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THE STORY OF JOY

Joy is an experience of reunion or fulfilment, of desire at least temporarily laid to rest, of a good thing that comes to pass or seems sure to happen soon. In this wide-ranging and highly original book Adam Potkay explores the concept of joy, distinguishing it from related concepts such as happiness and ecstasy. He goes on to trace the literary and intellectual history of joy in the Western tradition, from Aristotle, the Bible, and Provencal troubadours through contemporary culture, centering on British and German works from the Reformation through Romanticism. Describing the complex interconnections between literary art, ethics, and religion, Potkay offers fresh readings of Spenser, Shakespeare, Fielding, Schiller, English Romantic poets, Wilde, and Yeats. *The Story of Joy* will be of special interest to scholars of the Renaissance to the late Romantic period, but will also appeal to readers interested in the changing perceptions of joy over time.

ADAM POTKAY is Professor of English at the College of William and Mary, Virginia. He is the author of *The Fate of Eloquence in the Age of Hume* (1994) and *The Passion for Happiness: Samuel Johnson and David Hume* (2000).

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Adam Potkay
Frontmatter
More information

Contents

List of illustrations *page* vi
Preface vii
Acknowledgments xii

Introduction: What is joy? 1

1 Religious joy: The ethics of oneness from the Bible to Aquinas 30

2 Erotic *joi*: The troubadour tradition 50

3 The theology of joy and joylessness: Luther to Crusoe 73

4 Ethical joy in the age of enlightenment 95

5 The joys of doing and of being: Wordsworth and his Victorian legacy 121

6 Joy and aesthetics: Coleridge to Wilde 139

7 Post-Christian prophesies of forgiveness and exaltation 162

8 Tragic joy and the spirit of music: Wagner, Nietzsche, Yeats 193

Conclusion: The career of joy in the twentieth century 220

Notes 237
Bibliography 277
Index 298

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CAMBRIDGE

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978-0-521-17841-9 - The Story of Joy: From the Bible to Late Romanticism
Adam Potkay
Frontmatter
More information

Illustrations

1 Constantin Brancusi, *The Kiss* (1912). Courtesy of Philadelphia Museum of Art: The Louise and Walter Arenberg Collection © 2006 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris *page* 11
2 Gottfried Eichler, *Gaudium/Freude*, from the Johann Georg Hertel 1758–60 edition of Cesare Ripa's *Iconologia* © V&A Images/Victoria and Albert Museum 26

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Frontmatter
More information

Preface

Joy is the mind's delight in a good thing that comes to pass or seems sure to happen soon. It is often the experience of reunion or fulfillment, of desire at least temporarily laid to rest. Joy is what we feel, and as self-reflective beings know we feel, in situations, real or imaginary, in which what was lost is found; what was missed restored; what constrained is lifted; what we desire arrives; or what arrives satisfies a desire we hadn't known we'd had.

In this book I offer a history of joy or, more specifically, the ways in which joy has been addressed in Western literature and art, philosophy and religion, psychology and statecraft. Discourse about joy must of course build on some fundamental affect, a mental and to some degree physical state that is recognizable to, if not shared by, all. And yet the particular modes and contexts in which "joy" is expressed contribute, in turn, to our experience of the emotion. The cultural anthropologist William Reddy maintains, "Emotions are kinds of thought that lie 'outside' of language, yet are intimately involved in the formation of utterances"; "when we speak of our emotions, they come into a peculiar, dynamic relation with what we say about them."[1] Emotion terms are themselves culturally freighted. As the linguist Anna Wierzbicka writes, they "reflect, and pass on, certain cultural models; and these models, in turn, reflect and pass on values, preoccupations, and frames of reference of the society (or speech community) within which they have evolved."[2] Emotions or passions are not simply constant components of human psychology and physiology, the hard wiring of who we are. They are shaped, as well, by histories: the case history of each individual, and the cultural history of each emotion term. Thus, to take the passion of love, what a specific person loves and will love depends, first of all, on what a community agrees to call love (as distinguished, for example, from possible opposites such as "lust" or "friendship"), and is further conditioned by what that community allows or disallows, what a culture renders familiar or unimaginable, with regard to love's objects and expression. And what is true of love is, I hope to show, equally true of joy.

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Frontmatter
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Yet while considerable study has been devoted to love's rich and varying expression across time – starting, in the West, with Greek distinctions between *eros*, *agapē*, and *philia* – the expression of joy has in the past hundred years received little attention and less analysis.[3] But joy may be the most freighted emotion term of all. This is because joy has served, more clearly than any other emotion term – even than love, to which it is closely tied – as a linchpin between emotions and *ethics*. Granted, joy is not, at least not primarily, an ethical ideal: it possesses a psychological realism lacking in abstract universals such as "virtue" or "evil," and is differently tailored for each life story. "Are not different joys holy, eternal, infinite?," a character in a Blake poem asks, responding to herself, "and each joy is a Love." In narrative terms, there are as many different loves and joys as there are individual lives. And yet joy may and in fact often does involve basic ethical questions about the good. Joy is a delight of the mind from the consideration of a present or approaching good, and while this good may just be one's own good it generally involves beliefs about the good more generally. The discourse of joy thus involves us in shifting and competing interpretations of human ends. The story of joy is, in one light, the history of the good pursued by affective means.

Thus my inquiry into joy is not ultimately so different from the keyword approach to understanding ethical and political paradigms inaugurated by Nietzsche's *On the Genealogy of Morals* (1887), and most recently associated with the historian of political thought, J. G. A. Pocock. Pocock defines his terrain as the "history of discourse"; I call my focus on the historical evolution of a single keyword *cultural philology*. Nietzsche examined the chiasmic shift from the pagan ethics of "good" (self-assertive, dominant) and "bad" (humble, subservient) to the Judeo-Christian ethics of "good" (equals the pagan "bad") and "evil" (equals the pagan good). He assumed that abstract concepts do not exist independently of our experience of them (there's no such thing as a real or eternal "good" out there for us to discover), but rather that particular ethical systems are used to support particular distributions of power. Accordingly, Nietzsche's philology had a political agenda: he held that exceptional human beings, the "overmen" (or "supermen"), should – for the sake of increasing overall human potential – be held to some version of the pagan standards of "master morality," rather than the "slave morality" of Judeo-Christianity. Pocock, by contrast, announces no political aim in his history of conceptions of political "virtue" as they evolved from Roman antiquity (with the central ethical value of *virtus*) through the Italian renaissance (*virtù*) to seventeenth and early eighteenth-century England (virtue).[4] And yet Pocock did in fact enchant a number of historians

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Frontmatter
More information

and literary scholars with civic humanism as a moral idiom dovetailing with modern communitarianism and the philosophical revival of virtue ethics.[5] Similarly, *The Story of Joy* has no strong political program, and yet it too inevitably raises ethical and political questions, chiefly this: what sorts of things ought we to take joy or, more actively, rejoice in? I reflect on this question in my book's Conclusion. And I hope that, insofar as I am pursuing in the history of joy a history of the (felt) good, my work might serve as a model for uniting to their mutual advantage ethics, including theological ethics, and literary criticism.

I call my book *The Story of Joy* for two entwined reasons. First, I examine the stories we tell about joy, or how joy provides a motive for story telling. "Every picture tells a story," according to the old adage, but so too does every emotion.[6] If one feels joy it is joy in or about something. Like every emotion, joy has an "aboutness" (which philosophers call, in a technical sense, its "intentionality"), and this aboutness involves some type of narrative. Here's a simple example: "I never thought I'd see my son again; I was in despair, could hardly get out of bed in the morning; imagine my joy when, out of the blue, he showed up at my door!" Other stories in which joy features prominently are those about religious community on earth and at the imagined end of time; about lovers and their separations and reunions (or, paradoxically, their union-in-separation); about ethics, or how we ought to treat each other and how we know what we ought to do; about nature, considered either as a philosophical whole or as a congeries of little creatures; about the adult self in relation to childhood, or to godhood; finally, about our responses to the aesthetic forms into which these stories may be cast, or to music (as it came to be theorized in Schopenhauer) as the aesthetic "representation" of life force itself. In the chapters that follow I address the shapes of all these stories.

But the second reason for my title, *The Story of Joy*, is that I offer as well a history of joy in the Western tradition, with sideward glances at Islamic and Asian texts. It's chiefly a literary and intellectual history, though to some degree a more broadly cultural one, touching on music, opera and film, politics and advertising, memoirs and revelations. My historical sketch stretches from the Upanishads and the Bible through contemporary American culture – I conclude with a reading of the 1999 film *American Beauty* – but the centerpiece of my book, its most detailed work, concerns Britain, and to a lesser degree Germany, from the Reformation through Romanticism.

This focus reflects my contention that the Protestant Reformation ushered in an unprecedented concern with joy and joylessness as explicit topics of theology and homiletics. Luther and other Protestant theologians

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Frontmatter
More information

of the early modern period variously supplemented or supplanted the Roman Church's mysticism of sacrament and ritual with a mysticism of the Holy Spirit, and the first "fruits of the Spirit" are, according to Paul, "love, joy, and peace" (Galatians 5:22). From Luther through the works of Spenser and Donne joy serves as a sign and surety of spiritual grace, while joylessness indicates the Spirit's absence. Joylessness comes to be figured as a threat both to the spiritual life of the individual, and to the national church and emerging nation-state.

In the early eighteenth century the third earl of Shaftesbury advanced an influential philosophy of ethical as opposed to Christian–spiritual joy, one that garnered many evangelical responses, negative and synthetic. It is in relation to these responses, and particularly to a body of evangelical odes "On Joy" (as well as on "Dejection"), that we must understand the best-known odes to joy in the passage from classicism into Romanticism, Schiller's "Joy thou beauteous godly-lightning, / Daughter of Elysium," and Coleridge's lines to joy as "the spirit and the power / Which wedding Nature to us gives in dower / A new Earth and new Heaven, / Undreamt of by the sensual and the proud." As I show in the central chapters of my book, the trajectory from Reformation to Romanticism in England and Germany may be understood from one angle as the developing ways in which writers and other artists formulated joy and *freude* within an ongoing dialectic between religious and secularizing notions of the good. One aim of this book, then, is to contest a facile historical meta-narrative that links modernity with progressive secularization. Secularization proceeds through a productive tension and exchange with the religious, and the cultural philology of joy is the lens through which this dialectic is best beheld.

It bears mentioning that the modern "joy" and "*freude*" carry a different and greater resonance than their Romance language counterparts. The Italian *gioia* and especially French *joie* remain tethered, in part, to the twelfth-century troubadours and their technical use of *joi* as a term of erotic service: this, too, will be a topic of my book. English-language poets have not always been deaf to the erotic resonance of "joy": it's in Sidney's sonnet sequence *Astrophil and Stella*, for example, and Coleridge makes rich use of it in several notebook poems to Sara Hutchinson. However, a certain broad difference between Anglo-American and Gallic usage is epitomized by the fact that "Joy" has for the past hundred years served in England and America as a fairly common woman's name while in France a *fille de joie* remains a term, however quaint, for a prostitute.

My manner of proceeding in *The Story of Joy* is to alternate between, on the one hand, moving briskly through broad terrains of intellectual and

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literary history, and, on the other, slow-motion readings of selected works and passages of literature. I trust that my cultural philology of joy both enriches and is enriched by close critical analysis of selected texts and passages. In the chapters that follow I not only tell the "big story" of joy, the story I might tell more exclusively were I more exclusively a historian, but engage interpretively with individual works in which the cultural resonance of joy is significantly enriched, its psychology plumbed, its ethics – as well as its erotics – developed. I range more widely than scholars often do in our specialized age, drawing upon works including the Bible, Bunyan, and the Book of Mormon; writings by Sappho and Provençal troubadours, Guittone and Dante, Ronsard and Shakespeare; Martin Luther, Spenser, and Donne; Aquinas, Spinoza, and Shaftesbury; Defoe and Fielding; Edward Young and Jonathan Edwards; Felicia Hemans and Oscar Wilde; Schiller and Beethoven, Schopenhauer and Wagner, Nietzsche and Yeats; Emily Dickinson and Emerson; dozens of little-known authors, especially poets and sermon-writers from the Renaissance through the Romantic period; and, above all, English Romantic poets. Poems by Wordsworth and Coleridge, Blake and Shelley, are the rock on which this study is built; it was my love for their works that inspired me to look closely at "joy," a word they use so freely, and examine the avenues by which it came to them, what they did with it, and what came of it in their wake.

While *The Story of Joy* should be of special interest to students of literature, I hope to have written a book in which more general readers may take some pleasure. Especially but not only in my Introduction and Conclusion, I beckon to anyone with an interest in what, over time, has been perceived and expressed as a joy.

A few words on technical matters: I have tried to keep my endnotes to a minimum by parenthetically citing line numbers for poems and plays found on my bibliography. I have in general not provided line numbers for poems of fewer than 200 lines, to avoid cluttering my page with more numbers than are necessary. Endnotes contain short form references to works on the bibliography.

My citations from the Bible are from three texts: I use the Revised Standard Version (RSV) except when discussing the Bible in relation to English poetry, Donne through the Romantics, when I use the King James Version (KJV). My citations in Greek are from *The Greek New Testament*, fourth revised edition, ed. Barbara Aland, Kurt Aland, et al. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1993).

Translations from Greek, Latin, French, Italian and German are my own unless otherwise noted – which they very often are.

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Frontmatter
More information

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Frontmatter
More information

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