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978-0-521-87911-8 - The Story of Joy: From the Bible to Late Romanticism

Adam Potkay

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction: What is joy?*

“Tell me what is a joy? & in what gardens do joys grow?”

William Blake, *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* (1793)

Blake thought his two questions – what are joys and where do they grow? – pitiful ones to ask: he assigns them to the tragic character Theotormon, whose name may be parsed “God-torment.” Two hundred years later, Blake’s questions are still relevant. Do we know joy? We have *pleasures*, for sure, and entertainments and amusements galore, across spaces public and private. Some may still self-consciously pursue *happiness* or the good life. But *joy* is a word we don’t use much anymore, at least not in secular contexts. Shakespeare uses the words “happy” and “joy” with the same frequency, but by the early twentieth century the latter was less often sounded on the stage: George Bernard Shaw, for example, uses “happy” seven times more often than “joy.” And while joy has grown less common, still less do we now “rejoice.”<sup>1</sup>

What have we lost? Consider for a moment the following exultant claims made in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries for the power of joy. The first is from Schiller’s German ode of 1786 (later used by Beethoven in the choral finale of his ninth symphony), “*Freude, schöner Götterfunken*”: “Joy, thou beauteous Godly lightning / Daughter of Elysium, / Fire-drunken we are entering / Heavenly, thy holy home!”<sup>2</sup> The second is from Coleridge’s *Dejection: An Ode* of 1802: “Joy, Lady! Is 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 – / We in ourselves rejoice!” For Schiller and Coleridge, joy breaks down the boundaries that separate self and other, humanity and nature. It bestows a glorious we-mode upon the earth, making it seem like heaven.

Reading their lines in the early twenty-first century, one may well wonder what these authors are talking about. Their aims may seem impossible and their use of the word “joy” faintly absurd. In the twentieth century the word did not fare well in poetry, politics, or ordinary

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conversation. So clouded are the rays of joy that Blake's questions seem more vital than ever: what is (a) joy? And in what (metaphoric) gardens do joys grow? To understand the rich historical soil from which the poems of Schiller and Coleridge grew will take the better part of this book. But here, at the outset, we may inquire in a preliminary way into what joy is, or is said to be. My pursuit of joy begins with philology, but word-history quickly involves us in more basic philosophical issue: what is the essence of joy? The philosophical quest for precise definition shades, in turn, into a psychological inquiry into the passion's developmental origins. Joy is, I suggest, the original passion of infancy, reconnecting us, blissfully, to a stage in life before we were born. As source, joy is also our aim or end: it is what we wish and sometimes clamor to regain. "Joy" is, moreover, what we often speak of as unspeakable, a word that marks the limit of language as it gestures towards the undifferentiated unity before words were or after they shall cease to function as they familiarly do. Linked to a residual sense of un-individuated being, joy emerges as a vocal concern at those moments, biographical or cultural, in which self comes to seem a burden or a group needs consolidation.

Joy may also be defined negatively, by differentiating it from related but distinct concepts. Thus joy is not the same as *happiness*. Happiness refers to either a mental disposition or an ethical evaluation; as an ethical evaluation, it can pertain to the condition of an individual (the happy man) or of a community or political nation (the happy land). Joy, by contrast, refers primarily to a mental state – it's as such that I chiefly address it – although it can also refer to a mental disposition or emotional attitude ("Jane is a joyous person"). Happiness typically admits degree (i.e., one's happiness, whether understood subjectively or objectively, can be perfect or imperfect, lesser or greater), but joy admits both degree and a welter of adjectival qualifications. Thus we speak of spiritual joy; erotic joy or, narrowing it down to the erogenous zones, "the joy of sex"; *joie de vivre*; selfish joys and *schadenfreude*. As a responsive state, joy is often correlated to categories of stimuli. Adjectives can comment as well on the degree, quality, cause and effect of a joy. One finds in early modern English verse, for example, "consummate joy" (degree), "vulgar joy," "ethereal joy," "unwieldy joy" (qualities), and "fatal joy" (cause and/or effect). Joy can be modified by seemingly opposed emotions: we find (in Thomas Gray) "a fearful joy" and (in Zola) "a heavy and anxious joy." In Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* we find joys athwart aesthetic and ethical registers: "rose-coloured joy," "misshapen joy," and the "high indifference of joy." Joys are modifiable in ways that "happiness," a noun without a plural, is not.

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The modal aspect of joy has important consequences for the types of stories we can tell about it. Joys are plural and variegated. To understand a judgment about a joy – what makes it “consummate,” say, or “fearful” – requires narrative context. Additionally, joys are implicated in larger networks of passions: they issue from desires, loves, and hopes; they oppose yet may alternate with or be colored by sorrows, hatreds and fears. They are based on beliefs, both general and particular, about what is good and bad, right and wrong. They are, in short, enmeshed in story telling. Happiness, by contrast, tends to be a more uniform attribute or achievement, at least within a given community or set of assumptions; accordingly, the tales one can tell about it are limited in number and in narrative scope (e.g., virtue assailed, virtue triumphant). Happiness may contain episodes of joy, but philosophers have been stringent in excluding all but appropriate (which sometimes means quite limited) joys from their accounts of the good life.

The opposition between happiness and joy is a classical inheritance. Hellenistic and Latin philosophy opposes human flourishing to those joys in relation to which we are passive, particularly the joys of erotic love. Happiness, insofar as it harkens back to ancient eudaimonism, is opposed to the loss of self that is always, to some degree, involved in joy. Happiness is a technology of the self, a fashioning and indemnification that elevates inner integrity, constancy and wisdom over external mutability, loss, and death. Joy, by contrast, is an expansion and at least partial loss of self. As we shall see, at joy’s limit – or at the point where it passes over into the distinctive experience of *ecstasy* – it involves self-severance, an annihilation of the senses and the crystallization of consciousness as radical otherness.

## DEFINING JOY

What is a joy, and in what gardens does it grow? For a student of literature, the gardens of philology seem like a good place to start. Etymologically, the primary derivation of “joy” is from Latin *gaudia*, plural of *gaudium*, via the Old French and Middle English *joie*. (I contend in chapter 2 that “joy” derives, secondarily, from the *langue d’oc* word *joie*, a technical term of erotic service that has less to do with the passion of joy as we commonly recognize it and more to do with the cultural construction of “courtly love” in the West.)

Defining joy is a difficult task, and twentieth-century lexicographers have not, I think, risen to the challenge. As a rule, they’ve opted for synonyms rather than analysis. The Oxford English Dictionary begins on shaky ground: joy is “a vivid emotion of pleasure arising from a sense of well being or satisfaction” (i.e., a vivid pleasure arising from a sense of

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pleasure?). Then its definition dwindles into synonyms: “the feeling or state of being highly pleased or delighted; exultation of spirit; gladness, delight.” As weak as the OED is here, the popular new American Heritage Dictionary (third edition, 1992) is worse. Its definition of joy as “intense and especially ecstatic or exultant happiness” blurs the important historical distinction between joy and happiness and misleadingly making both sound like “feeling good.”

To define joy in its primary sense we need to go back to the great eighteenth-century dictionaries and encyclopedias. Through the eighteenth century the passions were understood systematically as the basic elements of psychology, and close attention was paid to their definition. The best concise definition of joy I’ve found is from John Locke’s *Essay concerning Human Understanding* (1689): “Joy is a delight of the Mind, from the consideration of the present or assured approaching possession of a Good.”<sup>3</sup> Samuel Johnson used Locke’s line as his first illustrative quotation for “joy” in his seminal *Dictionary* (first edition, 1755). (Johnson’s own definition of the term begins promisingly – “the passion produced by any happy accident” – but then settles, like his twentieth-century successors, for synonyms: “gladness; exultation.”) In France, *philosophes* adopted and refined Locke’s definition. The *Dictionnaire de L’Académie Française* (fifth edition, 1798) modifies Locke’s definition of joy with an explicit recognition that imagination plays a key role in certain joys: “*joie*” is “a passion, a lively and agreeable motion that the soul feels in the possession of a good, either real or imaginary.”

De Jaucourt begins his “*joie*” entry in the *Encyclopédie* (vol. 8, 1765) with a French translation of Locke’s larger discussion of joy, and proceeds to distinguish between joy and *gaieté*: *gaieté* amuses, while joy finds its perfect expression in tears. It was an eighteenth-century commonplace that joy wets the eye, and at its extreme animates the whole frame. James Burgh, in *The Art of Speaking* (1761), informs the aspiring orator or actor: “Joy, when sudden and violent, expresses itself by *clapping* of *hands*, and *exultation*, or leaping. The *eyes* are *opened* wide; perhaps filled with *tears*; often raised to *heaven*, especially by devout persons. The countenance is smiling, not composedly, but with features *aggravated*. The voice rises, from time to time, to very *high* notes.”<sup>4</sup> Joy elevates the mind and, correspondingly, the body. As another acting manual advises, to “sound *joy*” the actor’s “neck will be stretched and erect, without stiffness, as if it would add new height to his stature . . . his joints all high-braced, and his sinews extended.” “His eye” will be “smiling, and sparkling.”<sup>5</sup> Sparkling with tears or with a wholly inner gleam?

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Tears and laughter are the interchangeable indices of both joy and its structural opposite, sorrow. At their extremes, these opposed passions may assume either physical reaction, or both of them. William Blake turned this insight into a proverb: “Excess of sorrow laughs. Excess of joy weeps” (*The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Plate 8). Particular physiological reactions may accompany but they do not strictly characterize joy, or indeed any passion. This insight, available since antiquity, has received scientific validation: according to a classic study by Stanley Schachter and Jerome Singer (1962), subjects experiencing different passions – e.g., joy, fear, and anger – display the same signs of physiological arousal.<sup>6</sup>

However, the range of arousal involved in a joy depends, in part, on what a language community agrees to call a joy. So, for example, “joy,” singular, tends to have a sexier cast in eighteenth-century (and contemporary) France than in Britain. One feature of the 1798 *Dictionnaire de L’Académie Française* entry on *joie* that deserves comment is that after listing many phrases featuring the word – “transport of joy,” “cries of joy,” “tears of joy,” and so forth – it ends by recording a use that seems out of keeping with the rest: “one calls a prostitute a *fille de joie*.” The locution *filie de joie* translates into the German phrase *freudemadchen*, but it didn’t take in English: the OED lists a sole 1585 occurrence of the Anglicized “maiden of joy.” Although *filie de joie* didn’t fly in England, English writers of the seventeenth and earlier eighteenth century did have a habit (not noted by the OED) of using “joys,” plural, to mean sexual pleasures (as in John Donne’s *Elegy 19*, “bodies unclothed must be, / To taste whole joys”) or, more bluntly, sexual emissions. Thus in the second earl of Rochester’s poem “The Imperfect Enjoyment,” a premature ejaculation becomes “the Clammy Joys.” This peculiar usage pays homage to Ovid’s *Amores* 3.7, a poem of fantasized sexual “joys” (*gaudia mente*) disappointed by an uncooperative penis.<sup>7</sup>

The exceptional vulgarity of ejaculatory “joys” draws our attention to the fact that “joy,” although it often involves a physical response, is more typically associated with goods intangible rather than tangible, spiritual rather than sensual. Moreover, there are cases in which “joy” or a Romance language equivalent (*joie, gioia, gozo*) retains its association with a specialized Latin use of *gaudium*, and so constitutes a purely intellectual attitude towards the super-sensible good, an attitude distinct from even if attended by bodily response. Roman Stoics reserved *gaudium* for an equable state of mind, and used the word *laetitia* to designate either irrational joy or, less negatively, the physical aspects of *gaudium* – in which case it is best translated into English as “gladness.” “Even the joy [*gaudium* or *joie*] which is born from virtue, although it is a good, is not part of the greatest good, any more than gladness

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[*laetitia* or *allégresse*] and tranquility,” writes the Stoic Seneca (I translate from the Latin/French bilingual edition of *De Beata Vita*).<sup>8</sup> Elaborating on Stoic ethics, Cicero writes that “where we are satisfied that we are in possession of some good,” the word *gaudium* (“joy”) is used “when the soul has this satisfaction rationally and in a tranquil and equable way.” “When on the other hand the soul is in a transport of meaningless extravagance, then the satisfaction can be termed *exuberant* or *excessive delight*” (*laetitia gestiens vel nimia*).<sup>9</sup> St. Augustine dresses Cicero’s distinction in Christian garb: “*verum gaudium*,” true joy, is distinguished from a drunken or otherwise sensuous *laetitia* (*Confessions* 6.6); *laetitia* can be execrable (*execranda*), but *gaudium* – found above all in reunion with God – cannot be (8.3). *Laetitia* becomes, in the principal Romance languages, *allégresse* (French), *allegrezza* (Italian), and *alegría* (Spanish). Classical Spanish recognizes a difference between *gozo* and *alegría* grounded on the Stoic distinction between *gaudium* and *laetitia*: in the entry for *gozo*, the 1611 Covarrubias Dictionary notes (in Latin) “*gaudium* is when the soul is exhilarated by something, but not to the extent that exhilaration is poured forth to the exterior, so that it should appear clearly; but *laetitia* is when the soul is moved in such a way that it is forced out to the exterior and is clearly conspicuous in the face. Thus the Stoics say that *gaudium* can befall the sage, but not *laetitia*.”<sup>10</sup>

*Alegria* and its cognates are unavailable to us in English except as a limited Italian import in John Milton’s poem “L’Allegro” and in musical direction, where *allegro* sets a lively tempo. Consequently, when the latter-day Stoic the third earl of Shaftesbury needed to distinguish between *gaudium* and *laetitia*, he did so the only way he knew how – by writing in Latin.<sup>11</sup> It is Samuel Taylor Coleridge who best supplies English equivalents for the two terms in his distinction between “joy” (for *gaudium*) and “the gladness of joy” (for *laetitia*): “I know not, I have forgotten, what the Joy is of which the Heart is full as of a deep & quiet fountain overflowing insensibly, or the gladness of Joy, when the fountain overflows ebullient.”<sup>12</sup>

In his own poetry Coleridge expressed an imaginative preference for joy over the gladness of joy, the insensible overflow to the overflow ebullient. Thus in *Dejection: An Ode*,

We in ourselves rejoice!  
And thence flows all that charms our ear or sight,  
All melodies the echoes of that voice,  
All colours a suffusion from that light.

“In ourselves” means, primarily, inward joy: that is, both the joy felt within the self and also the joy that doesn’t become “conspicuous in the face,” still

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less convulse the body in paroxysms. Coleridge intimates not only a preference for *gaudium* over *laetitia* that runs back to Stoic ethics, but also a distaste for religious “enthusiasts,” or Protestant Dissenters, particularly of the lower social orders, who claimed to feel the immediate inspiration of the Holy Spirit and often to shake, quake or thrash with the joy of this feeling. Coleridge participates in the religious and class project of distinguishing an elite from the vulgar many precisely by restraining or managing emotional possession and expression, a project that, as scholars have argued, came to the fore in the eighteenth century.<sup>13</sup> However, it suffices here to remark that the restraint or management of the passions has been a philosophical and social concern since antiquity, and not solely the product of an emergent class system in Western Europe during the Enlightenment.

## THE ROOTS OF JOY: UNION AND FULFILLMENT

The Stoics bequeathed an understanding of joy or *gaudium* as not only an inner state but also an intellectual attitude. Speaking of joy in this way may affront a vulgar understanding of joy as a mere feeling, an experience that requires little or no thought. Yet all passions – joy, sorrow, love, hatred, fear, hope, and anger feature prominently on anyone’s list – have a cognitive component. Indeed, this cognitive aspect distinguishes the passions from, on the one hand, sensations, moods and simple feelings, and, on the other, non-directed emotional states such as free-floating anxiety, chronic depression, or inexplicable exhilaration.<sup>14</sup> We may say of joy what we could say of any passion: it involves judgment and belief. Joy is distinguished by an orientation towards (that which one deems to be) a good – real or imaginary, present or approaching.

It is this cognitive aspect of joy that distinguishes it from simple *pleasure*. Joy may and typically does include pleasurable consciousness, but it is not co-extensive with it. Unlike simple pleasure – e.g., the sensation of a cool breeze on one’s heated flesh – joy, like all passions, involves at least some cognitive evaluation, some judgment or belief about what is of abiding value for us as agents and/or for the world more generally.<sup>15</sup> The pleasure of the cool breeze rises to joy only as it becomes, in Locke’s phrase, “a delight of the mind,” as it might for example if the person relieved by it associated it, consciously or unconsciously, with the wonder of nature or the benevolent design of a cosmic creator or the overall sense that one’s life (e.g., living with an easy conscience near ocean breezes) is a fulfilling one.

We don’t always or necessarily experience joy in a self-conscious manner. It makes perfect sense to attribute joy to other mammals precisely

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because the cognitive or evaluative element in passion doesn't have to be subject to conscious recognition or reflection. I sometimes think the emblem of all joy to be my dog Cookie when I come home after a long day away. She embodies all the classic attributes of joy – neck stretched and erect, sinews braced, eye sparkling – plus she has a tail to wag as well. And she is evidently responding in accordance with her beliefs about the good (to her, my renewed presence), though just as evidently these beliefs are not consciously held ones. Cookie is, in short, prone to the emotional *state* of joy, but not to joy's self-conscious emotional *experience*.<sup>16</sup> Allow me one further distinction: although joy is an occasional and evanescent mental/physical state for Cookie (as it is for humans), because she is disposed to such states, one could call her a “joyful” or “joyous” dog.<sup>17</sup>

For humans, joy is associated with evaluations and beliefs about the good that may become consciously held and articulated. And indeed, such articulations, in the realm of culture, partially shape subsequent experiences of joy. Given this crucial interaction of culture and psychology, it's important to inquire into the particular types or classes of goods with which joy is or has been explicitly associated. One tradition of moral philosophy (on which I focus in chapter 4) links joy to the exercise and contemplation of the virtues – such as justice and magnanimity – and, more generally, to the flourishing of community. Not all commentators on joy, however, have been so sanguine. Thomas Hobbes's contrary view will help us better understand the mainstream story of joy by taking us, for a moment, outside of it. Hobbes understood joy as a cognitive response to one's personal “glory” – that is, a sudden recognition of one's superiority over others (*Leviathan* [1651] 1.6, “Of the Passions”). Bernard Mandeville elaborated on Hobbes in his *Fable of the Bees* (1714–33), explaining that while a man takes joy only in what raises him above other people and secures him their praise and esteem, “the well-bred Man conceals his Joy, and utterly denies that he feels any, and by this means . . . averts that Envy and Hatred, which otherwise he would have justly to fear.”<sup>18</sup> Sometimes, however, individuals aren't “well-bred” in this enlightened manner, and the joy of personal glory does get expressed. When it does today, it's typically by men pumped up on adrenaline, and within certain limited contexts or artistic genres: sporting events (think of the bumptious dance of some football players after a touchdown), rap songs, and certain rock and roll anthems.

But typically the joy of victory is a team or collective event: the joy *manqué* of Mudville, for example, in “Mighty Casey at the Bat,” or of the arena that lights up to Queen's song, “We are the Champions (of the World).” In the

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post-Homeric cultural archive it is most often in *communal* terms that individuals rejoice, either in present good or in the assured approaching rectification of loss or evil. Communal joy in the good may reflect peace in the valley: “We rejoice in thy gifts, O Lord.” Alternatively, a crowd, community or nation may rejoice in triumph over others: “We are the Champions.” In triumphal joy some group defines its very being through real or imagined victory over another group. In the Book of Exodus, for example, collective Israel sings a first-person-singular victory song in full chorus: “Then Moses and the people of Israel sang this song to the Lord, saying, ‘I will sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously; the horse and his rider he has thrown into the sea’” (15:1). Or, rather more chillingly, in Psalm 137 a communal lament for defeat and exile segues into a fantasy of revenge:

By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down and wept,  
 When we remembered Zion . . .  
 Let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth,  
 If I do not remember you,  
 If I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy! . . .  
 O daughter of Babylon, you devastator!  
 Happy shall he be who requites you with what you have done to us!  
 Happy shall he be who takes your little ones and dashes them against the rock!

As seen here, the defeated sometimes express joy in the present or anticipated misfortune of the victorious. We now call this joy *schadenfreude*, “joy in (another’s) damage,” a German term of sixteenth-century origin.<sup>19</sup> Yet expressions of *schadenfreude* are rarely allowed to stand uncontested in Judeo-Christian culture. Thus, in counterpoint to Psalm 137 there is Proverbs 24:17: “Do not rejoice when your enemy falls, and let not your heart be glad when he stumbles.” And Paul counsels in his great sermon on love: “it does not rejoice at wrong [injustice], but rejoices in the right [truth]” (1 Corinthians 13:6).<sup>20</sup>

Whatever injustice may lurk in our own hearts, within the moral framework of Western literature those who rejoice wrongly are typically punished. In Virgil’s *Aeneid* “*mala gaudia*,” evil joys, are among the personified figures at the entrance to Hades (6.278–79). Milton’s devils are eternally abased in Hell for divorcing their own perceived good from the good of all – that is, the good of God. According to Milton, the devil’s party invents *schadenfreude*. Beëlzebub counsels his fellow devils in Hell (recent losers of a war in Heaven) to “interrupt . . . [God’s] joy / In our Confusion, and our Joy upraise / In his disturbance.”<sup>21</sup> Beëlzebub imagines God in a Hobbesian manner, as a victor rejoicing in his own glory, only because he is a fallen creature, alienated from the one common good. Ironically, he raises the banner of triumphal unity

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(“our Joy upraise”) in despite of the metaphysical unity he has aided in sundering. Sectarian joy, Milton insists, is illusory: Satan and his cohorts finally take none of their expected joy from the fall of mankind or God’s “disturbance.” What Milton sees is that all joys – in his terms, both right (theocentric) and wrong (theofugal) joys – are grounded in some perception of a power or good higher than the self. Indeed, *pace* Hobbes, individuals most often take joy not in themselves but, on the contrary, in temporarily losing themselves within some larger collective or social organism or current of life, natural or supernatural, real or imaginary.

Joy is the experience or apprehension of union or fulfillment, of desire laid at least temporarily to rest. Stories of joy begin in disunion, rupture, lack, and suffering. They climax, through some combination of striving, enduring, good luck or providence, in a (sometimes protracted) moment of (re-) union, plenitude, and harmony. Yet this resolution is not, or at least not fully, the result of individual agency. Rather, it is something in relation to which we are more or less passive, like infants or, in theistic models, children of God. The present or approaching good in which the mind most typically delights is a union or fulfillment that is not in our power to effect. It comes to us, and it tends to come as a surprise.

Joy is the surprise that sustains and completes. As Peter Beyerhaus writes, joy (temporarily) satisfies “man’s unquenchable thirst for a fuller life”: “liberation, recovery or reconciliation mean joyful restoration of life lost; enrichment, advancement or discovery give access to larger realms of life not known before.”<sup>22</sup> To illustrate joy in its ideal fullness, in which restoration of loss blends with access to more life, I turn to a passage from Henry Fielding’s *A Journey from this World to the Next* (1743). Here the narrator describes his entrance into Elysium (a larger realm of life not known before) and reunion with his dead daughter. Fielding, whose own daughter had recently died, transparently uses his art as wish fulfillment: “Good Gods! what Words can describe the Raptures, the melting passionate Tenderness, with which we kiss’d each other, continuing in our Embrace, with the most extatic Joy, a Space, which if Time had been measured here as on Earth, could not be less than half a Year.”<sup>23</sup> The fantasy of joyful reunion after death, of defeating time and impermanence through a joy tied to neither, is key but not confined to Christianity, and indeed Fielding would seem to distance himself from a Christian context by his setting in pagan Elysium.

Fielding’s durable father–daughter kiss may be compared to the embrace of lovers in Constantin Brancusi’s 1912 *The Kiss (illustration 1)*.<sup>24</sup> Brancusi’s sculpture is the visual emblem of joy in union. Its two symmetrical figures, minimally differentiated, are interlocked in a way that