraction but also an affirmation of her power over him. Instead of carrying out what might be the expected (submissive) role of a girl of her age—especially when faced with the idea of a mysterious older man—Gerty is assured of her magnetism from the very beginning: "His dark eyes fixed themselves on her again, drinking in her every contour, literally worshipping at her shrine. If ever there was undisguised admiration in a man's passionate gaze it was plain to be seen on that man's face. It is for you, Gertrude MacDowell, and you know it." (13.566-567) Here, Joyce moves from the sacred to the profane, as he does throughout the chapter, and emphasizes Bloom's response to Gerty.

Joyce contrasts the specificity of “her every contour” to the generality of “that man’s face.” Though Bloom’s person is extremely important in the exchange, the almost detached tone of “that man’s face” suggests that Gerty can experience pleasure that is not solely dependent on Bloom. The final line of the paragraph, addressed directly to Gerty, seems an external, narratorial voice coming into her thoughts to interject commentary; in this way, the importance of Gerty’s story is heightened, worthy of the narrator’s (or of Joyce’s) participation. In this, Joyce also captures Gerty’s defiant confidence, visible in “and you know it.”

In many ways, Gerty displays a surprising control in their encounter, and her actions reveal a keen knowledge of how to maintain Bloom’s attention. In “Pleasure, Power and Masquerade in Joyce’s *Nausicaa*”, Philip Sicker accentuates the ways in which Gerty “understands male arousal with surprising acuity.”¹¹ Indeed, Gerty carefully navigates the complex territory of erotic display, and fully engages in a stimulating play between what is revealed or kept hidden:

her displayed body remains partly covered in the process of unveiling, promoting in the same moment a sense of visual absence and of imagined presence, a hybrid pleasure born of regulated disclosure and strategic concealment. (...) Gerty shares both [Bloom’s] pleasure and the knowledge of what has produced it.¹²

Sicker’s attention to the concomitant “visual absence” and “imagined presence” of genitalia seems to confer more importance and thought on Gerty’s part, and allow the reader to view her as more than a simple product of the magazines she has read. While her position is certainly visually inspired from what she has seen, the rhythmical

¹¹ Philip Sicker, “Unveiling Desire: Pleasure, Power and Masquerade in Joyce’s “*Nausicaa*” Episode.” (*Joyce Studies Annual* 14.1, 2003, 92-131) 110. Print.

¹² Sicker, 95.

swaying of her legs, as well as the careful covering and uncovering of her body remain her own creation.

While Gerty might not physically climax in the same way as Bloom– the bursting Roman candle remains phallic– Gerty does get close to orgasm: “she would faintly cried out to him chokingly, held out her snowy slender arms to him to come, to feel his lips laid on her white brow the cry of a young girl’s love, a strangled little cry, wrung from her, that cry that has rung through the ages” (13.733-736). Joyce plays with the double meaning of the word ‘come,’ already in slang terminology at the time.¹³ Her desire is therefore for Bloom to attain orgasm. Here, Gerty’s yearning for more physical contact– “held out her arms”, “to feel his lips laid on her”– suggests that she is not fully sexually satisfied, but nearly reaches that level. Henke reads Gerty’s attitude similarly, with particular attention to her ‘postcoital’ experience: “Gerty seems to linger in tumescent ecstasy, passionately aroused and tortured by the sweet pain of unconsummated desire.”¹⁴ Joyce foregrounds Gerty’s “sweet pain” through the semantic field of simultaneous suppression and reaching out: “chokingly”, “a strangled little cry”, “held out”, and “wrung.” The emotional intensity carried in the verbs Joyce uses suggests a prolongation of desire, brought on by the lack of total consummation. Yet, rather than dwelling on this state, Joyce swiftly moves on to Bloom’s climax within the next sentence: “And then the rocket sprang... the Roman candle burst. ” The shift from Gerty to Bloom appears natural,

¹³ Oxford English Dictionary, <http://www.oed.com/>The Oxford English Dictionary traces the meaning of come in sexual terms– “To experience sexual orgasm. Also with *off. slang*”– back to approximately 1650, citing several literary appearances of the word, including two quotes from *Ulysses*:

“1922 J. Joyce *Ulysses* ii. 471 Suppose you..came too quick with your best girl.
1922 J. Joyce *Ulysses* iii. 717 Yet I never came properly till I was what 22.”

¹⁴ Henke, *Women in Joyce*, 145.

fluid— almost imperceptible. Some critics, such as Sicker, read the episode as presenting the equal sexual satisfaction of both parties. Though Gerty does not seem to be physically satisfied in the same way as Bloom (evidenced by his emission), her sexual satisfaction as a whole seems comparable. The passage accentuates Bloom’s gaze as directly increasing Gerty’s pleasure, in the reciprocal dynamic of “she saw that he saw”(13.727) : “Bloom provides scopic satisfaction, but he is not merely objectified. Instead, Gerty’s viewing pleasure increases with the premise of co-subjectivity.”¹⁵ In this sense, the pleasure derives from seeing the effect that she can produce on Bloom, a male stranger captivated by the sight of her, and from their connection as well. For Sicker as well, Bloom’s gaze is not one of objectification but rather a “testament to [Gerty’s] seductive potency and feminine allure.”¹⁶ The element of scopic pleasure present in their exchange emphasizes as well the empowering nature of their visual communication. Through her experience in being seen as a sexual being, Gerty “proves that she can arouse, titillate, and satisfy masculine desire”, which for Henke constitutes “an erotic victory.”¹⁷

Gerty and Bloom’s connection, which goes beyond simply the physical, is also evidenced by Gerty’s care and attention paid to Bloom. Not only does this connection allow her to better understand Bloom, but it also prevents the reader from seeing her as narcissistic or naïve, simply because this reading would not take into account her perceptive nature and keen vision: she is the only character in the novel to notice that he is in mourning— “was he a married man of a widower who had lost his wife... perhaps it was an old flame he was in mourning for from the days beyond recall”— as well as the first person thus far in the novel to take him seriously, in direct contrast to Bloom’s peers

¹⁵ Sicker, 124.

¹⁶ Sicker, 103.

¹⁷ Henke, *Women in Joyce*, 147.

and colleagues with whom he can barely make his presence count (13.657-667). Gerty's perception of the "haunting sorrow written on his face" validates his pain and trauma, present with him on a constant basis, and directly contrasts with Simon Dedalus's and Martin Power's painfully flippant remarks on suicide earlier on in the novel (13.421). During Dignam's funeral, they reach categorical conclusions lacking nuance on the subject: suicide is to them "the worst disgrace to have in the family" and any one who commits it "is a coward" (6. 338, 341). With the exception of Martin Cunningham, who changes the topic, Bloom's peers—who have known him much longer than Gerty has—fail to even notice his discomfort, and their presence only serves to silence him: "Mr. Bloom, about to speak, closed his lips again" (6.343). This passage is also interesting in its attention to the body, as the focus on Dignam's corpse, as well as the memory of his father's, lead Bloom to reflect on the nature of his own life, remembering his father's dead body, in contrast with "warm bodies", the affirmation of life.

The vulnerability in this episode is apparent in Gerty's constrained and euphemistic language. The indirect nature of her speech is visible in her mention of Bloom's masturbation, simply referred to as "it" or "raising the devil", but also in extremely subtle allusions to her lame leg. Her indirection in naming and defining Bloom's masturbation perhaps stems from a desire to preserve an idea of her innocence or her virginal quality. Indeed, while her sexual awareness is apparent, Gerty has not fully accepted it, nor is she willing to name it. Yet, this does not strike us as an emotional trauma in the same way as her refusal to name her physical disability. Throughout *Ulysses* as a whole, Joyce expresses trauma as a circular trajectory, as the characters orbit around a central memory that they carry with them in their daily lives. The memory or

thought of that trauma emerges at various points throughout the day but proves difficult to shut out entirely.¹⁸ In Gerty's case, the trauma experienced is her "accident" on Dalkey Hill. Her language betrays her wish to avoid the subject: the emphasis on feet and legs comes cyclically in her thoughts and reveals a truly open wound on Gerty's part.

In the construction of her desire and sexuality, Gerty places importance on her disability, at times using it to her advantage and transforming it into a source of power, as we have seen earlier in her description of Cissy. Nevertheless, her emphasis –conscious or not– is apparent in her allusions to legs and feet: "higharched instep" (13.98), "a rare and wondrous lover at her feet" (13.210), Cissy's "long gaudy strides" (13.477), "her graceful beautifully shaped legs (13. 699), "patrician suitors vying at her feet," and "skirt dancers" (13.103). The mention of skirt dancers is particularly striking, as Gerty simultaneously distances herself from them ("this was altogether different" 13.706) and also identifies with them in her shared moment with Bloom: "he couldn't resist the sigh of the wondrous revelation half-offered like those skirt dancers." This association with the skirt dancers serves to further show the distance between this imagined model and the reality of Gerty's body: her likeness to the skirt dancers will never be complete, as she remains sitting down during the encounter.

The emphasis on her feet and legs is also visible in her own descriptions: "Her wellturned ankle displayed its perfect proportions beneath her skirt and just the proper amount no more of her shapely limbs" (13.168-170). The specificity of the "wellturned ankle" of "perfect proportions" contrasts with the larger scope of her "shapely limbs" as a

¹⁸ Stephen also periodically comes full circle back to the memory of his mother's death: each new re-visitation brings a new focus, with adjustments and variations. Indeed, each subsequent act of remembering builds on the previous, until we achieve a more complete whole by piecing together the multiple splinters of his memory.

whole. What is more striking however, is the fact that the ankle remains singular– it is the “wellturned” ankle rather than the other, less esthetically pleasing one. The subtle distinction, simply brought on by the singularity of the noun, captures Gerty’s constant circling back to her ankle, even in a moment of supposed physical validation. Even within an idealized description of herself, she is unable to escape “that one shortcoming.” This becomes more evident, though still not explicit on a first read, when reflecting on the “transient loveliness” of poetry:

oft misted her eyes with silent tears for she felt that the years were slipping by for her, one by one, and but for that one shortcoming she knew she need fear no competition and that was an accident coming down Dalkey hill and she always tried to conceal it. But it must end, she felt. If she saw the magic lure in his eyes there would be no holding back for her (13.649-652).

This passage not only underlines the way in which Gerty strays away from naming her actual disability, but also foreshadows the redemptive nature of the exchange she shares with Bloom: his gaze precipitates her self-actualization and incites her to move past the “shortcoming” she always “conceals.” Gerty sees the anticipated “magic lure” of his gaze, which allows her to give herself freely and completely; in that moment, Gerty moves past this trauma and gains access to a new realm of self-actualization and empowerment in which she no longer has to suppress sexuality or desire, nor “hold back.” This marks an important step forward, as it represents her first ‘romantic’ or physical encounter since Reggy, not to mention her first sexual exchange. The present pain of losing her first love is no longer the same after her experience with Bloom. Joyce introduces Reggy as an imagined husband for Gerty, yet even in her thoughts they are not a compatible couple: “Yes, she had known from the very first that her daydream of a marriage... was not to be.

He was too young to understand”(13.193-200). From this passage, we can see that the importance of Reggy for Gerty lies only in its novelty, not in the relationship itself.

Gerty thus shapes her desire based on these various vulnerabilities, but they are also what allow her to be connected with the figure of the ‘Other’: “Gerty sympathizes with Bloom’s melancholy because she understands his pain.”¹⁹ Similarly to Gerty, Bloom’s desire is also shaped by his vulnerabilities. Though we can see several persistent traumatic memories at work throughout his day, such as his father’s suicide and Rudy’s death, the trauma of no longer being intimate with Molly becomes extremely meaningful in his interaction with Gerty. Indeed, the loss of their son Rudy marks the cessation of any physical intimacy or shared sexual activity. While for Bloom this cessation of sexual activity is total, Molly continues to have an active sexual life with Blazes Boylan. Though Bloom himself never comments on the paradox, or perhaps even hypocrisy, of this act, we might begin to understand his pain in looking at his emphasis on the reproductive potential of sexual difference. Henke demonstrates the importance of sex as procreation for Bloom, commenting on his empathy towards pregnant women, best evidenced in his attitude regarding Mrs. Purefoy. Henke argues that his father’s and Rudy’s death both elicit guilt, which he internalizes: “Father, child and phallus occupy the same psychological position in Bloom’s unconscious, and all have become pathological symptoms of loss and bereavement.”²⁰ If the three do occupy the “the same psychological position,” then the lack of intimacy with his wife goes far beyond a simple halt of carnal relations but rather engages the other traumas in his life on a constant basis.

¹⁹ Henke, *Women in Joyce*, 139.

²⁰ Henke, *James Joyce and the Politics of Desire*, 113.

Furthermore, the image of Bloom's phallus becomes fraught with meaning if we consider that for him sex is directly correlated to the pain of losing Rudy. His phallus then is a contributing factor to this loss and, since he has not engaged in any sex since then, the phallus bears the same weight of guilt and responsibility. Indeed, Bloom has not been able to heal, nor has he had the chance to move past, this trauma through the body: sexual union with his wife would perhaps allow the trauma to be resolved physically, as it would present a gained body (the joining of both their bodies together) rather than a loss. However, Bloom has not had any chance to move on from that initial trauma with Molly through a recuperative moment of physical and emotional intimacy. Instead, sex comes to represent the proof of their estrangement.²¹ Like Gerty, Bloom often tries to avoid the subject, visible in his contorted language, but the effect of Molly's affair with Boylan comes through in terms of the effect it has on multiple facets of his personality and daily life. Indeed, Boylan embodies masculinity in a way that Bloom does not, as Bloom instead is often suggested to be more feminine. The most visible failure on Bloom's part is the inability to produce a male heir, which is considered to be his fault: "If it's healthy, it's from the mother. If not from the man" (6. 329). As we have seen, Bloom is "defined in terms of phallic lack" as both "sonless and fatherless."²²

The rupture of marriage can perhaps best be understood as an instance of the external coming into the internal, a destruction of the intimate, protected world of two lovers. The memory of Howth represents an ideal moment of union for Bloom, in which

²¹ The decision to end all sexual relations is in itself problematic: if sex means remembering Rudy and the devastating experience of losing her son, then we might better understand Molly's decision to put an end to sex altogether, yet this is not the case. Instead, Molly only puts an end to sex with her husband. The point here is not to demonize or reduce Molly's own complex way of dealing with her own trauma, but it is nevertheless important to underline the violence of the ruptured marriage.

²² Henke, *James Joyce and the Politics of Desire*, 113.

both of them are isolated from the rest of the world. Boylan's presence in his life represents the introduction of a third person in what is supposed to be a dyadic relationship: the violence of this intrusion should not be downplayed simply because Bloom does not view it in such terms. In "The Revolt of Love", Janine Utell rightfully asks what makes Bloom compliant in this situation, arguing that he goes so far as to facilitate his wife's affair.²³ While this question certainly raises important points, we may also see his lack of action as the ultimate proof that the two have drifted so far apart, to the point where Bloom has no control, and that any attempt to change the situation would have no impact. While Bloom is aware of his wife's affair, confronting it becomes another matter. It is too painful for him to even spell it out: "O, he did. Into her. Done" (13.849). Sex is here narrowed down to five words in an incredible act of compression that we might compare to his reflection after remembering Howth: "Me. And me now." (8. 917) The terse economy of Bloom's language signifies an intense emotion that does not even have access to speech. The phrases "Me. And me now" compress time and space, as he directly contrasts the person he used to be with Molly, to the person removed from his own bed. This direct juxtaposition evidences the incredible distance that separates them, and his inability to recuperate his past self.

For Bloom, the encounter with Gerty offers him the chance to suture the traumatic rupture, and to mend his own identity. Indeed, through their encounter, he is able to reaffirm his manhood as he takes on the role of the 'manly man' that Gerty offers him. Furthermore, this encounter marks an important step in working through his trauma since it is the first instance of a reciprocal sexual and imaginatively full exchange since

²³ Janine Utell *James Joyce and the Revolt of Love: Marriage, Adultery, Desire* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010) Print.

Rudy's death. Though Bloom might experience lust throughout the day, the relationship to sex is in those moments one-sided: to masturbate in those situations (for example, looking at the woman's legs at the butcher's) would only further a self-involvement devoid of shared human experience, and alienate him from any erotic connection with an 'other'. His encounter with Gerty, however, allows Bloom to reinscribe himself as a sexual being in the world once more. Bloom's language emphasizes the long period of exclusion from shared sexual experience, as it is marked almost by disbelief that their exchange actually occurred. The multiple repetitions of his exclamation "Lord!" seems to gesture towards this surprise, but also his gratefulness towards Gerty: "Lord! Did me good all the same.... Lord! It was all things combined. Excitement. When she leaned back, felt an ache at the butt of my tongue. Your head simply swirls" (13.940-941).²⁴ The repetition, juxtaposed with the brevity of his sentences, underlines his own excitement even in the unpleasant aftermath of his emission. In spite of the "cold and clammy" feeling that he experiences while readjusting his "wet shirt," he also profits from what he has gained in this experience. Joyce's emphasis on the disagreeable "aftereffect" makes the scene all the more truthful and poignant, since he does not avoid following Bloom even in moments of unidealized physical discomfort: "This wet is very unpleasant. Stuck. Well the foreskin is not back. Better detach. Ow!" (13.979-981) In this sense, Joyce neither romanticizes nor debases the body, but is pragmatic in its representation.

²⁴ We may also note that the last sentence, "Your head simply swirls", refers to the 'Seaside Girls' song, which Bloom mistakenly thinks is Blazes Boylan's creation: "*All dimpled cheeks and curls,/ Your head it simply swirls.*" (4.446-447) Yet, in this instance, Gerty represents the seaside girl, both due to her physical location and to her ties to Nausicaa in *The Odyssey*. The line therefore summons all the mythological imagery that surrounds Gerty, and also includes her within a long line of seductive female figures.

The inescapable reality of the scene can at times result in brutal honesty, best evidenced by Bloom's reaction to Gerty's lame leg: "Glad I didn't know when she was on show" (13.775). Joyce shows no mercy to his characters in his characteristic "scrupulous meanness"²⁵, or to his readers: Bloom's wandering postcoital thoughts hold much psychological truth. According to Henke, "Bloom's reaction to Gerty's deformity may be self-indulgent, but it is emotionally honest and far from callous.... Bloom's thoughts correspond to physical de-tumescence, and they expose uncensored layers of postorgasmic reflection."²⁶ The almost cruel quality of Bloom's immediate thoughts, however, is only momentary since immediately after Bloom works her disability into his desire, and accepts it: "Hot little devil all the same. I wouldn't mind" (13.775). Indeed, even after finding out about her leg, Bloom still remains impressed at the extent of the effect the experience has had on him: "Lord I am wet. Devil you are. Swell of her calf. Transparent stockings, stretched to breaking point. Not like that frump today" (13.929-930). The reiteration of "Lord I am wet" offers a moment of humor—Bloom is still surprised at how "wet" he is—in a mixing of profane and sacred characteristic of the episode, and representative of its fluidity. Furthermore, the passage accentuates the importance of legs as the carrier of sexual pleasure on both sides: Gerty transforms her disability into a means to arouse Bloom, and Bloom singles out the "swell of her leg" as a defining visual trigger for his pleasure. In becoming aroused by the view of her legs, Bloom in some sense idealizes her imperfect body, and looks at Gerty in the way she would like to be seen; the sexualization of her legs restores her lack and allows Gerty to include her lameness within the realm of sexuality. The notion of lack remains important

²⁵ James Joyce, *Dubliners*, (New York: Viking Press, 1969) 262. Print.

²⁶Henke, *Women in Joyce*, 145.

throughout the exchange, as it can also remind us of Bloom's "phallic lack" that he is able to mend. Outside the realm of their encounter, the two characters are defined by their lack, yet here the lack becomes a driving sexual force for each of them. The mention of her stockings in fact interestingly echoes Gerty's thoughts earlier on, and proves that she was right about Bloom's refined taste ("there wasn't a brack on them and that was what was he was looking at...because he had eyes in his head to see the difference for himself."). In the same vein, Bloom correctly guesses that she is "near her monthlies". The mirroring between Bloom and Gerty's thoughts confirms that they do understand each other in some way.

However, the harsh honesty of the scene, or more particularly the harsh honesty of Bloom's thoughts, serves to give emotional depth and credibility to the scene rather than suggest distance between the two of them. On the contrary, if Bloom does concede that he is happy not to have known about her leg, then we also know that any feelings of gratitude towards Gerty must also be equally honest. Indeed, by juxtaposing the two, Joyce gives equal weight to both, and therefore incites the reader to believe in Bloom's sweeter tone as well: "Little sweetheart come and kiss me. Still, I feel. The strength it gives a man" and later on, "We'll never meet again. But it was lovely. Goodbye, dear. Thanks. Made me feel so young again" (13. 859,1273). Though Bloom is aware that this encounter will never be reproduced, he acknowledges the importance it holds for him. Joyce also emphasizes here the ways in which Bloom has been able to reconstruct his identity and mend his pain.

We might also consider whether or not this mutual understanding, this shared "language between [them]" indicates a sort of ethical code present in their exchange.

Though both objectify each other in different ways, this objectification is not felt as an oppression but rather as an acknowledgment and even consideration on part of the other. The importance of the gaze, as we have seen, is first to establish the sexual connection and erotic play between the revealed and the hidden. Bloom's gaze influences Gerty's actions and shapes her scopical pleasure. Yet, his gaze also plays an important role in elevating their exchange to a higher level than simply that of a chance encounter on the beach. The two by the end of the episode are transformed, and have been empowered by the gaze of the other rather than hindered. Embedded within the notion of the gaze is also that of alterity: both characters not only preserve the other's difference, but acknowledge that their difference is the basis for their connection and ultimately what brings them together. The preservation of alterity is therefore a necessary element of their encounter. The attention to their difference (sexual difference, difference of age, life experience, Bloom's "foreignness" and Gerty's Irishness) in many ways relates to Levinas's conception of the ethics involved in experiencing the Other. In *Ethics and Infinity*, Levinas expands on this concept, specifically in the case of *eros*: "nothing in this relationship reduces the alterity that is exalted in it."²⁷ Instead of formulating a vision of erotic love as fusion, Levinas instead insists on the separate nature of erotic experience: "the pathos of love consists in an insurmountable duality of beings; it is a relationship with what forever slips away. The relationship does not ipso facto neutralize alterity, but conserves it."²⁸ Contrary to a certain idealized version of love as union, this separateness for Levinas is not negative but positive as it preserves the Other. Indeed, as Levinas argues, the presence of alterity is the fundamental basis for any exchange: "It is only by

²⁷ Emmanuel Levinas, and Philippe Nemo *Ethics and Infinity* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne UP, 1985) 66. Print.

²⁸ Levinas, 67.

showing in what way eros differs from possession and power that we can acknowledge a communication in eros.”²⁹ This seems particularly relevant to the Nausicaa episode, as there is no pretention to possession: Gerty is not his, nor is he fully hers. Importantly, Gerty comments on Bloom’s difference, and in this way succeeds in preserving it. Indeed, she acknowledges his “foreignness” and exoticism— directly tied to his Jewishness— rather than normalizing it, fueling her interest in him rather than establishing distance: “She could tell at once by his dark eyes and pale face that he was a foreigner” (13.416). This acceptance of his foreignness directly contrasts to the relationship Bloom has towards Martha, in which he sanitizes any trace of foreignness in his name, substituting for Leopold Bloom the more ‘British’, and more importantly not Jewish, pseudonym of Henry Flowers. While Jewishness is associated throughout *Ulysses* with femininity, Bloom’s foreign quality here is alluring and manly to Gerty. The exchange thus provides the necessary basis of preserving alterity in order to subsequently find “a communication in eros.”

Eide helpfully brings up Levinas’ interpretation of the *Odyssey* as an “exemplary of failed ethics because this hero insists on the totalizing recurrence of the same.”³⁰ Though *Ulysses* draws on the *Odyssey*, we could view *Ulysses* instead as an example of successful ethics, because Bloom fundamentally does not insist on reproducing the same. Unlike the character of Odysseus, his journey home is not a matter of reaching home spatially, but of being shut out from his home and prevented from returning because of his wife’s infidelity. The difference between the two characters lies in all of the changes Bloom has undergone within the compressed spatio-temporal frame of a day in Dublin,

²⁹ Levinas, 67.

³⁰ Eide, 8.

even within the brevity of his encounter with Gerty. While their exchange does not last more than an hour, it provides an open and empowering space in which both move past their trauma. We might restate the importance of Gerty in terms of helping Bloom return home, in its correspondence to Levinas. Indeed, Levinas posits that “alterity is accomplished in the feminine.”³¹ Furthermore, the feminine is particularly important to Levinas, as it also proves a home: “And the other, whose presence is discreetly an absence, with which is accomplished the primary hospitable welcome which describes the field of intimacy, is the Woman.”³² This becomes particularly important in thinking of Gerty as providing a different type of ‘home’ for Bloom, in which his identity and sexuality can be fully expressed. Though we might see this distinction as somewhat objectionable in feminist terms, Levinas suggests a way in which the “ontological difference” between masculine and feminine might seem “less archaic, if instead of dividing humanity into two species (or two genders), they would signify that the participation in the masculine and feminine were the attribute of every human being.”³³ Levinas here establishes a possible fluidity than can occur between genders, and allows for more space in the construction of identity in the face of the other, as is demonstrated in the fluidity of identity in *Nausicaa*.

Levinas also elaborates on his conception of ethics in terms of “the face of the Other.”³⁴ According to Levinas, people are habitually seen as “characters”, which could be tied to their profession, their rank, their dress or any externally defining characteristic. To others, Gerty might be defined as the girl with the lame leg, or with the drunk father,

³¹ As quoted by Eide, 11.

³² As quoted by Eide, 16.

³³ Levinas, 68.

³⁴ Levinas, 85.

and Bloom the cuckolded husband or effeminate Jewish man. In these instances, “the meaning of something is in relation to another thing.”³⁵ However, in experiencing alterity through the face, “the face is meaning all by itself. You are you.”³⁶ Part of the strength of Gerty’s and Bloom’s exchange relies on the fact that they do not know each other through these externally imposed definitions of ‘character’, nor do they see themselves in the way that others characterize them in their daily lives. Rather, they see each other in the way each wants to be seen: in Bloom’s gaze, Gerty becomes a sexual subject capable of arousing a man, and in Gerty’s, Bloom is taken seriously and appears as a refined, “manly” man.

The idea of “face” as “meaning all by itself” in Levinas seems particularly relevant to *Nausicaa*, evidenced by Joyce’s focus on the gaze and the face. While the face allows Gerty and Bloom to see each other as more than “characters”, the face also represents an openness and vulnerability: “There is first the very uprightness of the face, its upright exposure, without defense. The skin of the face is that which stays the most naked, most destitute.”³⁷ Levinas’s argument here seems particularly relevant in reading the *Nausicaa* episode, and becomes particularly striking when juxtaposed with the lack of visible nudity in the scene. The “visual absence and of imagined presence” of genitalia perhaps indicates that any nudity, at least on emotional and symbolic terms, would be found in the face.³⁸ Joyce’s mirroring of Bloom’s and Gerty’s face suggests that the majority of information in this exchange can only be understood through their reciprocated gaze. From the very beginning of the episode, Joyce associates meaning to

³⁵ Levinas, 86.

³⁶ Levinas, 86.

³⁷ Levinas, 86.

³⁸ Sicker, 95.

the face and the gaze, evidenced by the importance of Gerty's eyes: "And yet—and yet! That strained look on her face! A gnawing sorrow is there all the time. Her very soul is in her eyes" (13.188-189). Here, the repetition of "And yet" seems to represent a further exploration of meaning, of looking past initial appearances and prodding into usually uncharted emotional territory. The idea of the "soul" being contained in the eyes is reiterated throughout the chapter, playing an essential role in establishing a connection between two strangers and in transforming her visual dialogue with Bloom into a more meaningful one: "Till then they had only exchanged glances of the most casual but now ... ventured a look at him and the face that met her gaze there in the twilight, wan and strangely drawn, seemed to her the saddest she had ever seen" (13.367-370). Bloom's face thus represents the visual inscription of his trauma, which Gerty is able to decipher. The idea of face as meaning or face as text becomes explicit through Gerty's reading of Bloom: "the story of a haunting sorrow was written on his face" (13.422).

Furthermore, his face becomes the precipitating factor in taking their encounter past the realm of the "casual." In spite of their initial connection and the obvious effect that Bloom has on her, Gerty at first remains suspicious:

And while she gazed her heart went pitpat. Yes, it was her he was looking at, and there was meaning in his look. His eyes burned into her as though they would search her through and through, read her very soul. [The eyes] were superbly expressive, but could you trust him? (13.411- 414)

Joyce's language in this passage suggests a process of unveiling and revealing, which seems to accentuate the vulnerability of being completely read or searched. Gerty's thoughts here remind us of Levinas's remarks on the face as "naked", as the nakedness here is present in her total transparency. The phrases "burned into her" and "through and through" suggest the sexual quality of his look—the gaze becomes an erotic exchange

similar to penetration.

It is also through the face that Gerty can surmount her reservations about trusting Bloom, which implies that the face and the gaze carry both meaning and a care for the Other: “whitehot passion was in that face, passion as silent as the grave...she knew that he could be trusted to death” (13.691-693). It is interesting to note that a responsibility for the Other here does not necessarily entail an exclusion of sexual passion; instead the two can exist simultaneously and in fact drive the encounter towards a shared and identity-affirming experience. The episode itself is a visual exercise of glances that are exchanged, followed, returned and transformed. The attention paid to each other’s face therefore provides the necessary basis for a possible communication, and in fact constitutes the dialogue: “The face speaks. It speaks, it is in this that renders possible and begins all discourse.”³⁹ The face therefore replaces a vocal dialogue but allows Bloom and Gerty to create a language nonetheless. Their last exchange takes place through a series of glances that allows Gerty to acknowledge the impact of their experience:

Their souls met in a last lingering glance and the eyes that reached her heart, full of a strange shining, hung enraptured on her sweet flowerlike face. She half smiled at him wanly, a sweet forgiving smile, a smile that verged on tears, and then they parted (13.762-765).

While the emotional quality of their parting goodbye certainly stems from Gerty’s sensibility rather than Bloom’s, the passage does foreground the intensity and transformative power the experience has on Gerty, as we see in her “sweet forgiving smile, a smile that verged on tears.” Yet the brevity of this exchange, with the simplicity of the ending phrase “and then they parted,” suggests an unceremonial quality on Gerty’s side as well: she realizes that this gaze constitutes closure and does not try to make more out of it by trying to prolong their parting in any way. The use of the adjective

³⁹ Levinas, 87.

“flowerlike” also evokes Bloom, who is associated with flowers (and blooming) throughout the novel, and perhaps indicates that the text of her face, the story it tells, has changed through their encounter. This is further evidenced by the adverb “wanly,” as Joyce uses “wan” earlier on in the chapter to describe Bloom’s face: “wan and strangely drawn” (13.369).

This mixing of identities, and crossing of paths also comes through in the fluidity of gender and identity. Eide notes that while Levinas’s concept of the Other (*Autrui*) may seem “absolute,” Joyce’s other is “more immediate and plural, a series of ‘others.’”⁴⁰ Throughout *Nausicaa*, Joyce emphasizes the fluidity and liminality of Bloom and Gerty’s shared –and created– space. Rather than occupying definite and fixed roles, Gerty and Bloom represent fluctuating, protean beings that change even within the course of their encounter. This fluidity of identity is expressed in the fluidity of language itself, as Joyce creatively invents new words to adequately capture the situation. Joyce creates the word “girlwoman” for Gerty, perhaps borrowing from the Old English literary trope of kenning, and captures within this one word her adult maturity and youthful sensitivity. This fluidity, an essential characteristic of their exchange, allows Bloom and Gerty to go beyond the norms surrounding constrictive definitions of femininity and masculinity and instead enables them to become active participants in shaping their identities and sexual desire. Through their exploration of sexuality, both are aware of their desires—that might be considered marginalized or even perverse in other contexts—and are able to express them. In fact, the exchange itself subverts these norms surrounding the expression of sexuality and challenge gender dynamics of the time:

⁴⁰ Eide, 6.

That Gerty's presence should move Bloom from the programmatic pleasure of a voyeur to thoughts about her feelings and impressions suggests that, far from reproducing dominant gender codes in the incident at Sandymount, Joyce is challenging them, emancipating visual pleasure as a primary drive from what Gertrude Koch terms "its patriarchal incrustations."⁴¹

As we have seen, the space created represents one of self-actualization and affirmation. In *Nausicaa*, the evolution of his language reveals the effect that the exchange has on Bloom. As we have seen earlier, Bloom's language reflects an extreme compression when dealing with trauma. The thought of his wife's affair with Boylan, though taboo and unwelcome, remains a cyclical one which Bloom can only deal with in extremely condensed spurts: "O, he did. Into her. Done" and later "Me. And me now." He neither untangles his feelings nor confronts the situation, but is simply forced to acknowledge the reality of that affair. Whereas the economy of words here signals repressed emotion, a similar style later on in the chapter operates in the opposite way: "Darling, I saw, your. I saw all" (13.937). Here, the omission is richly evocative rather than reductive. The evocative power of the phrases can also remind us of Bloom's recollection of Howth, which he mentions as: "Where we" (13.1097). The omission in both sentences seem to draw from a moment of pleasure and connection, and seem to conjure particular created spaces in which he could express himself freely. In Gerty's case, the fact of keeping the noun associated to "your" silent widens Bloom's imaginative scope, and marks a change in Bloom's imaginative powers. Instead of turning away from his thoughts in the fear that they may take him too far, Bloom allows himself to fall into daydream in a moment of pleasurable contemplation.

The fluidity of the *Nausicaa* episode is perhaps best captured in the open-ended inscription of "I...AM. A." that Bloom writes in the sand (13. 1258-1264). Initially,

⁴¹ Sicker, 101.

Bloom begins to write in order to leave a note for Gerty: “Write a message for her. Might remain. What?” (13.1256-1257). By writing a note in the sand that she will only see the next day, Bloom is, in a sense, still prolonging their exchange even after her departure, and maintaining a sustained interaction with her. In the afterthoughts of their exchange, that has been both a working through of trauma and an affirmation of identity and sexuality, it seems especially striking that Bloom’s first inscribed word is “I.” The first person pronoun harkens back to the self-actualizing, embodied nature of this episode, and suggests that Bloom is also engaged in reflecting on his altered identity. With each following word, “AM” and “A”, Bloom narrows down the field of possibility of what may come next, and in doing so, also limits the openness of his identity: to complete this sentence would be to reduce himself to a single defining word, when the episode has foregrounded his fluid, complex and nuanced nature. The fact that Bloom does not finish the sentence allows him to preserve a changing identity, and reflects as well the self-affirmative quality of their exchange, as he no longer feels the need to define himself in terms of external markers of value or individuality.⁴² Instead, Bloom decides to erase the sentence entirely: “No room. Let it go” (13.1265). The two sentences remain beautifully simplistic, bared down to the essential and suggest an ease and serenity in the act of ‘letting go.’

Sicker helpfully reminds us of Gerty’s earlier question in relation to Bloom’s writing:

His inscription, “I...AM. A.” echoes his counterpart’s earlier query “who was Gerty?”—and proves equally elusive....Neither Gerty’s self-directed question not

⁴² Many critics, such as Harry Blamires, have noted as well the internal joke this inscription contains, as it anticipates Molly’s later remark “Poldy, you are a poor old stick in the mud” (14. 329-330), but have also remarked on the religious overtones recalling the proclamation “I am what I am” and “I am Alpha.”

Bloom's abortive self-description can find full expression within Dublin's narrow vocabulary of femininity and masculinity.⁴³

Beyond representing a moment of freedom in identity, the unfinished sentence also emphasizes the strength of the communication between Bloom and Gerty. Whereas Bloom's first impetus is to leave a written note, he quickly realizes that it would be "useless" (13.1259). In the same way, he considers talking to her, but this conversation would be about "talking about nothing" (13.943). Bloom's awareness here suggests that he knows these methods of communication are not necessary, as they have already engaged in a fulfilling exchange on their own terms. Indeed, he understands that their communication was tacit, and should remain that way. By going beyond the realm of speech and written word, it steps out of ordinary methods of exchange and becomes something perhaps more meaningful: "Still, it was a kind of language between us" (13.944) Bloom acknowledges the superfluousness of leaving a written note— they have already succeeded in creating meaning through a non-verbal communication of their own.

In the same way that the two share a "kind of language," their exchange is one that will be kept secret, hidden from Gerty's friends or Bloom's wife. Rather, the encounter stays between the two of them and suggest an isolation like that of lovers that keep special shared moments to themselves. While it is not to the same extent as two lovers, their encounter does seem to mark a separation between them and the rest of the world:

But there was an infinite store of mercy in those eyes, for him too a word of pardon even though he had erred and sinned and wandered. Should a girl tell? No, a thousand times no. That was their secret, only theirs, alone in the hiding twilight and there was no one to tell save for that little bat that flew so softly through the evening (13.750-753).⁴⁴

⁴³ Sicker, 128.

⁴⁴ This passage reiterates the correspondence between Gerty and the Virgin Mary, specifically in "an infinite store of mercy", "a word of pardon" and "erred and sinned and wandered."

Here, Gerty appears as a non-judgmental, forgiving figure who accepts Bloom wholly even in a moment of vulnerability. Importantly, her mercy and pardon implies that she does not hold him to blame, even if he has “erred and sinned”, whereas Molly presumably blames him for the loss of Rudy, or at least hold him accountable through ending their shared sexual life. The verb “wandered” calls to mind the figure of the Wandering Jew, condemned to eternal wandering. Bloom in many ways inhabits this role, as his constant wandering stems from the impossibility of returning home, yet we might see in this encounter the potential to momentarily cease his aimlessness. The sentence itself echoes this wandering, but also emphasizes a mutual understanding. The shared secret in some sort mirrors, or recreates on a much smaller scale, the intimacy that is lacking at home and in his marriage, and creates a microcosm for both to inhabit. The reiteration of “their secret, only theirs” suggests a unity created by this shared experience— to tell the bat that “flew softly through the evening” would still keep their encounter within this space.

Nausicaa therefore presents us with a moment of surprising intimacy, in which two strangers momentarily come together. Joyce delivers a real, lived, experience of engaging with the Other through Bloom and Gerty’s encounter. In preserving their difference— their alterity— they allow each other to fully exist outside of societal norms and definitions. Instead, they create their own self-image and are seen in the way they aspire to through the other’s eyes. Through their exchange of glances, of tacit communication and in their recognition of each other, Bloom and Gerty take an active role in shaping their identities and formulating their desires. This holds especially true in

expressing their sexual needs, possibly the most idiosyncratic and private expression of identity. Beyond the expression of their sexual desire, their encounter provides an open space of self-realization and mutual understanding, in which they can work through their traumas, and suture tears in their identities. For Bloom, this tear reflects his inability to inscribe himself as a sexual being in the world as well as his fraught relationship towards sex; for Gerty, the tear lies in the rift between her inability to confront her lameness and her wish to be seen as an object of desire. While their peers' view of them appears restraining, oppressive, categorical, this fluidity of identity allows them to navigate the field of lack, of marginalized sexuality, and of femininity and masculinity. The face of the 'Other' that they recognize stems from a total expression of their ipseity. Not only do Bloom and Gerty preserve each other's alterity— necessary for their communication— but they allow this alterity to exist wholly: Bloom's "foreignness" and psychic pain and Gerty's lame leg become central parts in their exchange. Their keen perception and understanding of each other, in a moment of physical and emotional vulnerability, suggests that the 'Other' that they recognize is the fullest self— in all of its complexity, nuance and fluidity— born of understanding and caring: their encounter represents one of self-realization, of an open-ended expression of identity, of a returned and reciprocal gaze, and, ultimately, of a profound ethical exchange.

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