

PRIMORDIAL SACRIFICE,
TYPOLOGY AND THE
THEOLOGICAL VOCATION OF
LITERATURE: EXTENDING
GIAN BALSAMO'S
INTERPRETATION OF JOYCE
AND CHRISTIAN EPIC

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Abstract

Extending the new contribution to the Joyce scholarship offered by Gian Balsamo, this essay develops a typological perspective upon literature as a ritualistic repetition of primordial sacrifice. It traces this function of literature from Dante through the Christian epic to Joyce. Poetry, viewed in this perspective, envisions and expresses what makes a culture possible as a whole and from its deepest roots. Such theologically laden types as sacrifice and eucharistic celebration reveal western culture in its development from both Greek and Hebrew antiquity to its ultramodern apotheosis in Joyce as one ongoing negotiation with itself. Culture is a continual reworking and revisioning of traditional types that run from the beginning to the end of the history—and back again—becoming the overarching metaphors that connect everything in the universe of human experience together.

THE FIGURATIVE powers that pre-dispose poetic language to perform the work of revelation in a sense akin to and even indiscernible from religious revelation are evinced with particular force in the operation of literary and theological types and in the compositional and exegetical methods of typology. Under various names, the type is one of the most classical topics in figurative rhetoric. The recognisability of characters and events as typical—as based on and repeating, as well as establishing precedents—is fundamental to literary and symbolic significance, in general. More specifically, typology has been indispensable to biblical interpretation since ancient times and has parallels

in the methods used for interpreting Homer and other poets in pagan antiquity. Even more primordially, typology is inextricably bound up with the repetitions of religious rite and specifically sacrifice. For the type is inherently a form of repetition, and sacrifice is an archetypal origin that is typically repeated.

Typology has taken on a new life in contemporary literary criticism and particularly in a very recent criticism of James Joyce. Gian Balsamo is currently applying an innovatively typological method, inspired by biblical typology, in a penetrating reading of Joyce and Christian epic.¹ Balsamo shows how primordial sacrifice is repeated by literary representations or types that re-invent and fulfil the primitive motifs that they subsume. This enables us to see literature as fulfilling a unitary purpose from ancient Greek tragedy through the Christian epic to Joyce and the novel: literature, in all these guises, has been discovered as being deeply liturgical in nature and as responding to a theological vocation. Viewed typologically, literature gives an original access to direct, especially sensuous experience of the divine; it even reveals this experience as the origin of human society and consciousness. These are, in fact, perennial ideas concerning the mission and function of poetry that can be traced all the way back to Orphic sources, in which Orpheus is designated as the instigator of the sacrificial rites of Bacchus,² but they are now being worked out with critical acumen in a perspective that can help us discern a new horizon for the experience of literature and religion. I will elicit from this work on typology aspects that bear particularly on injunctive repetition as a means of theological revelation.

Balsamo's work on scriptural poetics and James Joyce, conducts poetry back to its originally theological inspiration by showing how the experience of literature today, that is, in the day of James Joyce, is really not to be understood fully except in terms of the experience of liturgy, and that means an experience of primordial sacrifice. This clears a vista for over-viewing the purport of poetry quite generally that extends beyond our customary field of vision, opening a wider panorama in which poetic literature can be seen as responsive to a theological vocation. In former ages, poets made claims to theological inspiration with great frequency; but such claims seem to many to have become virtually unintelligible today. It is striking, then, that out of the midst of the modernist writing of Joyce, Balsamo evokes primordial types or archetypes for envisioning literature—the very existence and inexhaustible concreteness of literature—as theological in its deepest motivations.

In Joyce's works, it becomes fully clear that the literary, at the level of seriousness represented by Christian epics, operates fundamentally as a religious rite. This emerges clearly, moreover, as having been at stake in the Christian epic all along. Joyce and the Christian epic tradition taken together show how literature can be understood as the actualisation of religious ritual

and authentic religious rite as the re-actualisation of sacrifice that is not just recollected but actually lived. Balsamo contrasts this ritual function enacted in literature with the eucharistic rituals of official religious institutions that make the sacrifice of Christ, at least as a sensuous experience, over and done with—and therefore not something that is actualised in the worshipper's or reader's experience here and now.

According to Balsamo, the enactment of the sacrifice in literature, specifically in Christian epic literature, preserves the deeper sense and promulgates the disclosure of truth inherent in sacrifice, whereas its conservation in the cult of institutionalised religion systematically distorts and destroys the sense of sacrifice. The truth of religion in this way turns out to be grasped best, and perhaps only, in literature. Just this truth would have been betrayed, ironically, by the institutions deliberately designed for its preservation and transmission.³ For the Greeks, Balsamo maintains, sacrifice (*thysia*) was fully participated in by each individual in their ownmost experience. It was not just decreed dogmatically as a fact and publically acknowledged by the community. Balsamo argues that this possibility of actualisation was lost in the ecclesiastical institution of the Eucharist as sacrificial meal in which there is no longer any direct, sensual experience of blood sacrifice. Precisely the direct witness of blood is explicitly denied by the Thomistic theology of the Eucharist. Consequently, the identification of the bread and wine with the body and blood of Christ would remain only as invisible and therefore as a purely metaphysical postulate.⁴ In contrast, the actualisation of sacrifice in all its sensuous immediacy was preserved in epic literature by virtue of this genre's characteristically vivid and dramatic imagery (direct and imagined sensation being collapsed together as a continuum in this outlook).

Primordial sacrifice is re-actualised by Joyce with a vengeance in the total eucharistic rituals of both his major works. This entails a profaning of the Eucharist that is palpable in a line like 'God becomes man becomes fish becomes barnacle goose becomes feathered mountain'.⁵ But it also entails a releasing of the Eucharist from the confines of abstract sanctity into full engagement with actual life. In his fully eucharistic vision of the self-offering of the word in literature, Joyce assumes the biblical paradigm of the self-sacrificed Word as celebrated in the Catholic rite, but he also interprets and often reverses its connotations, suggesting what is really true and alive in it for readers still today. The result is a creative understanding of sacrifice as self-offering that binds the Christian epic together in a coherent tradition from the Bible through Joyce.

Sacrifice, alluded to in Buck Mulligan's shaving blade and the communal meal already in the opening pages of *Ulysses*, constitutes an overarching motif of the whole book. Its epic sequel, the *Häike*, similarly announces itself as a religious ritual in literature right from its title.⁶ Specifically the motif of the

Eucharist as a sacrificial sharing out of the ultimate revelation of the word broken and dismembered in the absolute sacrifice, which is self-sacrifice, emerges as coterminal with Joyce's epic *oeuvre* as a whole. On this basis, Joyce's literary creation can be understood as repeating the liturgical celebration of the Eucharist. The sacrificial death on the Cross issues in life, the resurrected life. Indeed, Crucifixion and Resurrection are run together by Joyce in a typological condensation throughout his epic novels. They are conflated, for example, in the following scene that starts off as a re-enactment of the Last Supper just after closing in a Dublin pub. The disciples are represented pre-eminently by the four gospel writers in the guise of judges who drive four nails into the condemned victim. Laying the cloth, to the fore of them, in addition to indicating the preparation of the table, suggests that the four of them are also ecclesiastics using the 'cloth' as a facade. Their very names are prone to repetitiveness as they work in chorus ('in core') in creating the core of a sacrificial liturgy.

Laying the cloth, to the fore of them. And thanking the fish, in core of them. To pass the grace for Gard sake! Almoohn. Mr. Justician Mathews and Mr. Justician Marks and Mr. Justician Luk de Luc and Mr. Justician Johnson-Johnson. And the askart, see, behind! Help, help, hurray! Allsup, allsup! Four ghooks to nail 'em it down mates, look slippy! They've got a dabble with a swimmingpull. Dang! Ding! Dunge! Dinnin. Isn't it great he is swaying above us for his good an' dour. Fly your balloons, dummies, and demisses! He's doorknobs dead! And Annie Delep is free. Ones more. We could ate you, par Bucces, and imhabe through you, reassurance in the wild lac of godhiness. One fledge, one brood till hahn culms everdyburdy. Hah the thronam! Hah the traitor. Hah the truth. (THT, 377-29-378.6)

Rather than the blessing of bread, thanksgiving for and even to the sacrificial victim here becomes 'thanking the fish', the fish being a symbol of Christ who is sacrificed in the Eucharist. (This symbol, of course, is based on the Greek word for fish, *IXTHOUS*, used by ancient Christians as an acronym for Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior, *Iesus Xristos Theou (Ihus Salator)*). Scratching the surface of 'To pass the grace for Gard sake! Almoohn' yields 'Pass the grapes, for God's sake! Amen', grapes being present in the canon of the Mass as 'fruit of the vine', while passing grace on to others defines the general purpose of the Christ event and its sacramental commemoration. The 'sop' is given to the betrayer (John 13. 26) or 'traitor', who has become everyone (especially in a money economy) in which all people are traders, all who partake or sup: 'Allsup, allsup!' at the Last Supper, at which Christ institutes the Eucharist. The 'askart', suggesting a cart used for executions, must also be tied to the donkey on which Christ at a prior

moment (now left 'behind') entered Jerusalem. It may also, more punitively, intimate 'a skirt' and ass behind, to be seen above the grace of a garter.

The ingestion of Christ's body as bread or 'fish' repeats primitive cannibalistic, bacchic sacrifice ('We could ate you, par Bucces, and imhabe through you'). 'Per Baceho!' (pronounced 'pear bakko') is the Italian equivalent of 'by love!' As an interjection it has the same force as 'par Bucces', where Bucces sounds like Bacchus and also in Latin means checks, a somewhat equivocal anatomical part. The communal meal involves also a eucharistic inhibiting that issues in babes, rebirth, in fact a collective resurrection as the body of Christ returned to its infancy so as to become a fledgling brood whose earthy energy and fertility *annihilates* or consummates everybody ('One fledge, one brood till hahn culms everdybody'). This orgasmic, eucharistic sacrifice making one flesh, one blood ('One fledge, one brood') of every body effects a sexual liberation, with swelling 'balloons' for both guys ('dummies') and gals ('demisses'). It declares the freeing of A knee and the lap ('Annie Delep is free'). The sacrificial death in this way becomes a handle, a 'knob' for opening doors ('He's doorknobs dead!') and, of course, metaphorically, other orifices.

Bound up with this event of sexual liberation and unity of all in one body through the death and emptying out of self in every body is the realisation of God as emptiness, lack. One is more ('Ones more') than the mere sum of individuals in this repetition (once more) that enacts the self-emptying of divinity. The lake of the Godhead ('wild lac of godhiness'), or primal reservoir of divine spirit in each person, taken as a *lake* brings a renewed assurance (it can never fail, since it is nothing), profaned to an insurance policy ('wild') ('reassured in the wild lac of godhiness'). It may also be a willful ('wild') inheritance. Through his own sacrificial death and self-negation in the Eucharist, God makes Godhead available to all everywhere. God, the One, has become fertile humus or mulch disseminated into the Creation by death. This sacrifice is celebrated by all as one, traitor and truth together with 'thronam' in a theatrical Trinity. Three cheers with a truncated hurrah, a 'hah' that registers the pre-conscious, uncomprehending, instinctual impulses that pulsate all through the linguistic magna of this scene. The third cheer cheers the Spirit of truth ('Hah the truth') as an empty hole ('truh' sounds just like 'trou', that is, 'hole' in French). This formula repeats the simultaneously jubilant and desperate 'Help, help, hurray!' (hlp, hlp, hurrah) of a few lines earlier.

Christ is crucified for the good of all, his and ours, as well as for opening those doors ('Isn't it great he is swaying above us for his good an' dour'), doors which are intimately 'ours' if they are doors to our bodies. By participating in this Eucharist, everybody is ever dying, or dies ever day-by-day (yielded by breaking 'everdyburdy' into 'ever dy bur dy'). Since 'as many' of us as were

baptised into Christ Jesus were baptised into his death' (Romans 6. 2), the death involved may also be construed as a hurrying forward towards a date (dathie) with baptism made sport of by turning the baptismal font or basin into a swimming pool with built-in spiritual pull ('They've got a dathie with a swimmingpull'). Indeed, the name 'Dairhí' turns out to mean the last unbaptised Gaelic king.⁷

In this way, having collapsed death and resurrection together with incarnation of all as one body in the babe, the passage goes on to collapse together the sacraments of communion and baptism. Both sacraments entail producing rejuvenated collective bodies (the body of Christ) by sacrifice of ghostly selves or selfhood. The abstraction of self from such embodiment produces a purely negative spirit or 'ghosts', evil spirits of us that, if it is not given up in sacrifice, makes us 'ghosts', evil spirits or phantoms 'morbidly interested in death' (*Oxford English Dictionary*). For an underlying attachment to this self that ineluctably dies issues in our obsession with mortality. This is the sinister fixation that the gospel writers are charged with having fostered. By virtue of committing to writing the universal sacrifice of divine life, and thus fixing it with nails as the canonical narrative of the Crucifixion, the four evangelists make it abstract and static, and thereby turn into a ghoulish horror story the constant ecstatic change of life into death and back again that runs all through the universe in something of a mystic dance.

According to the gospel as enacted in the *Wake*, we can be saved rather by the 'lack of godliness', or godliness as lack, as giving up and emptying of self in continual sacrifice of all that becomes hard and fixed in us as self-identity (as something we have 'got' and possess as an essential 'godliness') and so separates us from the ongoing sacrificial flow of life into death and back to life again. This is the salvation offered us in Christ's sacrifice of himself, which is continually in process of re-enactment, unless it is nailed down by ghosts in Scripture. Then Christ is indeed dead, dead as a doornail, whereas Joyce's writing endeavours to open those doornails up into doorknobs ('The's writing endeavours to open those doornails up into doorknobs' (The's doorknobs dead!)) and thus to pass through the door of death and the letter into life in all its unscriptable bodily fullness. To write less is recommended ('Cut it down mates, look slippy!'), or perhaps to write in a negative mode, in the 'hat language' (p. 83.12) of the *Wake*, a continual carnival of self-sacrifice of words to their own essential vanity. The same sacrifice by individuals of their ghostly interiority, their inner 'lack of godliness', can liberate them as one resurrected body, free to participate in the eucharistic celebration of life and death mingled eternally together.

These interpretations are meant to give some indications of how Joyce literally 'actualises' the Christ event in a variety of outlandish, irrelevant, and yet irresistible ways. The resurrection of the Word in the body, of course,

is one of the central proclamations of the Church, and particularly Catholic ritual has always sought to realise this resurrection in the Eucharist. The crucial difference between Joyce's and the Church's eucharistic liturgy is that his literary apothecosis of the religious rite and institution avoids halloving particular bygone moments and events that are thereby placed out of reach of any possible re-interpretation and so become opaque. Such original events are then attributed an absolute significance and potency which is, however, no longer actually experienced. The literary, in contrast, is in its intrinsic nature mobile and protean and in the process of recurring ever again in new and different guises. Literature posits no such absolute authority or extra-experiential truth to be believed in, despite the evidence of the senses, but rather opens the holy to actually occurring and being performed in a self-emptying or kenotic humbling unto the death of the Cross (Philippians 2. 5-11). In this manner, the untrammeled, infinite power of self-sacrificial love no less than divine is made fully actual in the interpretations that mediate it and posit nothing besides themselves as mediations.

Balsamo's exhumation of the cultic matrix of the Christian epic poetry, with due acknowledgements to Thomas Altizer, is guided by Nietzsche's discovery, in the *Birth of Tragedy*, of primordial religious rites beneath the forms of Aeschylus' tragedy. Just as literature, and particularly tragic theatre, revealed its origins in the religious rites of Dionysos, similarly from the vantage point of Joyce and especially of *Finnegans Wake*, the Christian epic is unveiled as a re-enactment of archaic sacrifice through a literary rendition of liturgy. *Finnegans Wake* thereby emerges as the final apocalypse that first enables the genre of the Christian epic to be clearly defined in terms of its deeply liturgical motivations.

Fundamentally, in this view, Christian epic, by its literary-liturgical celebrations, preserves the authentic experience of Crucifixion and the likewise crucial experiences of Incarnation and Resurrection that are covered over and forgotten in the institutionalised rites of the Church. The Eucharistic theology of Thomas Aquinas, in which the Christ event is commemorated, but as having happened once and for all and so as already over, and therefore as not presently experienced and relived, thus emerges as an antithesis to the re-actualisation of a eucharistic liturgy in the literature of the Christian epics.⁸ The aseptic doctrine of abstract, metaphysical transubstantiation, without any sensible change, promulgated by Aquinas empties the liturgical formulas of experiential content. But such formulas metamorphose into living and authentic sacrificial experience in the secular Christian epic that Dante inaugurates with richly sensuous imagination. This type of liturgical imagination comes to a culmination in Joyce in the instantly ritualistic performance of language embodied in his consummate epic work.

Pinnacled Lake. This work enacts a self-sacrifice of language, breaking its sense into fragments that can miraculously nourish the whole world.

Prerequisite to this rediscovery of a liturgical underlay as the deeper meaning of literature is a reassessment of current theories of sacrifice. Balsamo reviews alternative interpretations of sacrifice in order to recover the original imaginative and emotional power of blood sacrifice: the negation and actual annihilation of life. This terrifying side of sacrifice has often been lost by emphasis on the positive, reconstituting virtues of sacrifice for reaffirming the social order. The reaffirmation occurs especially around the sacrificial meal shared by the surviving members of the community, with hierarchically determined distribution of the different parts of the victim. But more than the communal meal, it is the moment of violent killing of the victim that works powerfully on the imagination and dominates the emotional responses of the participants in sacrificial rituals.⁹ And this is the level of feeling that can so effectively be re-activated in the imaginative experience of literature. It is an individual dimension in which each participant becomes self-aware as individually responsible—because individually threatened by death—and as beholden to higher powers and to a community for the gift of life. This level of awareness motivates ascetic renunciation of self and of one's own immediate impulses for the sake of the community, and it thus forms the foundation for a social order, as Émile Durkheim taught.¹⁰

Imaginative literature, by evoking the pathos of human life at risk, and by calling to mind the vulnerability of each individual to violence that only the social order can keep at bay, performs essentially the same function as sacrifice at the origin of human community. This parallel illuminates the religious sense of imaginative literature in terms of its social function. Such a function is still quite present and palpable in imaginative literature today, and it casts the representations of ritual and liturgy in Joyce's epic works into a revealing new light. It reveals them as reminiscent of the liturgical matrix from which literature of this most necessary order springs.

Today, in the absence of the public forums that served for performance of sacrificial rites as open spectacles in archaic communities, or, again, for lack of the tragic theatre to which the whole citizenry was convoked at festivals in ancient Greece, the ritualistic, liturgical significance of literature has become obscured. In literature today, the 'rite' transpires only in the invisible spaces of an individual's own private consciousness and activity of reading. Nevertheless, literature can still have the profound effect of inducing individual conversion to a sense of receiving one's life as a gift in and through a divine mystery and, conjointly, of being beholden to the community for guaranteeing one's personal survival and security. This implicit, deeply submerged function of literature can be detected diffusely throughout an enormous range of literary works and genres in all times and

places, but it is operative in especially concentrated ways and, in exemplary fashion, in what emerges from the perspective of Joyce as the Christian epic tradition. This tradition is delineated by Balsamo as deriving from Virgil and the Bible and leading via Dante, Malory, Spenser, Milton, Blake and Goethe to Joyce.

According to Balsamo, the originality of the theological vision embodied in the experience of sacrifice and carried forward by imaginative literature, exemplarily by the Christian epic, is crystallised especially well in the indispensable role it accords the senses for any genuine experience of divinity. The senses have often been held in deep suspicion by systematic theological reflection. But sacrifice belongs to a stage of religion that has not yet been purged of the sensuality of the archaic experience of sacrifice of the divine. Whereas the sensuality of the archaic experience of sacrifice has long been lost to the rites of institutionalised religion, it can be and has been kept uncannily alive in literature at the level of experience that we call 'imaginative'. Imagination is inextricably connected with the senses, and consequently so is literature. This theological vision of literature is one that never abstracts itself from sense and image, but it is not any less theological for that reason. The originally and distinctively sensuous experience of the divine in archaic sacrifice is preserved (and in some sense even re-originated) precisely in, and by, literature.

Literature in this way turns out to be continuous with rites of sacrifice that are not estranged from the senses. Dante, at the beginning of the tradition of modern Christian epic poetry proper, inaugurates a revaluation of the senses as genuine and indispensable vehicles of divine vision (*visio Dei*). His beloved Beatrice, his guide through the heavens to the presence of God, in her ravishing beauty, stands as the emblem for an erotic and sensually mediated love that is fully integrated into the soul's search for salvation and beatitude. This type of sensation vehiculates intimacy with the divine. Such a sensual experience of divinity contrasts with the doctrinal and even the anagogical modes of knowledge practiced by the traditional *poeta*, particularly in the context of Renaissance humanism, and by Dante himself at the preliminary stage at which he wrote his *Convivio*. It harks back rather to the kind of experience of the senses and of religious awe and consequent 'conversion' to social responsibility that was effected by archaic religious rites of sacrifice.¹¹

Dante forms the central link between Joyce and the Bible in this secularisation of religious revelation effected by the Christian epic. Far beyond translating theological doctrines into terms fit for literary consumption in the manner of a humanistic *poeta theologus*, as he does in the *Convivio*, Dante becomes a genuinely prophetic poet in the *Commedia*, where poetry becomes in and of itself truly prophetic and even apocalyptic. The idea that

revelation can be consummated in poetry, in fully human interpretation and language, is seen to follow from the revelation's ineradicably typological character: it is actually constituting itself through literary repetition, right from the most canonical of all sources, the Bible itself. The original and unmediated is, in any case, always just projected backwards from its mediations (at least it can actually be experienced only in and through, and indeed *as* such mediations). Literature as a mediation of theology, which it becomes consciously and programmatically in Dante, discovers itself thereby as truly theological revelation.

Dante's *Commedia* takes the initial steps towards a recuperation, under the figure of the *porta theologiae*, of a poetics of revelation such as would be pursued by the Renaissance humanists. But, whereas in the *Commedia* Dante's writing is still subservient to theological doctrine, in the *Comedy* he recedes in poetry the 'intimacy with divine knowledge', as Balsano phrases it, that only liturgical experience can give. Although this perhaps becomes clearly discernible only from the perspective on the whole of the Christian epic tradition that emerges from the vantage point of Joyce, Dante's *Commedia* already offers a liturgical poetry that re-enacts primordial sacrifice. In the retrospective made possible by Joyce, it becomes starkly significant that the very title 'Convivio' or 'Banquet' makes reference to the communal meal of the liturgy—that is, to the aftermath of the sacrifice, the dramatic moment of death having been elided. In the opening lines of Canto XXIV of the *Paradiso*, in contrast, this liturgical meal is naked as integral to a sacrificial rite by explicit reference to the blessed Lamb, the victim, who feeds the community:

O sodalizio eletto a la gran cena
del benedetto Agnello, il qual vi ch'a
sì, che la vostra voglia è sempre piena...

(O elect community called to the great supper
of the blessed Lamb, who feeds you so
that your desire is forever full...)¹²

Though under a symbolic veil, this Lamb of God, is, of course, Christ who feeds the community with his own flesh, shedding his blood on the Cross, in order to become thereby the salvation and fulfillment of the whole fellowship. Dante repeats almost verbatim the benediction of the Apocalypse of Saint John the Divine: 'Blessed are they which are called unto the marriage supper of the Lamb' (19. 9). Such liturgical experience in the literature of the Christian rite of the Eucharist is literally 'crucial' to accounting for the unnamy power of Dante's poetry throughout the *Commedia*. It is manifest already from the re-appearance of Beatrice, sacrificial victim of an unnamely

death, according to the *Vita nuova*, at the height of Mount Purgatory in the guise of a liturgical Christ, as she is hailed with the liturgical formula 'benedictus qui venit!' (*Purgatorio* XXXIII, 19).

This type of literary performance of liturgy is more painfully, indeed excruciatingly, embodied in the *Inferno's* climaxing in the 'bestial sign' of Ugolino's consumption of his sons' Christically offered flesh (see particularly *Inferno* XXXIII, 61–63, where one of the sons bids the desperate father to take back the flesh he gave them). Such poetic, liturgical evocations of the sacrifice of Christ, experienced powerfully in the hypnotic rhythms of Dante's *terza rima* and in the irresistible enchantment of the poem's lyricism, reactualise the communication with divinity that has been the experience conserved all along by religious ritual from its origins in archaic sacrifice. Dante's literary re-enactment thereby remains still in close communication with the primordial experience of blood sacrifice as it persists submerged in the Catholic liturgical practice. The advantage of Dante's secularised, imaginative medium of poetry is that it is not all doctrinally prescribed and circumscribed, but is open to the spontaneity of individual experience and interpretation.

The deeper, more serious purposes of literature, fundamental to even as uproariously jocular a work as *Finnegans Wake*, are disclosed by Balsano (and Thomas Altizer) as liturgical in nature, and we have seen that liturgy is to be understood first and foremost in relation to the rite of sacrifice. This paradigm works astonishingly well in reading the texts of Joyce and them, in their wake, the Bible, along with an extensive tradition of secularised religious literature in between. It works so well that we cannot help but wonder how the typical motif of sacrifice acquires the enormous scope and synthetic power it is shown to have in Joyce by Balsano's reading.

Although not explicitly included within the compass of Balsano's project, certain philosophical insights into sacrifice and death as lying at the origin of humanity—insights of the sort that devolve from Hegel and are developed, for example, by Alexandre Kojève and Georges Bataille—seem to be presupposed.¹³ In this perspective, sacrifice is the quintessentially human act by which the human being first becomes human: in fact, in sacrifice, humanity becomes the origin of itself. Only by ministering death to a victim, with which it nevertheless identifies, does the human being come into possession of itself as a free, finite existence. Life is revealed in its finitude by death: it is grasped for the first time as a whole, from its endpoint, and therefore as having a defined, finite significance, and so as human.

Only in this way, at its origin, in its emergence, that is, in sacrifice, can humanity be grasped wholly and indeed as holy. 'Sacrifice' may be analysed as the artifice that makes holy; that is, the *fitto*, the making up (as in *poiesis*) that makes something—life—sacred. Fiction is how sacrifice makes holy and

therefore also whole. Paradoxically, this occurs precisely in and through a negation, by a cutting off, a setting apart: *sacer*. A whole is conceivable only constructively: it emerges first through rupture of the all, through a severing from the rest. The human being conceives itself as whole only by cutting itself off from something and setting itself apart—vicariously, through sacrifice. Only as a negation of indeterminate, infinite, holy life can a finite, human life produce itself as a completed whole. Such a Hegelian thanatology is developed very compellingly by Alexandre Kojève.¹⁴

Sacrifice, of course, took place historically, and it effectively mediated religious experience on which the social order was founded, but it did not take place without fictions. A prime example is scapegoating, the heaping of all evils throughout society on one supposedly guilty individual who can be punished by death as sacrificial victim and thereby purge the community. The motivations of sacrifice are necessarily obscure: it functions, as René Girard stresses, only to the extent that its mechanisms remain at least partly unconscious and are misrecognised by its participants.¹⁵ This suggests why sacrifice can still be interpreted in terms of our fictions today. For our literary fictions likewise endeavour to make things holy, that is, in a certain sense whole again, even though this may mean precisely showing the whole shebang as exploding into the infinite entropy of irrecoverable dispersion. From this point of view, literature (alias theology) can emerge in its vital purpose for human culture as harboring the unique possibility of envisioning culture comprehensively and from its (always re-originating) origin. In the light of the rite of sacrifice, literature can be seen as fulfilling a unitary, or at least analogously similar, purpose from ancient Greek tragedy through Christian epic to Joyce and the novel. This purpose cannot but be described as 'liturgical' in the sacrificial-typological sense being defined in this essay.

In Joyce's epic works, religious rite appears particularly in the recurrent re-enactments of the rite of the Eucharist. In order to understand the significance of the Eucharist in terms of primal sacrifice, Balsamo, we have seen, insists on the need to liberate the Eucharist from a certain Thomistic theology of the sacrament as a purely metaphysical transubstantiation without any visible manifestation of blood. The eucharistic theme in Joyce bespeaks a eucharistic purpose of thanksgiving and praise at the very origin of poetry. But the praise embodied in such celebration is inseparable from the error of blood sacrifice evocative of the *mysterium tremendum* famously analysed by Rudolf Otto in *The Idea of the Holy* (*Das Heilige*, 1917), for only this religious awe enjoins and moderates recognition as a divine gift, and thereby makes a claim upon each participant as a responsible individual.

The Crucifixion, as the moment of blood-shedding, is the crux of the Eucharist as Balsamo reconstructs it in the light of primal sacrifice, and this,

accordingly, is the valence, often somewhat veiled, of the eucharistic liturgy of literature in Joyce and in his Christian epic predecessors. This interpretation places the Christian rite back in communication with pagan sacrificial rites, thereby illuminating the significance of the eucharistic imagery that recurs in Joyce's writings. The blood covenant of the Hebrews, along with Druidical practices of sacrifice, turn up thus as relived in the eucharistic celebration of the Crucifixion. These powerfully synthetic modes of envisaging literature and religion show literature in its deep and inextricable connection with the most archaic and basic forms of religious experience, that is, with originary theological revelation in the rite of sacrifice.

Joyce's pervasive religious motifs can, in this perspective, be seen in their deeply systematic significance. His renegade and satirical Catholicism actually rewrites the whole history of civilisation, and rather than dismissing religion finds the sense of all things deeply embedded in it. His own texts become the locus of a radically religious revelation that reverses millennia of distortions of the originally religious meaning of experience as it is revealed in sacrifice. An emblem of this reversal of the ascetic refusal and denial of the senses that has characterised so great and authoritative a part of Christian theology can be found in the figure of the patriarch Noah. Joyce projects a primal scene of sodomy, hinted at in Genesis 9. 21–27 in the description of the relations between Noah and his sons, into an archetypal dimension for revealing the brutally profane significance of human life as part of its wholeness and holiness. Revelation of humanity and its inalienable sanctity is achieved in a spectacular reversal of the sanctimonious connotations that it typically has in a more solemn theological tradition.¹⁶

Joyce's Catholicism is profoundly parodic and encompasses extreme profanity: only thereby does it become a veritable apotheosis of catholicity. All that is most abject is blessed and made holy within the whole of the Joycean cosmos—and, of course, vice versa, the supposedly holy is made abjectly profane. Joyce's very obscenity explodes all sanctimonious piety as it sneers the eucharistic sacrament up and down the whole body of a crassly vulgar universe. In this manner, Joyce (re)defines traditional types that operate as metaphors for vast regions of representation, and he reveals thereby disparate orders and ranges of experience in their connectedness and inner, generally invisible coherence. This has been the vocation of theology, when it has not become frozen or formalised into dogma but has managed rather to remain open to the creativity with which human language relates to and actually irradiates raw experience. This has occurred pre-eminently within the theological vision embodied in Christian epic tradition, particularly as it is re-capitulated and re-elaborated by Joyce.

Balsamo's thesis concerning the liturgical character and import of Christian epic recuperates the original and vital essence of this poetry. The religious

ritual at its root is one that appears fully incarnate in the form of literature, and its power is poetic. Hence, Balsamo's books are also about the essence of poetry, specifically its religious significance as affording intimacy with divinity, as in the experience of sacrifice. This character of poetry in its original essence as religious rite is pervasive even outside the Christian epic tradition, brought to focus by Balsamo. We may think of sensuous experience of sacrificial divinity in works such as Shelley's lyrical drama *Prometheus Unbound* or Holderlin's epistolary novel *Hyperion*. Nevertheless, this specific tradition, the Christian epic, emerges as exemplary in its responsiveness to the theological vocation of poetry, certainly one of the most vital of missions for cultural creations generally. The Christian epic tradition, as it becomes discernible from the standpoint of Joyce and his transformations or anachronistic re-inventions of biblical types, offers a pre-eminent model for how this theological dimension of cultures at their origins is registered and brought to expression.

Of course, any claims concerning the 'origin' and 'unity' of a tradition presuppose a thoroughgoing revolution in these concepts. The original turns out to be what is subsequently produced by continued re-elaboration of types that gives them a precise significance gathered out of the many diverse valences they can have in the 'original' source texts and traditions. In this sense, origin and unity, as understood from the paradigm of Scriptural typology, are *reconstituted* origin and *synthesis* of unity in the self-assertive individuation of the type that re-invents its own predecessors. *Arête* and *Theos*, as the bases for corresponding symbolic, logological operations of 'archaeology' and 'eschatology', define one another reciprocally: origin and end reveal themselves in relation to each other in a process of a mutual interplay that itself becomes the revelation of both.

Once the patterns and their copies are viewed rather as typological in the sense Balsamo demonstrates, insisting on the reversible interplay between type and anti-type, between original event and its recurrence or commemoration, origin can be grasped as leveraged from present re-interpretation, and accordingly the whole tradition can be revealed 'originally' by Joyce. This re-interpretation is total in that it manages to appropriate—or to murder and consume—its predecessors in an act of 'reverse filiation' that absorbs its precedents into itself, deconstructing the natural hierarchies and priorities of biological and chronological precedence. Typological repetition emerges as the only mode in which any such precedence and authority can be asserted. Only the power of a creator's metaphors to recreate the past and anticipate—setting the terms for—the future gives the measure of that author's universality and, in effect, omnipotence within the world that is created as a result.

Theology in a primordial sense concerns the origin—and consequently embraces also the wholeness—of a culture. This turns out in Balsamo's work

to be a kind of non-origin, a deconstruction of any absolute origin fixed once and for all that is not belated, and derivative. It becomes possible again to speak of origins and to envisage culture as a whole from its origin only once the origination is understood, pursuant to the Derridean critique of presence, as an ongoing, anachronistic process of revision and re-interpretation, such as has constituted, paradigmatically, the canon of Holy Scripture. Seen in this revisionary perspective, the methods and techniques of representation that constitute *arête* and *eschaton*, genesis and apocalypse alike in Western culture prove to be remarkably consistent. They start from the typological methods of representation in the Bible and continue through the re-workings of epic traditions of Christianity to Joyce's revisionary typologies.

Joyce conceives the possibility of re-inventing the world by assuming the archetypes on which history is founded and re-fathering them. By this act of reverse filiation, he absorbs all precedents and predecessors into his own work, which thereby proposes itself as an origin of itself and of everything else besides. This unconditioned creative power is in effect theological in character: by usurping all (re)creative power and authority to itself, it becomes the God of its own world. Although, this constitutes a deconstruction of conventional images of divinity as chronologically first, as before and outside all relation to anything other, and especially to any materials of creation, it can be an original actualisation of divinity as an absolutising creative power. Literature itself, in its typological dynamic, thereby performs the religious rites out of which divinity—or at least the human sense and imagination of divinity—is born.

In a day and age when the whole category of the theological is often said to be dead and is genuinely felt to be bankrupt and transparently irrelevant to the real driving forces of culture, Balsamo resuscitates the unique power of theology for envisioning culture in its source and origin, and as a whole. This is a power that is indeed uniquely theological, a power for the lack, or at least the denial of which the modern culture has often seemed to be merely the embodiment of incoherence without rhyme or reason. Yet, understood theologically, modern culture turns out to be startlingly coherent even in its disintegration. It is, conversely, this theological vision embodied in poetry that makes poetry again what it was at the origin of virtually all known cultures: the inspired articulation of the very enabling conditions of human life and society.

Perhaps no proposal within literary criticism today is so challenging as that we should read literature, and particularly the Christian epic poetry, as liturgy in its deepest intents and purposes. This opens the dimension in which poetry assumes vital significance, and it shows poetry to be viable today as much as ever. Perhaps, poetry has never been more necessary than now, when institutional modes of religious experience, at least within modern Western

countries, seen to be weakening in relevance for the members of technologically super-saturated societies in the throes of the explosion of information disseminated through electronic media. Opening especially the literary texts of the Christian epic tradition to their deeply theological significance and motivation as liturgy projects them into a whole new dimension of experience where their significance as poetry is re-opened to examination in light of individual experience and responsibility. For, just as cultic sacrifice was experiential and called upon the individual responsibility of its participants, so liturgical poetry, as the re-actualisation of this cultic rite, catalyses authentically personal, spontaneous, unique experience and response. Balsamo's analysis of typological re-origination demonstrates that whenever poetry is brought back into contact with actual, living experience its significance again becomes open and inexhaustible.

Poetry, viewed in this perspective, envisions and expresses what makes a culture possible as a whole and from its deepest roots. Such theologically laden types as sacrifice and eucharistic celebration reveal human, or at least Western culture in its development from both Greek and Hebrew antiquity to its ultramodern apotheosis in Joyce as one ongoing negotiation with itself. Culture is a continual reworking and revisiting of traditional types that run from the beginning to the end of history—and back again—becoming the overarching metaphors that connect everything in the universe of human experience together.

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REFERENCES

- Balsamo has recently published four books on this subject. I refer especially to the *Retains of Literature: Joyce, Dante, Aquinas, and the Tradition of Christian Epics* (Lewisburg, Pennsylvania: Bucknell University Press, 2004), though its arguments are closely intertwined with those of *Sacramental Poetics in Finnegans Wake* (Lewisburg, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2002), *Priming the Genealogical Tree: Punctation and Liturgy in *Litramen, Lam, and Religion** (Lewisburg, Pennsylvania: Bucknell University Press, 1999), London: Associated University Press, 1999) and, most recently, *Joyce's Messianism: Dante, Negative*

- At exactly this point Balsamo's interpretation of church ritual and specifically of Thomas's theology of the sacrament appears too narrow to me, since Thomas insists that human understanding even of purely intellectual or metaphysical entities is based always on sense experience ('*omnis nostra cognitio a sensu initium habet*', *Summa theologiae*, I, q. 1, art. 9). Nevertheless, the polemical stance towards Thomas undoubtedly captures an aspect of Joyce's own attitude.
- James Joyce, *Ulysses*, originally published in 1922, corrected edition by Hans Walter Gahler et al. (New York: Random House, 1986), p. 50.
- James Joyce, *Finnegans Wake* (London: Faber and Faber, 1964 [1939]), 3rd edn.
- Brendan O. Hehir, *J. Giedt: Lecture for 'Finnegans Wake' and Gateway for Joyce's Other Works* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), p. 208.
- This Alitzer-Balsamo approach offers a radically different perspective on Joyce's relation to Catholic doctrine and especially to Thomas Aquinas from that of critical classics such as William T. Noon, *Joyce and Aquinas* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957) and Robert Boyle S.J., *James Joyce's Pauline Vision: A Catholic Exposition* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1978).
- Balsamo is influenced here by Jean-Pierre Vernant, whom he, however, creatively misunderstands in suggesting that the moment of death was crucial for Greek *mythos*, in general Vernant actually underscores how the official Greek institution of sacrifice itself elided and obscured the moment of death that obsessed rather unofficial, splinter groups working out their alternative religiousities in the margins of Greek society. Vegetarian sects like the Pythagorians denounced the bloody murder at the heart of sacrificial rites that public institutions were at pains to dissimulate and legitimate. At the opposite pole, Dionysiacs regressively revelled in this murder that the official institution dissimulated as something other than simply a brutal killing. See Jean-Pierre Vernant, '*Theorie générale du sacrifice et mise à mort dans la mythologie grecque*', in Jean-Pierre Vernant and Claude Lévi-Strauss (eds), *Le sacrifice dans l'Antiquité* (Geneva: Vandoeuvres, 1980), pp. 1–21.
- See *Formas étnicas de la religión: El sistema ideológico en Jesuita* (Paris: Fata Morgana, 1925), 2nd edn, rev. Book III, chapter 1: 'Les Rites Accrédités'.
- See, for example, Jean-Pierre Vernant, *L'individu, le mort, l'homme: sotériologie et Poème en Geste antique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1989). Of course, institutional rites, such as the Catholic liturgy of the Eucharist, also rely very heavily on sensuous poetic imagery, and for this reason, contrary to Balsamo, I wish to stress the continuity between cultic eucharistic celebration and imaginative re-enactments of sacrifice in literature.
- I quote and translate from Dante Alighieri, in G. Petrocchi (ed.), *La Divina Commedia seconda l'antica vulgata* (Bollina: Mondadori, 1966–67) 4 vol.
- See particularly Baralle's 'Hegel la mort et le sacrifice', in *Œuvres complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1971–88), vol. XII, pp. 326–345.
- Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction à la lecture de Hegel* (Paris: Gallimard, 1971). Although in the last two paragraphs I am not following Balsamo's own explicit development of the concept of sacrifice, such a Hegelian view of death as origin of humanity is at the basis of Thomas Alitzer's thought, for example, in *History as Apocalyptic* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1983), which is a direct and acknowledged precedent for Balsamo. Likewise, the interpretations of Joyce's texts earlier in the essay are not based on Balsamo. Alitzer cites the passage beginning 'Laying the cloth to the face of them', though without analysing its specifics.

¹⁵ René Girard, *La violence et le sacré* (Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1972), p. 19, for example, and *passim*.

¹⁶ Joyce's reworkings of Noah-Ham-japhet, along with other biblical figures, are examined by Balsamo also in his article "Typistics," *James Joyce Quarterly*,

forthcoming. Another article Balsamo's "The Necropolitan Journey: Dante's Negative Poetics in Joyce's "The Dead"" *James Joyce Quarterly* 40(4) (2003), gives yet another sample of Balsamo's typological method of reading.