

Abstract

Jonsson, AnnKatrin. *Relations: Ethics and the Modernist Subject in James Joyce's Ulysses, Virginia Woolf's The Waves, and Djuna Barnes's Nightwood*. Göteborg University, Department of English, 2003.

This study examines the representation of the relationship between subject and world and subject and other in James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922), Virginia Woolf's *The Waves* (1931), and Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood* (1936). The study begins by indicating affinities between modernist literature and strands of phenomenology, affinities that appear as a phenomenological manner of thinking in Anglo-American modernism. Like phenomenology, this thinking involved a new way of perceiving the relationship between subject and world. The study contends that the way in which certain modernist writers represent this changing relationship indicates an ethical move, as the three novels portray a subject who exists in an inescapable relation with the world. The novels thus conceive an ethical notion of subjectivity.

When arguing for an ethics within the novels, the study proceeds *from* certain concepts of phenomenology according to Edmund Husserl and Maurice Merleau-Ponty—including intentionality, horizons, and the embodied subject—to Emmanuel Levinas and Paul Ricoeur's notions of subjectivity and ethics. By indicating ways in which new conceptions of ethics are made possible within modernism, the study also shows that there are, already within modernism, both literary and philosophical texts whose understanding and representation of subjectivity express aspects of a 'postmodern ethics.'

The ethical is articulated in different ways in the three novels, but its most important articulation is found in the novels' depiction of a subject who implicates otherness through its relation with the world and the other; otherness forms an inescapable part of subjectivity. As the novels acknowledge otherness, excess, and indeterminacy, there is a rebound effect on the narrative, its structure and its style; otherness transforms the narrative itself.

The ethics of *Ulysses*, *The Waves*, and *Nightwood* thus indicates a desire to escape from a subject that contains and controls the world and the other. As this desire does not have a real aim or objective other than to escape, their ethics is one of speculation and adumbration. This way, the three novels underline the importance of imagination for ethical thought. An (imaginative) ethics is the sphere in which (poetic) imagination can work as a kind of play within conventional structures of belief. Hence, the kind of ethics that *Ulysses*, *The Waves*, and *Nightwood* describe questions and problematizes structures of belief and power that are (still) taken for granted.

Keywords: modernism, subjectivity, ethics, literature and philosophy, phenomenology, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, Djuna Barnes, Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, Levinas, Ricoeur.