Introduction

> I will provide you with the available words and the available grammar. But will that help you to interpret between privacies?
>
> Brian Friel, *Translations*

If Europeans had read James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*, World War Two need never have happened. Or such, at least, is the legendary claim Joyce is said to have made for his final book. The legend is as indicative as it may be apocryphal. Certainly it is possible to read this claim as a marker of the author's often noted pride (the same pride that led him to tell the elder, established poet W. B. Yeats that he had met Yeats too late to really help him).[1] It is also possible for a frustrated reader to see the legend comically: who indeed would have time to launch a major military offensive while trying to read this obsessive book written for the ideal insomniac.[2] But I prefer, at least provisionally, to take this story at its face value, as a tragic statement of the *Wake*'s ambitious and admirable goals. If read according to Joyce's claim, the *Wake* emerges as a radically anti-totalitarian book which is not only descriptive but also performative in its effects.[3] In other words, this experimental text engages the reader in acts of interpretation that will, of necessity, affect that readers' ethics not by instruction or influence (which are potentially coercive modes) but through the agencies of interpretive exchange, which in Joyce's works demands reciprocity. These are the claims I will make for Joyce's literary, ethical project, a project that, I will argue, began with his first writings and is most sustained in his final work.

I

"I looked on her face as she lay in her coffin – a face grey and wasted with cancer – I understood that I was looking on the face of a victim and I cursed the system which made her a victim." James Joyce wrote these

words describing his mother to Nora Barnacle on August 29, 1904 in the first summer of their courtship. Paradoxically, in this encounter with his mother's corpse, an experience of absolute alienation, Joyce came to understand her situation clearly for the first time. He wrote to Nora that she had been killed slowly by a system in which she was confined to an inadequate home, sentenced to provide for a family of seventeen, subjected to her husband's alcoholic "ill-treatment," and his own "cynical frankness of conduct." Responding to his mother's untimely death and acknowledging the systems that had caused it, he wrote to Nora to justify his emerging ethical investments; he 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. For Joyce, then, the first ethical obligation is to experience and express sympathy while preserving the differences between oneself and another. Even in the alienated encounter with his mother's corpse described in this letter, he emphasized that the ethical subject is responsible for that other no matter how incommensurable the differences between them. Joyce elaborated the ethics reflected in this encounter throughout his literary career. In *Ethical Joyce*, I will argue that the central concern of his writing was the creation of a literary ethics responsive to the particularities of the culture to which his mother fell victim.[4]

In each of his works, Joyce maps the complex relations within a domestic setting or immediate context onto exterior processes in the social and political realms. *Ethical Joyce* reflects his repeated textual suggestion that ethics, which etymologically signifies both "character" and "habitat," might be best understood as an interaction between immediate and intimate processes (character) and more external and enduring structures (habitat). For example, his realization that his mother had provided him with his first habitat and sustained his life through adolescence and yet fell victim to the very system that nurtured his own success, altered Joyce's understanding of his obligation to women both in his literary representations and in his private relations with Nora Barnacle and later with his daughter, Lucia. The literary ethics I develop in this book proceed from a local, formal or aesthetic textual focus in order to examine how our assumptions about what it means to read and interpret produce within each reader an implicit ethical practice. Contrary to prevailing assumptions that aesthetic concerns are in some way divorced from or even allergic to ethical responsibility, I argue that Joyce's aesthetic choices constituted his performative ethics and suggest an ethical practice for his readers.[5]

Following Joyce's literary cue, my own method in the chapters that follow will be to focus on specific textual moments throughout his works that present particular ethical dilemmas or opportunities. Rather than surveying the vast range of possible instances, I will model the ethical suggestion and response by a process of interpretive dilation intended to present the encounter with an other in all of its ambivalence. While it may be possible to survey the range of ethical possibilities in the works, I prefer the kind of ethical interpretation that Joyce's complex texts make possible: to examine the character – or textual moment – in its habitat – or context – with all the vast implications, distinctions, and connections Joyce makes available to the reader. My approach is not to be exhaustive, or even exhausting, but perhaps insomniac: eyes open against darkness or obscurity (in other words, dilated), alert to the range of possibilities produced in Joyce's textual web.[6]

Joyce's texts locate readers between disparate subject positions, each of which makes an ethical demand. Drawing on the literal meaning of interpretation – putting between – I argue that reading Joyce's texts requires an ethical investment in which a reader maintains a suspended position between opposing claims. Stephen argues this case explicitly when in *Portrait* he defines "proper" art (as opposed to the "pornographic" or "didactic" arts) as static: "The esthetic emotion," he claims "is a face looking two ways."[7] While didactic arts impel the reader in a specific direction, demanding a particular, and predetermined reaction, "proper" arts compel ambivalence. In using the term "static" to describe fine art, Stephen does not suggest a paralytic or frozen response; rather, the reader's face looks two ways; the response, then, is a dynamic ambivalence.[8] Following Stephen's cue and recognizing the impossibility of conjoining oppositions, the reader performs the impossible yet imperative task of "interpreting between privacies."

Ethics, as I am defining it, is an engagement with radical alterity, or difference, within the context of ultimate responsibility (which encompasses responsiveness) to the other in his or her habitat. The alterities that Joyce addresses in his fictions include the differences between text and reader, text and author, between genders in a marriage, generations in a family, nations in a colonial empire, and races in conflict.[9]

At the close of Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, the young writer Stephen Dedalus inscribes the following, much quoted, entry in his diary as he prepares for his creative life in exile: "I go to encounter for the millionth time the reality of experience and to forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race" (*P* 252–253). While Stephen is,

as Joyce emphasizes, "a young man," and while his objectives are perhaps more dramatically articulated than those of his author, the idea that ends *Portrait* might yet be read as the crucial impetus for Joyce's artistic project: the forging of an uncreated conscience. Joyce's central concern as a writer was the creation of a literary ethics (or conscience) responsive to the particularities of Irish national culture, to the particularities of his character's context or habitat. He forged that ethics in the smithy of the encounter, in the place of meeting an other in which the situation demands that a subject communicate ethically across incommensurable difference.[10] For Joyce the first ethical consideration is the experience and expression of sympathy within the preservation of difference. In other words, ethical response makes possible a communion that does not obscure necessary separation.

II

Joyce's ethical theory may be elucidated by comparison with contemporary ethical thought. The second half of the twentieth century saw a major revolution in ethical theory founded primarily in response to the work of philosopher Emmanuel Levinas. Levinas makes a case for philosophical ethics very similar to Joyce's in many respects when he critiques the classical tradition as totalizing, noting the tendency of ontological thought to subsume the claims of the other under the rubric of the one. In *Totality and Infinity*, for example, Levinas writes of Martin Heidegger's ontology that its focus on the concept of "Being" tends to "neutralize" that which exists in the real in order to comprehend or understand it. There is no attempt in this ontology, according to Levinas, to form a relation with an other; rather, this philosophy reduces the other to a version of the self or same.[11] In Heidegger's philosophy, even "freedom" depends on this reduction, maintaining the primacy of the self in any relation with an other to ensure the "autarchy of an I." The effort of conceptualizing according to ontological premises depends on the "suppression or possession of the other" (*TI* 45–46). Levinas argues that when philosophy begins with the question of Being as its Archimedes lever,[12] the philosopher risks reducing or "neutralizing" everything outside his or her consciousness in order to know it. Ontology begins with the (perhaps unethical) assumption of the supreme philosophical importance of one being or consciousness. If this assumption is the foundation of philosophical inquiry, Levinas elaborates, then all subsequent thought will be, by definition, reductive, attempting to reduce multiplicity and

difference to a theme or concept that can be understood in its totality, that can, in other words, be totalized.

Like Joyce who saw his final work as an act of resistance to the rise of European fascism and increasing militarization at the beginning of World War Two, Levinas devoted his philosophical writings to resisting the totalitarianism he experienced during that same war when he was incarcerated in a military prisoners' camp.[13] While his work is primarily philosophical and theological, like Joyce's, it rests on a fundamental belief that an ethical disposition would be the only effective means for preventing the destructive politics of totalitarian regimes.

In "Difficult Freedom," Levinas argues that "Political totalitarianism rests on ontological totalitarianism."[14] Ontology, according to these terms, is the effort to span, mediate, or compress the difference between subject and other in order to reduce otherness to a recognizable same (see also *Totality and Infinity* 42–43). The political programs that would arise from these assumptions rest on the importance of universal truths and put all manifestations of difference at risk. As an alternative to the totalitarian impulses of ontology, Levinas argues that ethics is first philosophy and emphasizes the subject's responsibility in the primal encounter with the naked face of the *Autrui*.[15] "The face in which the other – the absolutely other – presents himself does not negate the same, does not do violence to it . . . It remains commensurate with him who welcomes; it remains terrestrial. This presentation is preeminently nonviolence, for instead of offending my freedom it calls it to responsibility and founds it. As nonviolence it nonetheless maintains the plurality of the same and the other" (*TI* 203). While the nonviolence of a subject's ethical encounter with the face of the other might tempt a reader to sentimentalize Levinas's philosophy, one must remember that this encounter with the specific other is also a repetition of the primordial meeting with the *Autrui* from whom we are commanded "Thou shalt not murder" and in whom we potentially see our own annihilation. "The identifying of death with nothingness befits the death of the other in murder. But at the same time this nothingness presents itself there as a sort of impossibility. For the Other [*Autrui*] cannot present himself as Other [*Autrui*] outside of my conscience, and his face expresses my moral impossibility of annihilating . . . The Other [*Autrui*], inseparable from the very event of transcendence, is situated in the region from which death, possibly murder comes" (*TI* 232–233).

Joyce's approach might be compared fruitfully to that of Levinas in their mutual emphasis on the decentralization of the subject and the

openness of the subject to an "other." Levinas's "other" (*autre*) might be more accurately referred to as "*the* Other" (*Autrui*), in the sense of the transcendent, the abstract, and the absolute. In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas writes that the "Other [*Autrui*] is not other with a relative alterity as are, in a comparison, even ultimate species, which mutually exclude one another but still have their place within the community of a genus – excluding one another by their definition, but calling for one another by this exclusion across the community of their genus. The alterity of the Other [*Autrui*] does not depend on any quality that would distinguish him from me, for a distinction of this nature would precisely imply between us that community of genus which already nullifies alterity" (*TI* 194).[16]

Luce Irigaray calls Levinas's conception of the *Autrui* into question to the extent that this *Autrui* is defined as absolute and incommensurably different from the subject. She notes that in Levinas's work the distance from an other is always maintained, even in love. "This autistic, egological solitary love does not correspond to the shared outpouring, to the loss of boundaries which takes place for both lovers when they cross the boundary of the skin into the mucous membranes of the body, leaving the circle which encloses my solitude to meet in a shared space, a shared breath. . . ."[17] Irigaray prefers to offer a model of the subject's responsibility to the other that relies on interactions of difference and connection. Drawing on the metaphors made possible in the body's mucosity she proposes a model for ethics to be found in acts of love. Her metaphor does not assume a connection between disparate species based on shared genus, a connection Levinas warns against, rather she suggests the possibility of connection even in the context of absolute difference. Anna Livia Plurabelle's fluid interventions between her warring sons in *Finnegans Wake* offer just such a model for an ethical relation between others that balances alterity with connection (see chapter three).

While Levinas's *Autrui* is absolute, incomparable, Joyce's other is more immediate and plural, a series of "others."[18] However, the tendency of both Joyce and Levinas to understand the subject in relation to an other, and to cast difference as incommensurable rather than relative, roots their very different discourses within a common concern for the ethical. Both writers also resist any totalizing philosophical or theoretical impulse because such an ontology reduces difference to the same, subsumes the other under the principles of the One.

To be responsible, the subject must recognize the extent to which in encountering an other from whom one experiences an essential difference, the encounter is understood to be singular, separate from the

assumptions of group identity. As Derek Attridge argues in "Innovation, Literature, Ethics: Relating to the Other," this term, "other," "implies a wholly new existent that cannot be apprehended by the old modes of understanding and could not have been predicted by means of them; its singularity, even if it is produced by nothing more than a slight recasting of the familiar and thus of the general, is absolute."[19] In its singularity, an encounter with the other reconfigures the subject even as the subject begins to apprehend or even understand that other.

The change implied by this singular occurrence can be seen in Joyce's *Dubliners* story "An Encounter" in which, as the title indicates, there may be many meetings, but only one encounter. In the boy narrator's play, in his school, and in the disquieting incident with the "queer old josser," there is a consistent pattern of domination: of one character taking another as his object and imposing on that other his own preoccupations and desires. The pederast's imposition is the most obvious and egregious example, of course. However, in the final moments of the story, the narrator recalls one authentic encounter between the two boys who have spent their day "miching." The narrator calls to his friend, Mahony, in his desperation to escape from the pederast and recollects that "my heart beat as he came running across the field to me! He ran as if to bring me aid. And I was a little penitent; for in my heart I had always despised him a little."[20] In this final moment, the narrator recalls what I have been describing as an ethical encounter: Mahony responds to his call and, responsible to the need the narrator's call implies, Mahony inadvertently effects a change within his friend who becomes, in this ethical encounter, other to himself. He realizes that he has despised his school friend, and, apprehending Mahony for the first time in all his difference from the narrator's assumptions, he is penitent.

For Joyce the first ethical consideration is the preservation of difference within a context of response or responsibility. Reduction of the other to the principle of the same, of the one, or the self is a form of unethical colonization (or, to quote Levinas, "ontological imperialism," [*TI* 44]) whether it happens at the level of the nation, the group, or the individual. For example, in the "Cyclops" episode of *Ulysses*, the citizen's interrogation of Leopold Bloom indicates not a recognition of an other but an attempt to create a unified truth (or to draw on Joyce's punning invocation of the *Odyssey*'s Cyclops: one-(eye)idea) that would expel Bloom's difference. "What is your nation if I may ask? says the citizen."[21] Implying that Bloom's Jewish heritage taints his Irish nationality, the citizen identifies relative difference in order to solidify his own

identity; his position is totalitarian in that he sees difference as dangerous and potentially threatening. Through rhetorical flourishes in which he denigrates Bloom's idealism and draws bigoted attention to his Jewishness, he attempts to reduce or expel Bloom's subjectivity by the power of his own nationalist unification. "That's the new Messiah for Ireland! says the citizen. Island of saints and sages!" (*U* 12:1642–1643). The citizen's unethical position stems from his perception of otherness as threat to which he reacts violently rather than responsively or, to use Levinas's language, responsibly. For Levinas, as for Joyce, the other to whom we are called to respond is not necessarily welcome or even benign, and yet we must be in responsible relation to that other.[22]

Joyce adapted Homer's *Odyssey* to record his literary ethics in which the exiled traveler constantly encounters alterity and difference and is called to respond and connect even when that difference threatens his happiness or even safety. In adapting the *Odyssey* he presents a crucial change from Homer's example in that Bloom can never return home; his return to 7 Eccles Street is a return to a home that has changed, been adulterated with his wife's adultery. Odysseus returns to the familiar in Ithaca, to a home and wife that have remained faithful and that he can bring back under his control in a brutal extermination of suitors. Levinas reads Odysseus's journey as exemplary of a failed ethics because this hero insists on the totalizing recurrence of the same. Odysseus "through all his peregrinations is only on the way to his native land." As such Odysseus is exemplary of a strain in western philosophy "struck with a horror of the other that remains other."[23] Levinas's own work insists on the subject's responsibility to the other in all his or her alterity by reference to another myth. "To the myth of Ulysses returning to Ithaca, we wish to oppose the story of Abraham who leaves his fatherland forever for a yet unknown land" (*ibid* 348). Joyce's Jewish Ulysses bears the trace of this diasporic Abraham whose exile necessitates responsibility to the other. Bloom, like Abraham, accepts exile without return. He leaves his home without keys to insure his return, and when he gains entrance by unorthodox means in "Ithaca," he catalogues the changes in his home and in his wife, accepting, albeit with pain, a kind of internal exile comprised in her difference, her essential otherness to him.

Levinas's philosophical ethic pursues the enduring and transcendent truth, whereas Joyce invests his literary ethic in the immediate and immanent. For example, Levinas advocates a return to metaphysical questions that provide possible alternatives to ontology, referring back to Plato's notion of the Good and Descartes's "Idea of the Infinite."[24] Joyce's

emphasis on the other might be understood to derive from sources that were as personal as they were philosophical. Though his early religious training might have predisposed him to think ethically toward an absolute Other in the form of the Roman Catholic God, it was catholicity of another kind that motivated his thinking as an adult. Living in a colonial environment and raised among Republicans and Nationalists (as the Christmas dinner scene in *Portrait*, if read autobiographically, might indicate), Joyce saw his environment as one in which incommensurable differences (cultural, philosophical, religious, ethical, and political) were violently yoked together under the guise of the sameness that is colonial culture. Encountering his mother's gray face in her coffin, falling in love with his very forceful partner, Nora Barnacle, and raising his daughter, Lucia, with whom he was strongly identified, he began to see the ways in which cultural differences yoked together as sameness in colonial culture are paralleled in gender differences, which are yoked into the sameness of patriarchal culture.[25] The result is his enduring ethical investment, in all of his fictions, in an understanding of the subject as an unstable entity formed in relation to an other from whom that subject is incommensurably different.[26] In contrast, for Levinas that incommensurable difference is neither unstable nor relative but absolute and primordial.

III

While Joyce presents his ethical theory primarily through the auspices of experimental narrative and representation, Levinas, especially in his early career, describes esthetic representations as totalizing forms, subsuming the other under the principles of the same: "For the moment let us note that the structure of representation as a non-reciprocal determination of the other by the same is precisely for the same to be present and for the other to be present to the same. We call it 'the same' because in representation the I precisely loses its opposition to its object; the opposition fades, bringing out the identity of the I despite the multiplicity of its objects, that is, precisely the unalterable character of the I" (*TI* 126). For Levinas, then, the insistent presence of representation subsumes the difference of the text's subject and its reader (that representation's others) under the presence of the representation itself (the same).

Robert Eaglestone provides an extremely accessible summary of Levinas's reservations about art in *Ethical Criticism*. He notes that "*Totality and Infinity* was open to criticism on the ground that it had difficulties over the issue of representation in general and the issue of aesthetic

representation in particular."[27] Eaglestone locates Levinas's reservations in the question of the face: in the philosopher's writing of the early period that culminates with *Totality and Infinity*, ethics derive from the face-to-face encounter which assumes the *presence* of an other. "To suggest that presence is only re-presented in material forms, to confuse the issue of presence with the issue of how presence is represented, is to challenge the actual face-to-face relationship with the Other, one of Levinas's most central ideas. It is because of this that Levinas is suspicious of the idea of representation, in art or otherwise, and either ignores representation or attempts to circumvent it."[28] However, this theory of representation relies on a Platonic assumption of literature as essentially mimetic rather than elaborating on the esthetic as itself a practice of intersubjective ethics, as I will argue.[29]

Jacques Derrida, in "Violence and Metaphysics," argues that Levinas's insistence on the materiality and immediacy of the face in an encounter merely prefers empiricism to philosophy, assuming that that empiricism can get beyond representation or the mediations of language, whereas, as Derrida points out, empiricism would actually be another philosophical gesture, performed within mediating language. Eaglestone glosses this philosophical conversation, noting that for "Derrida, ethics cannot exist save in language . . . which will underlie any 'pure' ethical moment: the ethical . . . is a result of language."[30] *Otherwise than Being* is Levinas's response to Derrida's essay in which he posits a theory of the Saying and the Said which suggests that an ethical gesture may reside in language (and especially in philosophical language) and resist the totalizing tendencies of representation. I will return to the theory of the Saying and the Said in the third chapter.

While Levinas resists literary representation as ethical expression, many of his examples of ethical interchange are actually derived from literary examples including Shakespeare, Dostoevsky, Celan, and Blanchot among others.[31] Jill Robbins argues that this allusive practice co-opts the alterity of the literary text, "the fact of allusion threatens to effect a return to a shared literary or textual heritage."[32] Rather than understanding "this divided perspective as a transformation of his view," it is possible to "approach this tension as one operative *within* each of his texts about art" (*ibid* 75). Levinas pays homage to textuality from Biblical to secular examples, but for his purposes, as Robbins notes "the art that makes an ethical difference can no longer be conceived as aesthetic" (*ibid* 134).

I would like to argue against Levinas that esthetic representations provide an ideal ground for ethical theorizing not simply because esthetic