

# The Possibility of Love



The Possibility of Love:  
An Interdisciplinary Analysis

By

Kathleen O'Dwyer

**CAMBRIDGE  
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P U B L I S H I N G

The Possibility of Love: An Interdisciplinary Analysis, by Kathleen O'Dwyer

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FOR MY SISTER, MARY



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# INTRODUCTION

For one human being to love another;  
that is perhaps the most difficult of all  
our tasks, the ultimate, the last test and  
proof, the work for which all other  
work is but preparation  
—Rilke, 2004: 37.

This study seeks to examine the possibility of love in human experience as a key question which forms a foundational link between the separate disciplines of philosophy, psychoanalysis and poetry. It is my contention that the question of love's possibility is an essential human question, essential in the sense that it is endemic to humanity and, therefore, endemic to any discipline concerned with the exploration of what it means to be human. In some way, and on some level, the question preoccupies the thrust and direction of the three disciplines chosen as the basis of research in this study; all three pose this question as a central and essential concern of human living, albeit that their methods and responses take different formats. According to this argument, the three disciplines are linked in their assertion that the question of love's possibility cannot be ignored even if it cannot be answered. This interconnection between the three disciplines is the focus of inquiry in the following chapters. It is explored in the literature of nine writers selected across an inter-disciplinary reading of philosophy, psychoanalysis, and poetry, and across different historical periods. The study examines how the selected writers pose, discuss and answer the question of whether the experience and communication of love is possible in inter-relational encounters, or whether such experience remains an unattainable ideal inevitably blocked and limited by personal and societal forces. An examination of this expansive question is confined to a concentration on how the concept of love has been, and continues to be, interpreted and explored in the three disciplines, and it is limited to a concentration on a small selection of writers within these areas.

This work aims at a limited and a selective reading of philosophy, psychoanalysis, and poetry, as three disciplines wherein language is the key mode of inquiry, practice, and expression; each of these disciplines is

directly and indirectly concerned with questions pertaining to concepts of truth, being, and the experience of the human condition, and each strives to approach the elusive yet essential issues of subjectivity, existence and essence, and particularly the needs and deprivations which enhance or diminish the experience of human living. The concept of love pertains inevitably to these questions, and it is argued that this concept enables a significant and insightful connection between the three disciplines. There are some common ways in which the concept of love is explored in relation to the three disciplines, and some ways that are specific to particular schools of inquiry; this commonality and difference also applies to different historical periods. A focus on key figures/writers from the three areas and from three time-frames ranging from romanticism, through modernism, to contemporary postmodernism, enables an analysis of the concept of love through diverse situations, personalities and cultural/literary/philosophical contexts. The limitation of the analysis to this time-frame, which necessarily excludes an examination of the question through periods prior to romanticism results from a determination to maintain coherence and focus in the discussion.

The question has been chosen because, it is asserted, the possibility of love is a question that lies at the deepest and most secret part of humanity. It is a question that, down through the ages and across different disciplines, has intrigued, disturbed, challenged and ultimately formed the (often unacknowledged) foundation of theoretical, creative or philosophical inquiry. It is a question that, although it defies conclusive analysis and the boundaries of discipline, is firmly rooted in any concept of what it is to be human, and therefore has never been - and can never be - ignored. It is consequently central to these three disciplines which are motivated, at least in part, by the search for an understanding and an expression of the human condition and truths thereof.

The notion of love is traditionally and conventionally associated with idealistic expressions of self-denial, object-worship, self-transcendence, and god-like characteristics. Sentimentality, cliché, and consumerist depictions of human relatedness often supersede the human reality of love, in its ambivalence, its contradictions, its failures and its diversity. Humanness, the pursuit of truth, the striving for happiness, indeed the full spectrum of lived experience, is impacted to at least some degree by the concept of love; from birth to death, across cultural and historical divides, the need/urge/instinct to love and to be loved may be discerned, at times clearly and obviously, more often hidden and disguised, in diverse manifestations of human behaviour. As a result, questions relating to the concept of love have exercised thinkers and writers across many

disciplines; attempts have been made to define and describe love, to provide theories of love, and to explain the meaning of love. However, this study seeks to ask how the selected writers respond to the question as to whether, in the light of philosophical insight, psychoanalytic observation and poetic inspiration, all of which attempt a realistic and truthful appraisal of human nature, and in the light of the contentious and disturbing facts of human history, love is possible at all.

“Is love possible?” It may be argued that this is a question which is too vague and too complex to be posed, explored or answered in any comprehensive way. Its analysis necessitates the construction of a definition of love which is comprehensive enough to embrace a broadly acceptable understanding of the concept; it also demands an explanation of the notion of possibility within the context of the question. I accept the complexities, limitations, and inconclusiveness pertaining to a theoretical inquiry into the question of love’s possibility, and thus I seek to approach a narrower and more focused aspect of such an investigation. The study places the question within a framework of historical and disciplinary boundaries, and asks how it is explored, analysed and pronounced by selected writers within this framework. Thus, definitions and conceptual explanations are limited to those which emerge from a reading of these writers. It is proposed that the central importance of the question lies, not in such analysis or exploration, but rather in the incontrovertible evidence of the centrality of the question to human experience. Great thinkers and writers have always, in various ways, represented or anticipated the great questions of their particular age or time. In the following chapters, evidence of the centrality of the question “is love possible?” will be explored through selected writers from the disciplines of philosophy, psychoanalysis and poetry. Essentially – and crucially – this is an exploration that gains its strength from the interdisciplinary nature of the exercise.

Over the centuries, the phenomenon of love has inspired and occupied philosophers, psychologists/psychoanalysts and poets, as well as students and researchers in fields of study which are outside the scope of this work. Hence, perennial questions of philosophy such as “who am I?”, “how should one live?” and “whence meaning and significance?” reflect in a direct way concepts and definitions of love. Platonic, Aristotelian and Pauline discourses on love differentiate between *eros*, *agape* and *philia*, and explore diverse manifestations of love in sexuality, friendship, and divine worship and adoration.<sup>1</sup> Subsequent philosophers analyse and

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<sup>1</sup> For an exploration of these concepts, see Alan Noble’s *Eros, Agape, and Philia*.

interpret these conceptions of love, query their boundaries, and offer traditional or revolutionary understanding and conclusion. Within philosophical discourse, religious, ethical and practical aspects of the phenomenon of love are explored, and the opposition between self-love and altruism is examined and sometimes deconstructed altogether. On this point, philosophy encounters psychoanalytic theory regarding selfhood and otherness and the complex relationship between subject and object. Psychoanalysis seeks to free the human psyche from the constrictions of deception and compulsion, and, in the words of its founder, aims to liberate man “to love and to work”.<sup>2</sup> In the clinical setting of psychoanalytical practice manifestations of mental and emotional distress are addressed with a view to their amelioration, and this is mainly achieved through an understanding of their origins. Tracing the sources of trauma or distress to the enduring influence of early childhood experience inevitably results in a portrayal of the subject’s desire for love, a desire which is replicated in the phenomenon of transference in the clinical setting. Poetry, in a manner different to other literary genres such as narrative and drama, has traditionally been seen as the creative exploration and expression of individual emotion and passion, and in lifting the veil of fixed assumptions and rational limitations, it explores and expresses the common experience of love as the nucleus of human life. The vicissitudes, losses, joys and sorrows pertaining to love are approached in a unique way through the poetic word, as it simultaneously addresses these issues intellectually, emotionally and creatively. Thus, the three disciplines share a common emphasis on the question of human love; they each contribute a unique commentary on the subject. However, it is my argument that a richer exploration of the question is enabled through a combined reading of, and an attempted dialogue between, philosophy, psychoanalysis and poetry.

The concept of love has inspired much of the literature of the three disciplines, as seen through diverse personalities and historical periods. Titles such as *The Reasons of Love*, *The Nature of Love*, *the Way of Love*, and *The Psychology of Love*, form but a miniscule reflection of the existing selection. However, this study asks if, according to the writers selected, love, as defined in myriad forms and descriptions, is actually possible within the human condition. Through a reading of selected authors of philosophy, psychoanalysis and poetry, it examines some of the obstacles to such a possibility, the impact of love on the concept of the

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<sup>2</sup> This phrase is attributed to Freud by Erik Erikson, in *Identity and the Life Cycle*, p.102.

individual subject, and ultimately the role of love in human living. It investigates how the concept of love has been explored not only through the three disciplines mentioned, but also through different historical periods. This impacts on and influences, the writers chosen for exploration and analysis.

The philosophical contribution centres on Friedrich Nietzsche, whose deconstructive assault on fixed forms of being rejected the separation of philosophy from lived experience, and who suggested an inescapable relationship between thought and feeling, mind and body, and philosophy and psychology; Martin Buber as a philosopher concerned with authenticity and love in human relations, with a particular emphasis on the concrete events and encounters of lived experience, and in particular the complexities and ambivalence pertaining to the encounter between self and other; and Paul Ricoeur as a contemporary philosopher concentrated on a hermeneutical approach to subjectivity, personhood, and the interpretation of human action and motivation, especially as this enables an investigation of the interrelatedness of self and other. Psychoanalytic literature focuses on Sigmund Freud as the founder and instigator of the discipline, Jacques Lacan as both an interpreter of Freud and an influential innovator of new developments in psychoanalysis, and Slavoj Žižek as a commentator and thinker in the postmodern world of psychoanalysis, and the most prominent psychoanalytic writer of the contemporary time. The selection of poetry starts with William Wordsworth as a prime figure in the development of romanticism, with its rejection of the one-sided concentration on rationalism characteristic of the metaphysical poets, and an embrace of emotion as a worthy contributor to truth; the poetry of T.S. Eliot provides an exposé of modernity and its disillusionments; and the work of Brendan Kennelly enables an examination of the global experience of postmodernism. An assertion of Kennelly's articulation of the self between local and global particularities is proposed here, but it is offered in acknowledgement of the fact that the verdict on his contribution awaits historical hindsight. The three poets have been chosen as representative of their literary eras. All nine writers provide exploration, analysis and commentary on the concept of love; each will be examined from their own perspective and from the perspective of their particular historical framework.

Definitions of love abound in myriad forms, sexual, spiritual, parental, brotherly, divine, and many more; terms such as romantic, neighbourly, reciprocal, selfish, altruistic and ethical, variously prefix the concept and appear to suggest a vital difference in their diverse descriptions. It is not my intention to outline the manifold interpretations of the experience of

love, nor is it suggested that the meaning of love is reducible to theoretic abstraction, definition or signification. The study refers to inter-personal love in the broadest sense, and does not seek to extrapolate different kinds of love from each other as it is considered that they intermingle in thought and experience. Above all, love is a subjective experience, its communication is essentially personal, and thus it resists easy generalisations and proclamations; this study is undertaken in acknowledgement of the ambiguities and restrictions necessarily ensuing from this reality, and it modestly attempts, through the selected readings, to explore glimpses of an experience which is somehow universally known while also universally disputed: “This is a reality that each one of us knows all too well, even from our own meagre experience of what it means to really love” (Hederman, 2000: 105). Love is something more than the sum of its expressions and the variety of its manifestations, and it is not within the scope of this work to transcend the incommensurable nature of the concept. The subjective nature of love’s experience and the difficulties inherent in its articulation and signification is acknowledged here, and thus recourse to language and theory as media of exploration is inevitably limited and incomplete. The focus on the “possibility” of love rather than on the “existence” of love is justified within this argument; the existence of love cannot be measured or validated objectively because it is a metaphysical entity. Consequently, the study is limited to an exploration of the insights of selected thinkers as an avenue towards highlighting at least some of the conditions of the *possibility* of love.

The study is structured in three sections, each dealing with a particular discipline across three historical periods. Section 1 examines, in three separate chapters, the works of Nietzsche, Buber, and Ricoeur as they relate to the thesis question. Chapter One explores a reading of Nietzsche’s work concentrated on the following texts: *Beyond Good and Evil*, *Human, All Too Human*, *Will to Power*, *The Genealogy of Morality*, and *Zarathustra*. Within these texts, Nietzsche’s arguments relating to the misinterpretation of morality and the corresponding distorted view of human nature are explored with the view to ascertaining how these deceptions and duplicities impact on the experience of love and pose obstacles and distortions to its communication. The possibility of love is explored through a reading of the proclamations articulated in *Zarathustra*, and particularly through an analysis of Nietzsche’s doctrines of eternal recurrence and *amor fati*. Chapter Two outlines Buber’s vision of love and the obstacles to its experience through a reading of his works, *I and Thou*, *The Way of Man*, and *Between Man and Man*, as well as through the recorded memoirs of some of his contemporaries. Topics explored through



a reading of these texts include the alluring attraction of crowd membership as an escape from personal responsibility, the practice of monologue as a substitute for dialogue within relationships, and the resulting alienation from the self which negates the communication of love between subjects or selves. The possibility of love, as interpreted through Buber's work, focuses on the concrete, experiential character of love's experience, and on the practical responsibilities incurred in the encounter between I and Thou. Chapter Three examines a selection of Ricoeur's work which reflects his thoughts on the fragmented nature of subjectivity, the narrowing and distorting restrictions on vision and understanding, and the fragility of identity; these are some of the obstacles to the possibility of love which are explored in his work, particularly in the aptly titled texts such as *Fallible Man*, *Oneself as Another*, and *The Course of Recognition*. Ricoeur's acknowledgement of fallibility and evil in human nature is explored in conjunction with his belief and hope in the possibility of solicitude as an avenue to love of self and others.

Section 2 concentrates on the work of three psychoanalytic writers and the insights into love's possibility which may be gleaned therein. Chapter Four introduces the work of Freud as the originary expression of psychoanalysis. Freud's seminal work, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, is explored, while a selection of Freudian texts is read within collected volumes of his work, such as those edited by Adam Phillips and Peter Gay; these texts are supplemented by a reading of a selection of his private letters. Freud's "discovery" of the unconscious, and his elaboration of its impact on human behaviour and motivation, his observation and description of the many manifestations of psychic conflict, and his theory of repression as a universal human phenomenon, are outlined as they relate to the possibility of love. Freud's exposition of the conflict between the happiness of the individual and the constraints of civilization, as outlined in his work *Civilization and its Discontents*, is considered in the light of the central question of this work, and his unique and often unflattering appraisal of human nature is juxtaposed with his description of the possibility of an art of living based on love. In Chapter Five, the theories and insights of psychoanalysis are further explored through the seminars and *Écrits* (a compilation of selected publications) of the French psychoanalyst, Lacan. Lacan's pronouncements on the paradox of language, the wall of language, and the law of language, suggesting the inescapable alienation and isolation of the human subject constrained by the impossibility of full or complete expression of human existence, are explored. Lacan's vision of the subject and of the human condition, and his cynical and controversial observations of human nature are outlined as

possible responses to the question of love's possibility. His assertion of the potential of psychoanalysis to liberate the subject from constraints and denials, and his call for an acknowledgement of the truth of human desire as a prerequisite to the experience of love are examined and discussed. Chapter Six explores a selected reading of the contemporary theorist, Žižek, and concentrates on aspects of his work which are pertinent to the question under inquiry. Texts chosen from his prolific *oeuvre* include characteristically titled works such as *Enjoy Your Symptom!*, *The Plague of Fantasies*, and *The Neighbour*, as well as a selection of articles and essays. Žižek's affirmation of the emergence of the new big Other, an introjected and almost involuntary acquiescence to unspoken laws, rituals and behaviours, especially as they relate to the relationships between human beings, is explored as a barrier to authentic communication, and so to love. His paradoxical response to the dictum of neighbourly love is examined, and his insistence on the unknowable and ungraspable nature of the other is explored as it appears to discount the possibility of love. His demand for truth, for traversing the fantasy, leaves the question open, and his work is increasingly seen to focus on the concept of love in its diverse manifestations.

Section 3 departs from the concentration on theory and introduces a poetic exploration of the topic. Chapter Seven begins with an examination of the work of Wordsworth and his instigation of the principles of literary romanticism. His *Collected Works* is used for reference with a particular focus on his major poems such as "The Prelude", "The Immortality Ode", "Tintern Abbey", and a selection from the shorter poems. This selection is supplemented with his "Preface to the Lyrical Ballads" and with letters and essays of relevance to the topic. Wordsworth's arguments against an over-reliance on rationalism, science and logic, to the exclusion of emotion and imagination, are outlined as an elucidation of some of the obstacles to love. His portrayal of the human experience of inevitable loss and change is explored, particularly in the light of Freud's interpretation of mourning and melancholia as basic reactions to such vicissitudes. The autobiographical nature of "The Prelude" provides a poetic exposition of the relationship between solitude and attachment, self and other, past and present, and these concepts enable a commentary on the possibility of love. Chapter Eight concentrates on the poetry of Eliot as a body of work which reflects many of the characteristics of modernity while also providing a uniquely individual portrayal of the modern subject. His collected works are explored with a special emphasis on "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock", "The Waste Land", and "Four Quartets". Eliot's essays are also examined for the elucidation which they provide in

formulating the impetus and motivation of the poet's work. Eliot's portrayal of the modern subject as essentially fragmented, and often split between private and public realities, is analyzed as a commentary on the subject's frequent failure to express his/her needs and desires, and hence as a contributing factor to the failure of love. The failure of language to communicate the innermost depths of human being is explored and linked with the ideas of Buber and Lacan relating to language as a barrier to intersubjectivity and hence to love. The barriers erected and maintained between separate individuals are mirrored in the denial and disavowal of certain aspects of the self as portrayed in Eliot's vision. This loss of self is considered in its impact on the possibility of love, of self and of others. An exploration of the poetry of Kennelly in Chapter Nine expands the realm of the study to the experience of postmodernism, and therefore suggests comparison with the theories of Ricoeur and of Žižek. Indeed, this final chapter, in its discussion of the essential interplay between past and present, in its outline of the postmodern phenomenon of relativism and the loss of traditional meaning and authority, provides a poetic resonance with the thoughts of the writers explored in previous chapters. Kennelly's collected works are the focus of this chapter, with a broad selection across a wide chronological spectrum. This reading is supplemented by an examination of Kennelly's latest publication, *Now*, as well as recorded and published interviews. This section closes with an investigation of Kennelly's persistence and optimism in spite of the vicissitudes, happenchance and unpredictability of human being, and his eloquent celebration of life in all its messiness and elusiveness provides a chorus to the Nietzschean exhortation of *amor fati* of the first chapter.

The reading and the exploration of primary texts is illuminated by a broad contribution from secondary sources, and an attempt is made to draw from these texts a selection balanced between diverse views. While the chosen disciplines, and the individual writers selected therein, are outlined and explored in separate sections and separate chapters, the study attempts a dialogue between these independent and separate realms of thought. Agreement, disagreement, links and divergences are noted and explored. These are highlighted and discussed in the conclusion of the work, which provides an overview of the questions, insights and possible answers resulting from the research.



**SECTION I:**  
**PHILOSOPHY**



# CHAPTER ONE

## FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE

The discipline of philosophy is rooted in its Latin translation, “love of wisdom”. The vagueness and ambiguity of this term allows for diverse concentrations in different areas of philosophy, including philosophy of mind, philosophy of language, phenomenology, metaphysics, ethics, and the history of philosophy, to name but a few. Yet the question inevitably arises: what is the wisdom which is loved, and what is its relation to lived experience as distinct from theoretical abstractions? In the words of Martha Nussbaum, this question asks ‘what philosophy has to do with the world’ (Nussbaum, 1994: 3). The question poses others, such as, what is the function, reason, and significance of philosophy in the realm of human life, and how do the insights and explorations of this discipline reflect, interpret, and enhance the experience of the human condition? A concentration on this question is the focus of the philosophical exploration in this study, and in particular, the philosophical reflections on the concept of love as central to human experience.

In this section, the philosophical reflections of Nietzsche, Buber, and Ricoeur, on the obstacles and barriers to the possibility of love are explored. While the philosophies of Buber and Ricoeur are particularly grounded in an emphasis on relationship as a central and pervading concept in the experience of human living, personal, communal, and political, the choice of Nietzsche, as a philosopher who contributes in a unique way to the discussion of love, is not so immediately validated. It is argued that Nietzsche’s philosophy, while dealing in a more obvious way with issues such as ‘truth’, perspectivism, and ‘will to power’, is no less concerned with the Platonic and Aristotelian explorations of ‘the good’, ‘practical wisdom’, and ‘the meaning of love’. Underlying Nietzsche’s reflections on morality, philosophy, history, and truth, is a persistent concern with the possibilities and hindrances to optimum human living or flourishing, personal integrity, solitude and connection, happiness and sorrow, and the full spectrum of experience which promotes or diminishes the possibility of love; love of self and of others, manifested in a love of life in all its ambivalence and mystery. Nietzsche sees the enjoyment of

life, the inevitable corollary of *amor fati*, or love of one's fate/life, as the most crucial purpose of human living:<sup>1</sup> "As long as men have existed, man has enjoyed himself too little...if we learn better to enjoy ourselves, we best unlearn how to do harm to others and to contrive harm" (Nietzsche, 2003a: 112), and he argues for a truthfulness and a comprehensiveness which would enhance rather than diminish life: "And let that day be lost to us on which we did not dance once! And let that wisdom be false to us that brought no laughter with it!" (Nietzsche, 2003a: 228). Nietzsche's reflections on enjoyment, laughter and celebration of life ("dance"), and his assertion that these experiences are closer to the truth of who we are than experiences based on "false wisdom", suggest the following possibility: the human subject, in every conceivable situation, behaviour and experience, is ultimately striving for joy. This joy is signified diversely as "happiness", "well-being", "feeling good and worthwhile", "having one's needs met", "loving and being loved", and the myriad expressions of what underlines human desire.

Nietzsche's writings, in both style and content, provide an unconventional analysis of the individual subject through a revolutionary appraisal of philosophy, humankind, morality and truth. In rejecting hitherto unquestioned assumptions regarding the human condition, Nietzsche overturns some of our most precious depictions of ourselves and our world. As a radical and revolutionary thinker confronting uncomfortable questions regarding philosophy, psychology, and a host of traditionally held convictions relating to human nature, Nietzsche continues to resound, either in agreement or debate, with all the writers explored in the following chapters. In particular, Nietzsche's writings, through revolutionising our assumptions regarding self and others, morals and values, rationality and instinct, provoke debate and reflection on the actual experience of the human condition, and this inevitably involves an analysis of the concept of love as a central element of human living.

Throughout his work, Nietzsche is critical of the narrowness and deceptions which he sees as characteristic of philosophy throughout history, but especially in his own time. He accuses philosophers of basing their convictions on a biased and distorted view of the human subject, an

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<sup>1</sup> Slavoj Žižek and other contemporary theorists, offer an ironic version of this idea whereby the injunction to enjoy is exposed as a societal command, an imposition of the superego, and therefore a constraining limitation on the individual; perhaps the dilemma lies in the variously possible interpretations of the concept of enjoyment, ranging from the struggle pertaining to the 'performance' or 'appearance' of enjoyment to a personal and often private experience of joy which is independent of public validation.



assumption of absolutism and certainty in questions of truth and meaning, and an aversion to self-analysis and self-interrogation. He refers to this as “the struggle of belief in opinions, that is, the struggle of convictions” (Nietzsche, 1984: 262), and explains that “conviction is the belief that in some point of knowledge one possesses absolute truth” (Nietzsche, 1984: 261). In contrast, many of Nietzsche’s proclamations evoke shock and disbelief, as they blatantly overturn long-held assumptions regarding the human being and the human condition; his philosophy denies the validity of revered concepts of truth, being, will to life, and cause and effect; he rejects conventional interpretations of values such as responsibility, guilt, power and knowledge. The impact of the shock emanating from his thought is intensified by his aphoristic style and unapologetic mode of address. The style and language adopted by Nietzsche is radically different from that of his predecessors, and often reflects his claim that “truth tends to reveal its highest wisdom in the guise of simplicity” (Nietzsche, 1984: 253).

Nietzsche rejects what he perceives as the dogmatism and arrogance of previous philosophers, which, according to his argument, often disguised dishonesty, an ostensible objectivity that is in fact highly subjective. This is the view of Maudmarie Clark: “What Nietzsche objects to in previous philosophers is not that they read their values into the world, but that they pretended to be doing something else” (Clark, 1990: 240). Nietzsche’s philosophy is not proffered as a prescription or a roadmap for mankind; he constantly asserts that his thoughts are merely *his* thoughts, *his* interpretations, and *his* truths. He explains that he “came to [his] truth by diverse paths and diverse ways”, he insists that “this – is now *my* way”, and asks “where is yours?...for *the* way – does not exist!” (Nietzsche: 2003a: 213). The most important questions in life can never be answered by anyone except oneself. This is an assertion which he applies to all philosophy, and it is an individual perspective which is adopted variously by all the writers explored in this study: “It has gradually become clear to me what every great philosophy has hitherto been; a confession on the part of its author and a kind of involuntary memoir” (Nietzsche, 2003: 37). Furthermore, Nietzsche acknowledges the co-existence of concealment and revelation in such confessions: “Every philosophy also *conceals* a philosophy; every opinion is also a hiding-place, every word is also a mask” (Nietzsche, 2003: 216). He looks forward to the philosophers of the future who will embrace these sentiments: “these coming philosophers...will not be dogmatists...[but will assert that] my judgement is [only] *my* judgement” (Nietzsche, 2003: 71). Walter Kaufmann suggests that Nietzsche embodies the characteristics of “these coming philosophers”

and that his “greatest value may well lie in the fact that he embodied the true philosophical spirit of ‘searching into myself and other men’” (Kaufmann, 1974: xvi). Robert Solomon, in his existential reading of Nietzsche, concurs with this evaluation as he claims that “he is not a philosopher of abstract ideas but rather of the dazzling personal insight, the provocative comment” (Solomon, 2003: 13). Nietzsche bases his reflections, discoveries, and proclamations on actual lived experience as he perceives it, and there is an underlying awareness that his writings, in fact all literature, is secondary to individual experience in the pursuit of personal truth, as he asks: “What *I* find, what *I* am seeking – Was that ever in a book?” (Nietzsche, 1984: 268). His emphasis on actual, concrete experience of human living renders Nietzsche’s philosophy vital for this study, as it is a focus often absent from the work of other philosophers, and it is fundamental in an exploration of the concept of love.<sup>2</sup>

### Misinterpretation of Morality

The beast in us wants to be lied to;  
morality is a white lie, to keep it from  
tearing us apart (Nietzsche, 1984: 45).

The possibility of love is a question approached directly and indirectly in Nietzsche’s work as he addresses the obstacles and deceptions which militate against love of self, of others, and of life. A major impediment to the experience of love is, according to his argument, the misinterpretation of morality involving an unquestioned acceptance of a range of values and morals which suppress and distort personal truth, motivation and desire. In what is considered his most controversial work, *The Genealogy of Morality*, Nietzsche provides a critique of morality, values and philosophy. In calling for a re-evaluation of all morals, Nietzsche brings into question common assumptions regarding accepted values and moral virtues which have been extolled and encouraged as being inherent to human nature, and which have served to portray an image of humanity which is basically good, well-meaning, and other-centred. Virtues such as altruism, generosity, sympathy, and compassion, have historically been seen as the best expressions of human nature, and are encapsulated in the Christian

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<sup>2</sup> Concentration on actual lived experience as distinct from abstract theorization is also deemed essential by Buber and Ricoeur, and is a pervading characteristic of all the writers explored in this study; a willingness to look honestly at personal experience is a courage and humility shared by these writers, and their insights are ultimately based on this attempted appraisal of introspection and interrogation.

dictum to love one's neighbour as oneself.<sup>3</sup> Nietzsche rejects the assumption that these virtues are inherent to human nature, that they are natural to humankind, and he disputes any absolutist conception of these virtues. Rather, he argues that "values" and codes of morality are "in a continual state of fluctuation" (Nietzsche, 1984: 53), and he seeks to expose the cultural and historical relativity of our values, crucially our moral values, "the utility which dominates moral value-judgements" (Nietzsche, 2003: 122); in so doing he casts a particularly critical and sceptical eye on Christian sources of morality. The deleterious effect of unrealistic codes of morality results, according to Nietzsche, in a diminishment of human experience and a distorted appraisal of the human subject: "All these moralities...[are] recipes to counter his passions" (Nietzsche, 2003: 119). This is particularly evident in the concept of love: "Christianity gave Eros poison to drink – and he did not die of it, to be sure, but degenerated into vice" (Nietzsche, 2003: 105).<sup>4</sup> The poet, D.H. Laurence, describes this as "the mess of love": "We've made a great mess of love, / Since we made an ideal of it" (Laurence, 2002: 387). According to Nietzsche's argument, many assumptions, norms and practices that are accepted as inevitable and unavoidable in fact have a contingent, utilitarian and relativist character. It could be argued that the importance of modern literary theory lies in its unveiling of values that appear natural and self-evident as contrived and created, whether relating to language, identity, otherness, morality or sexuality. In this way Nietzsche can be seen as precursor to this mode of thinking, and this creates a strong link between his work and that of the theorists discussed later in the study.

Nietzsche's genealogy of morals suggests that all moral values, rather than being natural and inherent to human existence, actually serve the interests of influential groups or institutions. Morality is, in this analysis, a body of rules which has come down through centuries, appropriated by a religion or a culture, and uncritically received and accepted. Nietzsche maintains that moralities are essentially instruments of social control, usually related to the establishment or preservation of the interests of one group or another. " 'Value' is essentially the standpoint for the increase or decrease of...dominating centres" (Nietzsche, 1968: 715). This critique of "dominating centres" is expanded in the deconstruction of Western

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<sup>3</sup> This dictum of universal love is debated in diverse ways by many of the writers explored below, i.e., Freud, Lacan and Žižek.

<sup>4</sup> The distortion and perversion of love through a religious pronouncement on the superiority of divine love and the denigration of human love is a theme explored in Kennelly's poetry, while Eliot's work progressively turns to divine love as the ideal.

metaphysics undertaken by the French philosopher, Jacques Derrida. Like Nietzsche, Derrida argues that centres or hegemonies validate themselves by making their situation at the centre seem natural and fixed, and by perpetuating the illusion of binary oppositions such as male/female, nature/culture, and mind/body. He suggests that it is necessary to consider “that the centre had no natural site, that it was not a fixed locus but a function”, and he looks to “the Nietzschean critique of metaphysics, the critique of the concepts of being and truth...and the Freudian critique of self-presence, that is, the critique of consciousness” in outlining his attempt to deconstruct these “centres” (Derrida, 1981: 280).

Nietzsche’s attack on morality centres on its commitment to untenable claims about human nature, and on what he sees as the deleterious impact which these claims have had on the flourishing of life; deception, resentment, and guilt ensue: “how dearly the erection of every ideal on earth has exacted its payment? How much reality always had to be labelled and mistaken, how much lying sanctified, how much conscience disturbed?” (Nietzsche, 1998: 65). Nietzsche promotes his argument by insisting on a re-examination of the origins of these values, and thereby he seeks to expose their historical and utilitarian character. Thus, his attack is not centred primarily on the nature of the values and morals which are accepted unquestionably as “good” and “true”; he insists on the necessity of examining the origins of these values as a route to understanding their historical and cultural sources. According to Solomon, “Nietzsche’s genealogy of morals is, first of all, a thesis about the motivation of morality” (Solomon, 2003: 54). Nietzsche argues that the true nature of morality can only be approached if one analyses and acknowledges the sources and purposes of moral teaching, and hence he calls for a more honest, a more factual appraisal of human nature. He insists that moral values do not exist in themselves; they are not absolute or transcendent, and they can be modified according to changing situations and circumstances: “Unchanging good and evil does not exist!” (Nietzsche, 2003a: 139). This appraisal would relinquish the possibility of fixed absolutes, in relation to truth, goodness, or the human being. As Richard Kearney states: “Nietzsche’s project of transvaluation effected not only the moral question of good but also the epistemological question of truth. The age-old quest for absolute truth is now exposed as a hidden will to power” (Kearney, 1998: 212).

Nietzsche’s question regarding our values of good and evil is, “have they inhibited or furthered human flourishing up until now? Are they are a sign of distress, of impoverishment, of the degeneration of life?” (Nietzsche, 1998: 3). Only by recognising the pragmatic nature of all

morals, and by acknowledging the premise and the purpose of all ethical rules and judgements, can we, according to Nietzsche, attempt to come to terms with the multi-faceted character of life as we experience it. Such honesty, involving the abandonment of established “ideals” which act as a barrier to instinct, passion, and an appreciation of human nature as it is, inevitably results in a transitional period of nihilism, an uneasiness portrayed in the literature of the age;<sup>5</sup> but, it is, according to Nietzsche, prerequisite to overcoming the resentment inherent in a slave morality, whereby individual responsibility is sacrificed for the illusions of certainty and truth, social and personal guidelines, and a fixed script of rules and expectations.<sup>6</sup> These assumptions and limitations alienate the subject from individual truth and expression: “The first opinion that occurs to us when we are suddenly asked about a matter is usually not our own, but only the customary one, appropriate to our caste, position, or parentage; our own opinions seldom swim near the surface” (Nietzsche, 1984: 245).

Nietzsche disputes any inherent or consistent meaning pertaining to the concepts of good and evil, and suggests that such signifiers are conditioned by historical and cultural fluctuations. On this point, Alexander Nehamas, in his interpretation of Nietzsche’s philosophy in *Nietzsche: Life as Literature*, draws a comparison between the thought of Nietzsche and that of Socrates: “Nietzsche argues in a manner very close to the manner of Socrates that what we commonly consider good depends essentially on the context that we implicitly introduce into our evaluation, and that it is not therefore good in itself” (Nehamas, 1985: 212). In his analysis of the history of philosophy, Nietzsche suggests an absence of honesty in relation to these matters: “The errors of the great philosophers usually start from a false explanation of certain human actions and feelings....an erroneous analysis of so-called selfless behaviour, for example, can be the basis for false ethics” (Nietzsche, 1984: 41). Solomon argues that Nietzsche’s criticism of philosophy is based on the tendency of philosophers to “ignore the concrete social and psychological situations out of which ideas, ideologies, and whole philosophies are born” (Solomon, 2000: 45).

Nietzsche challenges the foundations of traditional thought; he calls for

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<sup>5</sup> The sense of disillusionment, alienation and hopelessness which characterizes much of the literature of modernism is characteristic of Nietzsche’s analysis of nihilism, and it is particularly captured in the poetry of Eliot.

<sup>6</sup> The abdication of personal responsibility and the embrace of “collective” and popular assumptions of authority and truth is also seen by Buber as an impediment to genuine relationship. Directly and indirectly, all the writers explored in this study concur with this analysis.

a questioning of everything, especially the concepts through which we have viewed the world and ourselves without seeing their underlying assumptions and deceptions. He demands that we reconsider what we have taken for granted, and that we consider afresh what a good human life consists of, by putting our usual assumptions about the world into brackets. Nehamas, in his discussion of Nietzsche's *Genealogy of Morals*, states that "Nietzsche's opposition to traditional histories of morality and his sometimes extravagant claims for the novelty and importance of his own approach are primarily caused by his aversion to this linear or static conception of the nature of values and institutions" (Nehamas, 1985: 112). The Italian poet, Antonio Porchia concurs with this critique of the narrowness of linear thinking and vision: "Following straight lines shortens distances, and also life" (Porchia, 2003: 43), while William Blake notes what is sacrificed in the attempted "improvement" of human nature: "Improvement makes strait roads; but the crooked roads / without improvement are roads of Genius" (Blake, 2004: 139). In probing the inconsistencies and deceptions which form the background of much of our convictions about ourselves and our world, Nietzsche, like Freud, calls into question our illusions of self-knowledge and self-awareness: "We remain of necessity strangers to ourselves, we do not understand ourselves, we must mistake ourselves, for us the maxim reads to all eternity; 'each is furthest from himself'- with respect to ourselves we are not 'knowers'" (Nietzsche, 1998: 1), and he suggests that self-deception is sometimes chosen, either consciously or unconsciously: "Where my honesty ceases I am blind and want to be blind" (Nietzsche, 2003a: 264).

Freud later reiterates this assertion that we can never fully know ourselves, particularly in the light of his description of the unconscious as a part of mental life over which we have little or no control, and which can be aptly described as a stranger in the house, suggesting its inaccessibility and alienation from rational thinking. Thus Nietzsche claims that "Man is difficult to discover, most of all to himself" (Nietzsche, 2003a: 212). The impossibility of complete self-transparency may be difficult to acknowledge, and this difficulty is also an obstacle to the acceptance of the alterity of the other as something which can never be fully penetrated; the state of "unknowing" discomfits the demands and expectations of human pride and propels an insistent desire to "know" and so to evaluate that which cannot be known. Derrida looks to Nietzsche's analysis of this dilemma as part of his exploration of love and friendship, and he concludes that love and friendship involve an acceptance of distance and "unknowing": "Whereby those who are separated come together without ceasing to be what they are destined to be...dissociated, 'solitarized',