

CHAPTER 46

James Joyce and the Bible

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James Joyce's employment of the Bible in his literary productions is vast and multifaceted: nevertheless, the Bible filters into Joyce's texts most intensively and persistently through the forms of the Latin liturgy of the Mass.¹ This helps us to restrict and focus the field of vision to the point where we discern that the core of the Bible as it is refracted in Joyce consists in the eucharistic celebration of the death of Christ, his offer of his flesh as nourishment for all: this rite in the Bible and in Joyce alike culminates in the symbolic resurrection of the body of Christ and in the salvation and even the sanctification of the world. Numerous figures and narratives from throughout the Old and New Testaments are alluded to by Joyce, but in the motif of the Eucharist as a re-enactment of the death and resurrection of Christ we grasp the essential dynamic of the Bible at the heart of Joyce's whole project of apocalyptic imagination – his envisioning of a final disclosure of the truth of the universe through poetic images.

My main guide for this interpretation of the biblical vision in Joyce is Thomas J. J. Altizer.² Altizer views the biblical revelation in Christ, and particularly in the Christ event, the death and resurrection of God, in a perspective that is derived from the Christian prophetic poets in the tradition of Dante, Milton, and Blake. For Altizer, this tradition has carried forward the authentic apocalyptic revelation of the Bible, which, according to him, has been almost universally betrayed by the whole range of Christian theologies. Interpreting James Joyce and in particular *Finnegans Wake* and *Ulysses* in the context of what he calls the Christian epic tradition, Altizer discovers Joyce as an incomparably revelatory moment in this tradition of revelation, which he understands as specifically apocalyptic in character. Dante and his successors, Milton, Blake, and finally Joyce, are seen as carrying out the mission of realizing theological revelation as apocalypse in the modern world. Their poems show the full and final meaning of human life and death in the light of Christian revelation. Beyond the plethora of thematic connections and citations of Christian and Jewish tradition, Joyce is aligned with a continuous prophetic-apocalyptic movement comprising the efforts of secular writers to extend apocalyptic revelation from the Bible into the sphere of literary artistic endeavor.³

In the view of other eminent interpreters as well, the connection with prophetic inspiration on the biblical model is obviously present but also vexed in Joyce. Northrop

Frye read Joyce's contribution to literature and culture in the perspective of a continuity with the Catholic tradition that remained his intellectual root: "In Joyce's personal life his break with the Catholic Church meant not that he wanted to believe in something else but that he wanted to transfer the mythical structure of the Church from faith and doctrine to creative imagination, thereby exchanging dogmatic Catholicism for imaginative catholicity."⁴ Robert Alter emphasizes rather more trenchantly the Bible's purely literary canonicity, parallel to that of the *Odyssey*, in Joyce's work. Nevertheless, Alter too shows how, despite his unsparing parody and subversion of the Bible, Joyce still writes with a strong sense of continuity with the biblical tradition. Joyce counts among the modernist writers who challenge but also "reaffirm the continuing authority of the canon as a resource of collective memory and as a guide for contemplating the dense tangle of human fate."⁵ Alter senses the potential of Joyce's playful and subversive deformations of biblical tradition to reinsert themselves back into that tradition and so to continue its revelatory claim: "In the extraordinarily supple and varied uses to which the Bible is put in *Ulysses*, it is converted into a secular literary text, but perhaps not entirely secular, after all, because it is reasserted as a source of value and vision" (pp. 182–3). At the very same time as it declares the secularizing force particularly of Joyce's readings of the Bible, this sentence evinces a suspicion of the still, at least covertly, theological character of disclosure – or perhaps revelation – in Joyce's writing.

Thomas Altizer's interpretation, in contrast, accentuates unequivocally the radical rupture with the Catholic tradition, insisting on Joyce's deliberate apostasy and obstinate heterodoxy – yet precisely in order to highlight the specifically biblical-apocalyptic thrust of Joyce's vision. And this apocalyptic vision he esteems to be, after all, an authentic realization of theological truth, the theological truth of apocalypse that orthodox Christian tradition all along had been betraying. Altizer sees Joyce's work, particularly *Finnegans Wake*, together with Christian epic in general, as realizing the death of God that for him is the core of true, eschatological Christian experience and, consequently, theology. He reads theologians from John and Paul through Augustine and Luther to Hegel and Nietzsche as all deeply realizing the death of God. But just as fundamental are the revelations of the poets, particularly Dante, Milton, Blake, and finally Joyce. Their epic works become eucharisties in which the death of God the Word is shared out in tormented and martyred words with the readers. Readers realize in their own experience and interpretations of broken, mortified meaning the apocalypse that is proclaimed by the Christian gospel and that is actually accomplished by Christ's Crucifixion/Resurrection.

It is by ending the era of belief in a static, self-identical God, immutable in his transcendence, that the death of God, in Altizer's view, opens up a genuinely new conception of divinity. For Altizer, authentic apocalyptic Christianity stands in opposition to previous religions and their myths of eternal return. Altizer derives this idea, which remains fundamental all through the development of his thought, especially from Mircea Eliade's work in comparative religions.⁶ In this perspective, Christianity inaugurates the vision of divinity revealed in a unique, irreversible historical event, an incarnation in flesh that is a final and irrevocable submission to death (as recounted particularly in Philippians 2:5–11). The self-emptying of divinity in death without

return to an eternity outside of and over and above time marks for the first time in the history of religions the real and actual beginning of finite historical existence that never returns but passes toward a future that is genuinely new and apocalyptic. The past is now totally past and finally vanishes in real and irrevocable death, and a future that is not just a return of the past is now really born in all its astonishing newness. Unique, finite, historical existence is finally free to be just itself in its definitive perishing, once the past has been nailed to the cross and is thus crossed out forever. This is resurrected life, and it is no longer beholden to any past. Only now is full and absolute presence of the embodied individual and the incarnate historical act possible. And just this “total presence” is what would have been realized by Joyce in the apocalypse of *Finnegans Wake*.⁷

Altizer emphasizes the heretical character of Christian epic and at the same time the absolute necessity of Christianity as ground not only of the epic but of the whole modern world. Joyce, like other modern epic poets, in his view, performs a dialectical reversal of Christian tradition, and so of every kind of dogmatic Christianity, in favor of an apocalyptic, visionary Christianity – the original apocalyptic vision of the Bible – concerned not with conserving tradition but with ending, that is, with consummating the world. This reversal is necessary in order that Christianity be rediscovered as the religion of the *novum*, of the absolutely new, as against the return of the same. Its eternity is won precisely by ending the cycle of eternal return that dominates pre-Christian religion and also Christianity itself as grounded in an eternal and transcendent God, a God who is *only* transcendent and eternal and does not, at least not in his own person, die. The actuality of the event of Christianity is at the same time a definitive ending of the *inactuality* of the eternity outside time of all such purely transcendent religious presences. Altizer insists on the absolutely new and different eternity that is inaugurated by death, specifically the death on the Cross. This is the eternity of an event that remains forever irreversible precisely because it is the event of becoming definitively past, of perishing, never to come back again. Thus the full actuality of events is made possible by the death of God and takes place decisively in the central, literally crucial event of Christianity and of all history, the Crucifixion.

This new world and fully apocalyptic history has been apprehended and represented, according to Altizer, most completely and perspicuously, and in a contemporary language, by Joyce in *Finnegans Wake*. This can be seen most readily perhaps from the way that Crucifixion and Resurrection are deployed as key themes of the work. At the center of the *Wake*, in pages that happen also to comprise the first to be written, is an event that Altizer describes as “a divine acceptance of death.” It is concentrated into the utterance: “*I’ve a terrible errible lot todue todie todue tootorribleday.*”⁸ This phrase articulates a terrible, perhaps errant, resignation to death as due (“todue”) today, as to-be-done presently – in the torrid heat and torrent of the present tense: “today” (Latin: *hodie*) becomes synonymous, by dint of quasi-homophony, with “to die” (*todie*). Altizer reads this statement as extending Joyce’s total demythologization of the divine death at the end of the Proteus episode in *Ulysses*: “God becomes man becomes fish,” which for Altizer describes “a victim wholly dissociated from any mythical form of Christ, a victim who is pure victim as such and no more, and hence by necessity a nameless or anonymous Christ.”⁹ Of course, it should not be overlooked that Joyce is also alluding to how

this naked victim is inscribed into Christian symbolism, since the word for fish in Greek, *ἰχθῦς*, transliterated Ixthus, was used by ancient Christians as an acronym for “Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior” (*Iesous Xristos THEou 'Uios Salvator*). Joyce’s “God becomes man becomes fish” exploits a latent comic potential inhering in what was initially a reverent symbol of the holy before it came to be transformed in the course of tradition. He explodes thereby the aura of holiness that would elevate the divine victim above the material world of ordinary comestibles.

Altizer also quotes the “prayer”: “Grant sleep in hour’s time, O Loud!” (FW, p. 259.4), in which the name of the Lord has become just loud noise. Prayer here confesses itself to be distracted by distraction to the point where, prayer being impossible, only sleep can be wished, a wish for extinction in time, in an “hour,” which is also what is most essentially “ours.” Joyce is echoing, of course, the Book of Common Prayer: “Grant peace in our time, O Lord.” But as this refrain reverberates in his text, it suggests that our being has been fully disclosed as temporal to its very core, and thus as most essentially a perishing. This indeed is how Altizer takes it. However, there is also another crucial implication that imposes itself as the same parodic play is pursued in further deformations of liturgical formulae such as “Loud, hear us! / Loud, graciously hear us!” (FW, p. 258.24–5). Insistent vocalization of “Lord” pronounced with a thick Gaelic accent as “Loud” mischievously exposes the resonant emptiness of language as *flatus vocis*. We hear the holy mystery of the Name of God, from which all language derives and on which it all depends in monotheistic theologies of the Divine Name, reduced to a linguistic fact or flub. We are reminded, moreover, that language conjures up what it is *not* out of thin air, out of the insubstantiality, the near immateriality, of voice, and this holds even in the case of the divine Name. The name of the Lord, which substitutes for the unspeakable Name of God, sounds aloud (literally as “Loud”) this uncannily pregnant and productive nothingness into which the purported presence of God evoked in prayer is evacuated.

This voiding of the Holy Name accords with Altizer’s stress on the self-emptying of God in order that he become incarnate in a profane, contemporary language. In the passage leading up to the prayer just quoted, a further phrase – “The timid hearts of words all exeomnosunt” (FW, p. 258.2–3) – by echoing the Latin *exeunt omnes*, as in the stage direction “all leave,” meaning alternately “all die,” likewise evokes the divine absence enshrined in every word. It bespeaks an emptiness of language that works as its omnipotence, its unlimited power of creation from nothing.

This cardinal biblical motif of creation *ex nihilo* suggests something of the full extent to which *Finnegans Wake* enfolds an interpretation of the history of civilization and cosmos in the perspective rendered uniquely possible by the Bible. The work begins with a fall that, in the context of Christian epic tradition, reads as the fall of Satan. As a literary act, moreover, it aims to embody, and perhaps succeeds in embodying, to a superlative degree, the total presence of immanent historical consciousness that coincides with a new vision of eternity. The total immanence of God in the Word, that is, the word that is broken and dispersed and profaned in the unrelenting, audacious linguistic outrages and sacrileges that make up this extraordinarily blasphemous work, is brought into clear and convincing focus by Altizer’s interpretation. But it is especially the possibility of celebrating a new humanity on the basis of the total collapse of any

established social and cosmic order that makes Joyce's vision apocalyptic in the originally biblical sense Altizer advocates.

The profound theological drama of the resurrectional, life-giving, sacrificial death of God in Joyce's works has been illuminated brilliantly by Altizer's ideas, and in the light they shed I would like to propose a detailed reading (independent of Altizer's own exegeses) of a couple of passages from *Finnegans Wake*. They will show how the Christ event emerges clearly as a sacrificial, liberating death, celebrated in the Christian Eucharist and re-enacted even in the most vulgar and profane banalities of ordinary people's lives as represented by Joyce. All life, however degraded in the common and contemporary world, can be seen as transfigured in the perspective of this event of sacrifice and crucifixion that itself becomes the resurrection to fully incarnate life. For in Joyce the original event narrated in the gospels as the Christ event is broken open, divided up, and scattered abroad. It is dispersed eucharistically so as to become all events – however mean and trivial – rather than remaining fixed as determined by a single narrative about one identical subject.

Language is the arena in which Joyce's poetic apocalypse is achieved. Joyce sees grammar as at least one factor accomplishing the sacrificial death of God, which runs the Crucifixion and the Resurrection (and the Incarnation) together inextricably. The sacrifice of God on the altar of grammar features as a recurrent motif, especially in the funeral elegy for H.C.E. pronounced at the end of the first chapter of *Finnegans Wake*. Joyce bases this elegy on the idea that "the grammarians of Christpatrick" (FW, p. 26.21) have violently killed and buried God, in a scene that Andrew Mitchell revealingly connects with Nietzsche's staging of the death of God in the *Gay Science*, sec. 125.¹⁰ The novel's protagonist, as a surrogate for God (as will become clear in the sequel), is in effect put on trial posthumously as part of his sacrificial ordeal:

our old offender was humile, commune and ensectuous from his nature, which you may gauge after the bynames was put under him, in lashons of languages, (honnein suit and praisers be!) and, totalisating him, even hammissim of himashim that he, sober serious, he is ee and no counter he who will be ultimendly respunchable for the hubbub caused in Edinborough. (FW, p. 29.30–6)

God, or his alter-ego H.C.E., and indistinguishably also Adam ("our old offender"), is made responsible ("respunchable") ultimately, in the "end" ("ultimendly"), but also ill-timedly or anachronistically, for the chaos pursuant to the fall that occurred in Eden ("the hubbub caused in Edinborough"). The story of the Fall – and its modern repetitions – is thus linked to the sacrifice of the divine victim or scapegoat. In addition to being made responsible, the victim is made repeatedly punishable or more exactly *punchable*, like a thing, in Latin a *res* ("respunchable"). The sacrificial victim is lashed particularly by language ("lashons of languages"), with the intimation of his being lashed down and so bound by language, verisimilarly by grammatical rules and restrictions; but at the same time we hear that the latchings-on of language are multiple and indeed wrought in a plurality of "languages." The burgeoning multiplicity of his names, as well as of words in general, which bind him as he goes on trial and is sacrificed, is at the same time a source of untold fertility. He becomes the common humus that

humbly nourishes (“humile, commune”) his community. Yet this nourishment of names also plagues nature infectiously (“ensectuous”), recalling the plagues of *insects* like flies and locusts that infested Egypt (Exodus 7–11).

This ill effect is due at least in part to his being divided up by names (“bynames”) into sects (“ensectuous”) that totalize him (“totalisating him”). In particular, Muslim and Jew, with their languages, seem to make mincemeat of the One supposed to be God above all, making of him a hash: “even hamissim of himashim.” These word-conglomerates sound like Arabic and Hebrew respectively; moreover, in English “himashim” is a third-person version of the phrase “I am that I am,” by which the Lord designates himself to Moses in Exodus 3:14. Joyce’s concocted locutions suggest that God is missed and mashed, and perhaps even worshipped as ham. Of course, Greek and Christian, too, totalize their conceptions of divinity and represent God as One and Being: “honnein,” where the Greek *on* for Being is aspirated (as in *ón*, the One) to become *hon* and combines with German *ein* for One, but equally with *nein* for Nothing.

In this last language-family or culture, Christianity from its Greek to its German expressions, God is also simple repetition of simplicity (“he is ee and no counter”). In *Paradiso* XXVI.133–5, Dante has Adam say that *I* was the original human Name of God: “Pria ch’i’ scendessi all’infernale ambascia, / I s’appelava in terra il sommo bene / onde vien la letizia che mi fascia” (“Before I descended to the infernal dismay, the highest good whence comes the delight that wraps me round was called *I* on the earth”). “I,” which is pronounced in Italian like “e” in English, is the simplest sound the language affords; it is without the difference of a consonant, with no sound “counter” to it. It comes from Adam, in his first moment of consciousness, as an ecstatic acknowledgment of the source of all his delight, in a spontaneous act of naming and of praise for his Creator.¹¹ But this human utterance is offered to and, at the same time, offers up a God who will be cheered and jeered countless numbers of times (“he is ee and no counter”). Heard another way, this phrase suggests that the divine name is repeated countless times as a sort of stutter in language. Paradoxically and tragicomically, or fortunately-calamitously, the divine essence, “his nature,” which is in principle absolute simplicity and the source of all goodness and healing, becomes malefic through its appropriation into human languages. The divine nature is made divisive and sectarian essentially by names (“which you may gauge after the bynames was put under him”) used as instruments of appropriation that subvert divinity’s sovereign impartiality. Truly, these are *bi*-names, since they inevitably split the divine nature’s unity: they appropriate God by one name in one language and oppose him to another name in another language, and thus oppose one people to another.

The elegy is for the death of “the G.O.G! He’s duddandgunne now” (FW, p. 25.23). At least initially, ecclesiastical authorities dispose of the legacy of the sacrificial event: “the company of the precentors and of the grammarians of Christpatrick’s ordered concerning thee in the matter of the work of thy tombing” (FW, p. 26.21–3). But, of course, these preceptors, unmasked as lustful and duplicitous centaurs (“precentors”), cannot control divinity and its self-sacrifice exclusively, and God is resurrected in other, popular guises. He is eulogized in this text as open at the “fore” for the laps (and lapses) of goddesses or working girls (“when you were undone in every point fore the laps of goddesses you showed our labourlasses how to free was easy,” FW, p. 25.20–1). These

lasses are made free of labor, laborless, by what is offered as free love, though it could of course make them laboring lasses again in another sense too. There is something divine in the freedom of this sexual activity, although it is also an undoing, presumably of pants, but also of self (“you were undone in every point”). There is thus a hint here of sacrificial self-surrender, the ultimate model for which is Christ’s sacrifice, his kenosis, his being undone completely, even to the point of death on the Cross (Philippians 2:8). But coupled together with this, the arched, stiff or stolid, as well as soiled and spending, phallus looms fecund and loaded with seed as it lowers itself in the lines: “If you were bowed and soild and letdown itself from the oner of the load it was that paddyplanters might pack up plenty.”

This reminiscing over his prowess and potency climaxes in the goggling exclamation elegiacally evoking the deceased with a thinly veiled “By God”: “Begog but he was, the G.O.G!” The eulogized is an awkward figure whose title in this distillation of initials has a clumsy consonance with “God” (much like “Godot” in Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*). From beyond the bounds of orthography and orthodoxy, the text begins to suggest what the deceased has meant and means, or could mean, to his community at large. In the spirit of Joyce’s prolific displays of the endless fecundity of linguistic corruption, this dissemination of significances would potentially embrace everything, even the most perverse things, as accepted, graced, transfigured.

“Gog” appears in Ezekiel 38–9 as the arch foe of Israel in a doomsday battle: “On that day I will give to Gog a place for burial in Israel” (39:11). Gog is defeated and becomes carrion for birds and wild animals, as well as a sacrificial meal for Israel: “Assemble and come, gather from all around to the sacrificial feast that I am preparing for you, a great sacrificial feast on the mountains of Israel, and you shall eat flesh and drink blood” (Ezekiel 39:17). Viewed typologically, this invites mixing together the vengeance on Judgment Day against the “Gog and Magog” (Revelation 20:8) with the eucharistic sacrifice of God in Christ, especially given the eating of His flesh and drinking of His blood. And, of course, Christ’s sacrificial dismemberment is linked with the punishment of Man after the Fall. Joyce evidently revels in conflating together and confounding all these in fact theologically interdependent and mutually inextricable moments of biblical epic history from Creation to Apocalypse.

Even so, the crucial event, the death of God, has not yet changed things, not apparently anyway: “Everything’s going on the same or so it appears to all of us, in the old holmsted here” (FW, p. 26.23–6). The work of the Church, in providing a secure home, which is instead something of a hole (as suggested by “holmsted”), goes on as God’s entombing. This includes, presumably, the writing of the gospels among the linguistic means of mastering the sacrificial catastrophe and its uncontainable grace. Nevertheless, God or “Gunne,” as this character is also called, making him out, not without irony, to be a big-shot, has proved to be a dud, like a shot that fails to fire (“He’s dud-dandgunne now”). True to his name when dead, he is “gunne now,” which evidently says that he is “gone now” but at the same time also hints that he is “going to now,” that is, becoming actual, becoming finally present – Gunne now! This, I suggest, might be taken to be “total presence” in exactly the sense Altizer intends, the total presence made possible uniquely by the death of God as a transcendent reality beyond and inaccessible to the present.

These elucidations are meant, in the first instance, to provide an example of the potential productiveness of Altizer's frame for reading *Finnegans Wake* – and universal history as well, for that matter – in terms of the sacrificial, apocalyptic death of God. The *Wake* seems to open such a comprehensive view of everything “immarginable” (p. 4.19). Yet it does so without comprehending it. The whole story is made rather incomprehensible, at least to all familiar, available faculties and instruments of comprehension. There is definitely a sense of the sacrificial scenario as inescapable and totalizing, yet it is the unlimited equivocity of it all that comes out in Joyce's texts every time, and indeed as prior to the apocalyptically clear, final, theological sense that Altizer's reading inevitably elicits from it.

The languages that totalize God are bound and undergirded with latencies that are not actually or exhaustively revealed. The praise of him goes on as a “suit,” a musical suite or hymn, but also a “following” or sequel, if we hear the French nuances of this word. The phrase “honnein suit,” of course, also says “honey an' sweet,” even in praising the lashes – to mention one more of the contradictory significances compressed into this phrase. Totalizing itself is changed by the gerund continuative into an ongoing process of “totalisating.” This sort of wild equivocity of meanings in the unrestricted linguistic play that the text invites and even obliges us to participate in is bounded only by a principle of repetition, whereby we must be able to recognize elements that have occurred elsewhere, and so are already familiar, as being actualized here and now, albeit with other meanings pointing in different directions. These endless intricacies of repetition are incalculable at innumerable levels, as can be seen straight from the staging of the overarching theme of the “fall” on the first page of the *Wake*:

The fall (babadalgharaghtakamminarronnkonnbronntonnerronntuonnthunntrovarrhounawnskawntoohooordenenthurnuk!) of a once wallstrait oldparr is retailed early in bed and later on life down through all christian minstrelsy. The great fall of the offwall entailed at such short notice the pftjschute of Finnegan, erse solid man, that the humptyhillhead of humself promptly sends an unquiring one well to the west in quest of his tumptytumtoes. (FW, p. 3.15–21)

This passage projects the fall of Adam and Eve, oldest human couple or pair (the “oldparr”), named at the outset of the book a few lines before, backward to the fall of Satan, “unquiring one,” from among the angels, “well to the west” perhaps suggesting the setting of the morning star from Isaiah 14:12: “How art thou fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning.” The passage projects from here forward to the fall of language at the Tower of Babel (the syllables “babadal” beginning a long imitation of babalese). The trajectory of repetition reaches further into a very different register with the reference to the nursery rhyme about Humpty Dumpty's fall from a wall, as well as to an event nearly contemporary to composition, namely, the crash of the stock market, “wallstraight,” in 1929. This word also hints that the confines of Eden may have been claustrophobic, such that the Fall was fortunate, as also in Milton's *Paradise Lost*, according to which, once expelled from the straits of the Garden and its wall, the human pair face an exhilarating prospect opening before them: “The world was all before them” (XII.646). These piggy-backed falls are all replayed also

in the ballad “Finnegan’s Wake” – which gives Joyce’s work its title – about Tim Finnegan falling off a ladder and rising again on the strength of the whisky spilled at his wake.

All these fallings announce what Harry Levin indicated as the work’s “central theme” of the problem of evil and original sin.¹² Typically the repetitions of falling are riotously sacrilegious reversals: this is emphatically so when they are “retaled” in Joyce’s “meandertale” (FW, p. 18.22), which unearths by circuitous routes unsuspected origins and primitive ancestors. Joyce finds an emblem for this recirculation of history in language in the phoenix, cyclically reborn anew from its own ashes. He links this figure with the idea of the happy fall, the *felix culpa*, which is hailed: “O foenix culprit” (p. 23.16). The babelic fall into a multiplicity of languages is the precondition for any such exercise as the *Wake*’s own macaronic mélange of languages.

Joyce’s genius is to discover the trace of patterns of recurrence compressed into words and to release it by tweaking them in such a way that everything seemingly excluded by their proper sense reappears in the deformations that devolve from the resultant, impishly perverse and corrupted form. Minimal slips and shifts of orthography can totally reverse sense and make it ridiculous, diverting it in unexpectedly devious directions. The recurrences that result entail the wildest meetings of opposites and coincidences of contraries. They also result in what it has been customary to term the “layering” of Joyce’s text, ever since Richard Ellmann’s observation concerning Joyce’s “working in layers.”¹³ There are many different levels or layers at which the repetitions alluded to by the text are simultaneously operative.

In the paradoxical anti-*summa* of *Finnegans Wake*, the archives of civilization are ransacked in order to show how every past is contained in every present and will be presented again in every future. This is to continue without any end that is not destined to be repeated: “fin again.” As in dream, where distinctions of tense collapse, time here consists in cyclical repetitions that at the same time evoke an eternal “wake.” Already in *Ulysses*, Leopold Bloom, an undistinguished modern man on an ordinary day, was able to repeat, at whatever distance, making for pathetic parody, the fabled adventures of the Greek epic hero Odysseus known as “Ulysses” through the relay of Latin tradition. The whole story is “history repeating itself with a difference”: in the opening episode Stephen thinks lucidly, “I am another now and yet the same,” as he assists Buck Mulligan in performing his mock eucharistic rite and morning ablutions.¹⁴

In *Finnegans Wake* the possibilities of repetition are multiplied by the myriad different linguistic levels or layerings. One does not even know what language to use to decipher any given word. The text hints that every word in it might be read in seventy different ways, according to its different “types”: “every word will be bound over to carry three score and ten toptypical readings throughout the book of Doublends Jined” (FW, p. 20.14–16). Although this may well mean that “three score and ten” is the number of languages used in the book, following rabbinical and patristic tradition in envisaging a total of seventy nations and a corresponding number of separate tongues on the earth,¹⁵ the possibilities are actually unlimited, to the extent that the languages in play are not discrete and separate but combine and generate, proliferating in new codes beyond and between their presumable boundaries. That the book makes its ends meet in doubleness (“Doublends Jined”), or, as it elsewhere

says, in “doublecrossing twofold truths and devising tingling tailwords” (FW, p. 288.3), suggests a self-replicating, endlessly open circulation that spills out always more from its top, or trails off still a remainder from its tail, rather than completing itself in a closed circuit.

The repetition in question, of course, displaces and in effect reoriginates whatever it repeats in an endless process that the *Wake*’s own wacky language describes as “contonation through regeneration of the urutteration of the word in progress” (FW, p. 284.19–21). Any “ur” utterance is but a continuation of the then not-so-original thunder (Italian: *tuono*) with which language begins as the language of the gods, according to Vico. More than a beginning or origin, it is an ongoing rumbling tone or “contonation.” The word, as a pre-existing quantity or “progress,” is actually heard, in the event, as a word *in progress*. The repetition is thus at the same time an erasure of the original, a negation through oblivion of the *arché*, in “the obluvial waters of our noarchic memory” (FW, p. 80.24). And just as any staking out of a first beginning is destined to be washed away by what comes after, so also no ending can be final in this tumultuous “chaosmos” (FW, p. 118.21).

In the passage on the “pftjschute of Finnegan” (from the French *chute* for “fall,” with onomatopoeic elaboration of the initial consonant), there is a suggestion that Finnegan falls by virtue of a perversion or negation of inquiring. This sin repeats the unauthorized inquiring after knowledge of good and evil in Eden that turned it into an *un*quiring, a false note of disobedience marring cosmic harmony. His fall “well to the west,” furthermore, is the repetition and, in effect, repeal of a line from the Easter Vigil liturgy: “Lucifer, dico, qui nescit occasum,” about the bearer of light, who knows no setting. It alludes to Christ’s rising like the morning star (Revelation 22:16 and Luke 1:78) never to set and is quoted in *Ulysses* at the very moment that “Allbright he falls, proud lightning of the intellect” (p. 50). There, too, the fall is “to evening lands,” that is, to the West, just as in the *Wake* passage, with a hint that this is at the same time a Crucifixion scene (“I thirst”). There may even be a reminiscence of the Dantesque “altezza d’ingegno,” height of genius or pride of intellect, which lies behind the fall of Guido Cavalcanti adumbrated in Canto X of the *Inferno* (line 59). But the *Wake*’s destitute, modern-day Satan, collapsed together with Christ crucified, falls to evening lands in quest not of high intellect but of clumsy and trivial “tump-tytumtoes” at the low end of his body, as he tries to put on his drawers perhaps, having risen or rather fallen out of bed in the morning. This is a good example of how Joyce translates the liturgical past into utterly contemporary language, as Altizer compellingly maintains.

The tremendous creative power of Joyce’s language flows indeed, in large measure, from its assuming the most crass, banal, meaningless language of common, contemporary life – including its advertising slogans and consumer product brand-names, its popular songs, its technical and professional jargon, the trite banter of people in pubs – and transfiguring it all within the frame of a mock-heroic epic that re-enacts revelation of everything in everything else. It thus becomes possible to see the contemporary world and its characteristic speech in an apocalyptic light as re-echoing the most holy verbal heritage of Joyce’s civilization, as it is garnered and transmitted signally in the Latin liturgy of the Roman Catholic Church. Other civilizations, too, are represented by

incorporations especially of otherworldly and apocalyptic motifs from texts including the Egyptian and the Tibetan Books of the Dead, the Koran, the Indian Vedas, and the Chinese Book of Changes.

Such is the powerfully syncretistic apocalyptic vision that Joyce actualizes in his epic. Still, this vision is for Joyce essentially that of the Bible. The whole history of the world is revealed in its essential dynamic by the Bible in its core narrative of the death and resurrection of Christ as celebrated in the Eucharist. Joyce's literary work continues this eucharistic breaking and dispersal of the Word in its profanation by human words. This profanation of the Word coincides with what can become the sanctification of human words: through their fragmenting and violent dismemberment they become transfigured as sacraments of Christ's self-sacrificial, saving act. Joyce's literary work thus becomes not only a verbal echo of themes from the Bible but the actual, material re-enactment in incarnation and dissemination of its central event.

Notes

- 1 Essential bibliography on the broad topic of Joyce and the Bible includes Robert Boyle, SJ, *James Joyce's Pauline Vision: A Catholic Exposition* (Southern Illinois University Press, Carbondale, 1978); Giuseppe Martella, *Ulisse: Parallelo biblico e modernità* (Cooperativa Libreria Universitaria, Bologna, 1997); Gian Balsamo, *Scriptural Poetics in Joyce's Finnegans Wake* (Edwin Mellon Press, Lewiston, NY, 2002); and Virginia Moseley, *Joyce and the Bible* (Northern Illinois University Press, DeKalb, 1967).
- 2 Altizer's theses on Christian epic are developed in detailed literary-critical studies of his selection of Christian epic poets in *History as Apocalypse* (State University of New York Press, Albany, 1985). These views are integrated, furthermore, into his general theology, especially in *Genesis and Apocalypse: A Theological Voyage Toward Authentic Christianity* (Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY, 1990) and again in *The Genesis of God: A Theological Genealogy* (Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY, 1993).
- 3 The body of this chapter is adapted from material in chapter 4 of my book *Poetry and Apocalypse: Theological Disclosures of Poetic Language*, forthcoming from Stanford University Press.
- 4 Northrop Frye, "Quest and Cycle in *Finnegans Wake*," in *Fables of Identity: Studies in Poetic Mythology* (Harcourt, Brace and World, New York, 1963), pp. 256–7.
- 5 Robert Alter, *Canon and Creativity* (Yale University Press, New Haven, CT, 2000), p. 20.
- 6 See Altizer's *Mircea Eliade and the Dialectic of the Sacred* (The Westminster Press, Philadelphia, 1963).
- 7 Altizer's *Total Presence: The Language of Jesus and the Language of Today* (Seabury Press, New York, 1980) gives an outline of this and several other guiding insights that remain crucial for him throughout his career.
- 8 *Finnegans Wake*, 3rd edn (Faber and Faber, London 1964 [1939]), p. 381.23–4 (hereafter cited as FW). The passage is quoted in *Genesis and Apocalypse*, p. 171.
- 9 Altizer, *History as Apocalypse*, p. 218.
- 10 Andrew John Mitchell, "'So it appeals to all of us': The Death of God, *Finnegans Wake*, and the Eternal Recurrence," *James Joyce Quarterly* 39:3 (Spring 2002), 419–34.
- 11 In *De vulgari eloquentia* I, iv, Dante describes Adam's first word or *primoquium* in just these terms. In this earlier treatise, he still held Hebrew to be Adam's language in Eden, and thus

“El,” the Name of God in Hebrew, to be the first word humanly spoken. The later substitution in *Paradiso XXVI* of *I* as the original human Name of God evidences a greater depth of speculative reflection.

- 12 Harry Levin, *James Joyce: A Critical Introduction* (Faber, London, 1960 [1941]), p. 134.
- 13 Richard Ellmann, *James Joyce*, rev. edn (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1982), p. 546.
- 14 James Joyce, *Ulysses* (Vintage, New York, 1990 [1934]). Citations from p. 638 and p. 12.
- 15 See Laurent Milesi, “L’idiome babélien de *Finnegans Wake*: Recherches thématiques dans une perspective génétique,” in Claude Jacquet, ed., *Genèse de Babel: Joyce et la création* (CNRS, Paris, 1985), pp. 155–215.