LINGUISTIC REPETITION AS THEOLOGICAL REVELATION IN CHRISTIAN EPIC TRADITION: THE CASE OF JOYCE'S FINNEGANS WAKE

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Abstract

This essay places Joyce's Finnegans Wake in the tradition of Christian epic poetry and explores its continuation of the claim to theological revelation in and through the poetic word. It brings to light the theological underpinnings of structures of repetition inherent in language, in its phonemic and graphic materials, as exposed by Joyce's inimitable juggling and shuffling with his linguistic medium, bringing out unsuspected nuances by deforming, recombining and juxtaposing linguistic signifiers. This opens a very new perspective on theological revelation in its constitutively verbal and performative character, even while maintaining constant contact with the revelation of the Word in the Bible and its appropriation by forms of literary discourse from the epic to the novel.

The Divine Comedy was recognized first in 1914-1915 by György Lukács as the archetype of the modern novel. Since then, many scholars have pursued this genealogy, including Gianfranco Contini, particularly via the comparison of Dante with Proust.² Vittorio Russo's Il 'romanzo teologico'. Sondaggi sulla 'Commedia' di Dante, borrowing the denomination "theological novel" from Benedetto Croce, but reversing its pejorative connotation, made Dante's inauguration of the novelistic into the guiding insight for reading his poem.³ Also in later revisitings of this thesis, Russo emphasized a variety of features in virtue of which the Commedia anticipates the genre of the novel.4 Its multi-lingualism, its realistic representation of historical and contemporary persons and events, as well as of society and its ideologies, its narrating "I" presenting the author as protagonist all these features will be developed to the full extent of their possibilities particularly in the novel. Furthermore, all are features of a new field for representation of reality that the novel will make its own in subsequent centuries, especially from the 18th century on. 5 Nevertheless, each of these aspects of representation emerges from and re-

mains bound to the Christian epic tradition. Just as in the biblical revelation of Holy Scripture, so in sub-canonical literary representation, especially in the genre of epic, language becomes the medium of a disclosure of human life in its full and final meaning. The deep connections between the emergence of poetic narrative as a form of poetic-prophetic revelation in the Christian epic and the sort of experience crystallized in Joyce's novels reach down to the very roots of modern consciousness. Translating the revelation of the divine Word into worldly words of literature perdures in the modern period as an abiding ambition of major poetic texts. Pursuing this common project, Christian epics represent a signally revealing point of departure and Joyce's novels a fittingly apocalyptic culmination.

Christian epic, particularly as invented by Dante, proposes the experience of the individual subject as a definitive revelation of the ultimate reality of human existence and thereby also of divinity. The person who says "I" in the Divine Comedy opens a prophetic purview into the eternal verities of the life to come and finally into the divine essence itself. He achieves this by relating his personal experience in an extensive autobiographical narrative. It is the richness of Dante's own personality as it pervades every encounter with historical and contemporary figures in the poem that transfigures even abstract theological doctrine, making it into an eminently personal revelation felt in the intimate recesses of individual consciousness. This can be confirmed from beginning to end of the poem, in representations from Francesca to Ulysses to Bellacqua, and further to Beatrice and Bernard, and in the personal accents and passions giving every episode its distinctive character and poignancy. Since the figures Dante encounters, as represented in the poem, are all his own interpretations, the whole poem in every aspect can be read as an exercise in self-interpretation, as a building up of individual self-consciousness in a way that Hegel was to articulate and communicate to Auerbach and thereby to the common heritage of Dante criticism. As Hegel observed: "In this matter Dante's Divine Comedy has an especially remarkable position. In it the epic poet himself is the one individual to whose wanderings through Hell, Purgatory, and Paradisc each and every incident is linked, so that he can recount the productions of his imagination as his own experiences and therefore acquires the right, to a greater extent than is allowed to other epic poets, of interweaving his own feelings and reflections with the objective side of his work." Everything encountered by the protagonist at the same time reflects upon the author and his self-interpretation of his existence in evolution towards God.

Dante's lead in appropriating the eternal verities of Christian revelation for the imaginative re-elaboration of the concrete, historical experience of an individual, filtered through the medium of a poetic language, and thus expressive of the inner motives of action and nuances of feeling, opens a field to be explored in the ensuing centuries by Christian epic in its myriad forms, including, finally, the form of the novel. The modernity of Dante's appropriation of Christian revelation is measured especially by its phenomenological method of exploring a purportedly transcendent truth in the immanence of experience. The phenomenological reduction identifies the real with what appears in experience. Dante's poem, in making his experience a revelation of ultimate reality, applies a comparable method which, more than a reduction, is an opening of a new field of possibilities to be explored. Still, this discovery of reality as verified and even constituted by experience essentially links Christian epic as it emerges from the Middle Ages with the most characteristically modern patterns of thought and experience that will eventually be embodied in their extreme implications in Joyce's writings. This tremendously empowering innovation places religion on a new foundation where experience is its source and authority, and this is the vein of revelation that Joyce's religious vision works and exploits in collaboration with the entire Christian epic tradition.

Of course, Joyce is exemplary rather than exceptional in this regard. Many other masters of the modern novel have followed in Dante's tracks by adapting traditional motifs of revelation, such as the descent into hell, to the exploration of experience from the point of view of the interiority of consciousness. Noteworthy cases include Louis-Ferdinand Céline, Virginia Woolf, and Peter Weiss. In a different style, Georges Bataille, both as novelist and theorist, continues this line of exploration of religious revelation in the pursuit of "inner experience" to certain extremes of possibility.

The re-situating of theological revelation in the existence and consciousness of an individual numbers among its consequences the shattering of revelation into an open set of reenactments or repetitions. The time and place of disclosure of truth depend on the particular protagonist immersed in the contingencies of a singular existence. The reader, then, becomes a further locus of revelation by repeating the experience and the discoveries of the protagonist. Revelation and repetition become mutually dependent moments: only in being repeated can revelation be realized and validated.

This identification of experience as it is accessible to an individual subject with the truth of things themselves also constitutes the

with the world and consciousness.¹¹ The reflexivity characteristic of self-consciousness reveals and realizes itself concretely in the self-reflexiveness of language.

Joyce purposefully dismantles every conventional organizing structure of narration and takes completely to pieces any familiar order of language itself. Yet, in this process, the self-reflexive essence of language is heightened rather than obliterated, and it reflects into everything Joyce represents. He remains obsessed with the phenomenon of recurrence, of repetition, that is, of "recirculation," as it is termed from the opening lines of Finnegans Wake. The very linearity of time, its "riverrun," in the classic Heraclitean metaphor, presupposes a circularity whereby a certain sameness enables elements to be perceived as belonging together, as forming a series, be it only a series of two or three syllables, in which repetition structures the stream of speech into units with a wholeness holding them together. Without such recurrences, the universe would just be infinitely dispersed, whereas recurrence effects a movement of recuperation and recapitulation in and out of dispersion. 12

Joyce led consciousness, particularly the self-consciousness of the individual as represented in his alter-egos, down a path of progressive dissolution. He reflected self-consciousness so deeply into itself that it shattered and was no longer clearly set off against either the consciousness of others or the world itself. His stream of consciousness flooded over all conceivable embankments and immersed the whole world of consciousness in a sea of the unconscious, where individual identities were no longer distinct but merged into one another. The dissolution of individual consciousness and its dispersal into the body certainly represents one crucial strand of Joyce's development of the novel form. But bound up with this - as Finnegans Wake renders particularly palpable - is the disintegration of the medium by which consciousness constitutes itself and in which it is also dispersed, namely, language. It is in the transformations wrought upon language that we grasp most readily how the "revelation" Joyce proffers can still be considered, in essential ways, theological in nature. Joyce realizes what in the end is not only a breaking and fragmenting and profaning of language but also what can be called, in the language of theology, a eucharistic transfiguration of the word. It is "transfiguration" in the sense of a transfer of potency from figure to figure that affirms the word - even in its distortion and demolition - as an enhanced and empowered version of itself. This revelation may be considered theological at least in the minimal sense that the word's very dissolution reveals a submerged centeredness of sense, of all sense in an implicit, unsayable One, precisely in the moment that this centeredness comes undone.

It is perhaps not at first obvious that any theological motivations determine Joyce's strident violation and dispersal of the word. So it is necessary here to pose very basic questions. Perhaps the most challenging theological question regarding Joyce is that of how language as a dynamic happening, continually in process of formation and deformation, as epitomized by Joyce's "work in progress," can be a revelation, a locus of the happening of truth, a truth transcending the isolated material elements into which language and all reality fragment when every ideal structure collapses and all prefabricated sense is smashed. Does the prophetic claim to revelation on the part of Christian prophetic poets, then, have a counterpart in Joyce's further transformation, apparently an exasperation, of Christian epic tradition?

The traditional epic and prophetic ambition to represent the totality of history, myth and cosmos is still very much alive in Joyce's epic, as is suggested by the proper names alone of Finnegans Wake, beginning with Adam and Eve, including Ceasar, Brutus and Cassius (that is, Burrus and Caseous), Tristan (confounded with Tristram) and Isolde (Issy), Abraham, Isaac, Noah, Shem, Japheth, Buddha, Mohammed, and, most inclusively of all. Here Comes Everybody (H.C.E.).¹³ This all-inclusiveness is confirmed by the spatial and geographic dimensions of the novel with its presumable center in Dublin's Howth Castle at the mouth of the river Liffey (names in which places and persons coalesce) but ranging across continents, straddling, from the very first lines, Nord Armorica and Europe Minor, from there to spread linguistically to the Orient and remotest areas of the earth. Another measure of the work's all-inclusive catholicity is the unrestricted range of languages it draws into its linguistic mix. Of course, the inclusiveness or totality in question can never be totalized and remains perpetually open to new inclusions. Mutations, equivocations, virtual identifications and associations in these names open up pluralities of possible interpretations that prove inexhaustible. In general, Joyce's literary formulations serve as functions for producing new connections. It is their limitless generative potency rather than any definitely circumscribed field of references, however comprehensive, that constitutes their opening into a universal embrace.

Given this unrestricted range, it often seems that any sense of a centered narrative and of unity of consciousness is destroyed by Joyce in his disarticulation and dismembering of all conventional

narrative forms together with his transgressions of all linguistic norms down to basic grammar and orthography. Still, such fragmentation and deliberate scrabbling of form may be pursued for the purpose of effecting, or at least enabling, a reintegration at another level, a level perhaps transcending every possible system and even conceivable principle. Such a quintessentially modernist pattern takes on a clear doctrinal motivation, for example, in T. S. Eliot's poetic development from The Waste Land's fragments shored against his ruin to the mystic music of Four Quartets. Eliot made public his return to Chrisitianity and his adherence to the Anglo-Catholic Church. By contrast, for Joyce there is no declared doctrinal allegiance nor perhaps intent, but still his language itself manages to trace a path of return and to center itself through repetition. For repetition is per se a revelation of some structure transcending the merely fragmentary: it constitutes or suggests an at least virtual joining together in a higher synthesis of a hypothetical whole. Repetition produces a sort of eternal time of the text, whose end is at the same time its beginning. This time of repetition is realized in the simultaneity of all elements, including latent ones, together in a language. The rhetorical philosophy of Giambattista Vico in the Scienza nuova discovers this dimension as an "ideal eternal history." To the extent that the structures of centeredness and totality created by repetition are essentially theological, as has become more and more evident in postmodern thought, Joyce can be read as reproposing the theological vision of Christian epic in a new, more radical form, freed from dogmatic accretions but activated in its essential creative energies.

If there can be any overarching theme to Finnegans Wake, then it is best defined as the theme of recurrence signaled from the opening and again in the closing words, and in fact already in the title. The name "Finnegan," that is, "Finn again," sounds like the end, finis, over again. This theme coalesces with that of resurrection, of a summoning of all Irish or all humans to wake up to life, if we read the title as plural and verbal, as indeed the lack of an apostrophe invites us to do: (All) Finnegans Wake (Up)! As an imperative addressed to all Irish, and by synechdochy to all humanity, in the name of a mythic ancestor, the title announces not so much an end, "fin," as a beginning again, a reawakening or even a resurrection.

Of course, any solemn, sacralizing reading of resurrection can be but partial and is set up to be raucously reversed. "Hohohoho, Mister Finn, you're going to be Mister Finnagain!" roars boisterous and exultant. The uproarious spirit of the whole book and its author is condensed into the deformative declensions of the name in the title: "Hahahaha, Mister Funn, you're going to be fined again!" How many different meanings recur in a phonemic phenomenon that slides from fin to fun to fine? To be fined here suggests, in addition to being monetarily penalized, also being ended, finished, and perhaps also, transitively, being made fine, that is, being refined, a recurrent motif in modern literary tradition from its troubadouric origins in fin amor. All these virtual evocations involve repetitions of cultural tradition, a notion suggested to Joyce by the historical cycles or ricorsi of Vico, alluded to from the book's very first phrase, with its mention of "a commodius vicus of recirculation" (p. 3).

Repetition can be a way of freeing oneself from the alienation of the past by assuming and, in effect, doing it all over again oneself, freely, as one's own. In this sense, repetition frees the future from being mortgaged to the past. Kierkegaard first theorized a form of repetition oriented towards the future; comparable notions have been developed philosophically by Nietzsche and Heidegger. Nietzsche's declaring "Thus I willed it" with regard to everything in order to overcome resentment and oppression by the past and its "it was" fixed like a gravestone is a repetition designed to reenact the past in a dimension of freedom, so as to no longer be conditioned by it as by an albatross about one's neck, an inert mass or fatality that cannot be changed. The act of repetition in this way becomes the origin of a new universe, the beginning of a new history. Certainly this view of repetition captures an important aspect of Joyce's thought and illuminates what he means by recirculation and ricorso. Essential to this view is that even in its act of negating the totality of the past as past, repetition creates a new totality of all that was past, only now centered in itself, in the present act of repetition, and projected towards the future that is anticipated (or anteriorly repeated).

Repetition, by the role it takes on in Joyce's text, constitutes the last remnant — but still the very essence, stripped to its core — of a centered and totalized order. In this minimal phenomenon of repetition, a totality centered in the syllable or in the sequence of letters — whatever serves as a minimal fragment reflecting the order of the universe — is made present or is at least glimpsed as a fleeting, yet structuring and necessary moment. Centeredness and totality are irreducibly theological postulates, for they imply ultimately an infinite consciousness. A center and a whole do not and cannot exist divorced from all subjectivity. They are perceptions, phenomena, structures that need to be perceived in order to be at all.

aloud with a Gaelic accent in the monotonous repetitions of the Hail Mary in its second part ("Holy Mary, mother of God ... "), giving this free linguistic play a sharp satirical point. A further permutation of these phonetic forms into "hellmurries" will make the blasphemous possibilities here even more evident, though this may only mean that the distance between blasphemy and piety has been collapsed, since, as the text reminds us, everything is sacred for a blasphemer: "tout est sacré pour un sacreur."

Joyce's ostensible subversive dissolving and dismembering of language in this way actually brings its indestructable propensity towards interconnectedness to the surface. Though oftentimes his puns may be impertinent and apparently superfluous to any specifiable intents and purposes, their sap and savor and seductiveness are such as to make any superimposed programs of meaning pale by comparison with the mutations' own intrinsic suggestiveness. One is persuaded to abandon the attempt to understand words as used to mean something preconceived in order to let them stray from their standard senses and proliferate in meanings in a promiscuous, carnevalesque engendering of identities of each potentially with all.

Just as the poets of the Christian epic had shown that divinity could be experienced as immanent to the subject, not as an Other in objective form but as dwelling in the very self-reflexive structure of consciousness, as the form of experience rather than any determinate or objective content of experience, as therefore infinite rather than finite, so Joyce shows that language itself, without any preconceived subjective intent, is already inhabited by the essentially theological structures of centeredness and totality as manifest in the irrepressible life of repetition. Theology here is not any mere intention or velleity of the writer, but is disclosed as inherent in the writing and in the words themselves.

Repetition, as used by Joyce, implies a structure of return and even of a hypothetical whole. By thematizing this circular pattern, Joyce creates the grounds for faith that alpha and omega belong to the same language-in-process, though this may consist in many amalgamated languages, across all the dislocations that unrestricted combinatorial play with the alphabet can invent. Indeed language can no longer be conceived as a self-enclosed system proper to a national entity or ethnicity but is itself opened up as a field traversed by an indeterminate set of uncircumscribable idioms. Joyce has realized that neither his nor any finite creature's thought will ever comprehend the sense that is present and absent, alive and dead, mummified and vibrant in its language. "For if sciencium (what's

what) can mute uns nought, 'a thought, abought the Great Sommboddy within the Omniboss, perhops an artsaccord (hoot's hoot) might sing urms tumtim abutt the Little Newbuddies that ring his panch" (p. 415). The thought of God, the supreme authority or boss of all ("Omniboss") in the realm of the subject, a great Somebody (more literally and concretely the highest — "summa" — body), may give voice to epic poetry ("might sing urms," as in the Aeneid's "Arms and the man I sing," with an emphasis on epic's striving to represent the original "ur" event, as well as representing, according to the letter, a dead civilization, an "urn"), for science cannot silence us ("can mute uns nought") with all its apodeictic certainties. Even a verbal mutation such as "somethink" suggests that there is an anonymous thought of someone behind everything, everything that language can name as "something."

Repetition is a mechanism that structures Joyce's language, just as it structures any language, most conspicuously poetic language, and it is here thematized both microscopically, in minute hints that stumble upon otherwise scarcely perceptible reiterations, and in the Wake's overarching "theme" as signalled from the opening lines. Not only are etymological origins of words evoked by Joyce's morphological deformations. All sorts of random associations, having nothing to do with words' etymological histories, are also made: Finnegan's living "in the broadest way immarginable" raises the question whether the imaginable is marginal, even while placing linguistic imagination into the central focus and testifying to this inventivity as without confinement, as unlimited and unstoppable, "imm-arginable" ("arginare" in Italian means "to set limits," literally "to dam"). Language is a maze and a matrix of such gratuitous connections and suggestions. Without presuming actual historical relations of derivation and dependence, phenomena of repetition multiply with their unlimited hints and simulations of sense. Buried in any of Joyce's word lists are myriad, incalculable such associations. What are the presuppositions of this universe of recurrences in which the master narrative is fragmented and submerged? Are these unmistakable elements of association, of ineluctable reiteration, the signs of a theology that has simply become less obvious but more pervasive, invading the very sub-semantic, pre-linguistic constitutive material of the word?

Joyce shows that the *ricorenze* or cycles and returnings of history are inherent within language itself: they constitute this medium's own intrinsic energy. Beyond all the purposes consciously pursued by the artist, language has purposes and directions of its own. To

disclose this mind inherent in his medium itself, Joyce has to deliberately undo the determinations consciously given to language from without: he has to neutralize or nullify his own use of it as an instrument to express his thought — except insofar as the thoughts that emerge from his language themselves happen to be those he is in search of beneath all conscious surfaces of his thinking. The returns or repetitions where synthesis takes place are thereby exposed as produced spontaneously by language itself in its own errant perambulations and uncontrollable metamorphoses. Of course, it is well known that Joyce lavished unrelenting labors on the construction and elaboration of his language, through innumerable drafts, of the various sections of *Finnegans Wake*. The spontaneity of language is not reached by avoiding all conscious work upon it. On the contrary, these inherent energies are released by the artist's carefully calculated interventions.

F. R. Leavis scathingly criticized Joyce for pursuing the development of his medium for its own sake, rather than in response to "a pressure of something to be conveyed," such as Leavis found to be exemplarily the case in Shakespeare. Edmund Wilson similarly worried over "what seems Joyce's growing self-indulgence in an impulse to pure verbal play." This autonomy of the word with respect to any fully extra-linguistic field of reference, however, is a mode of revelation already thoroughly integrated into Christian poetic tradition from Dante's Paradiso on. Milton, too, is ever again criticized for overwhelming his reader with "organ music" in purely rhetorical excesses that obfuscate sense. 17 But there is a sphere of revelation immanent to the word - the moreso wherever it may also be believed to be a theological Word. Whatever he may believe theologically, Joyce shows how the whole universe in its infinity can be teased out of words in their inexhaustible permutations and inarrestable engenderings of sense. The question remains whether this triggering of language into the unfettered release of its untold energies is to be understood as the demise, or as an apotheosis, of theology. In any case it is a transformation of theology. Not any fixed doctrine or dogmatic discourse, theology must be understood rather as the divinity of the word itself in the inifinity of its creative capabilities. Such is the divine word - theou logos - revealed most basically by repetition in the language of Finnegans Wake.

Criticism of Joyce has been greatly enriched by certain distinguished efforts to read him back into the Christian epic and biblical prophetic traditions. In particular, Northrop Frye excavated the Blakean parallels and overall pattern of *Finnegans Wake*, identifying

Blake's Albion, a giant form embracing a whole nation and all humanity, as model for Finnegan. More consolidated and programmatic in their theological intent are Thomas J. J. Altizer's ambitious and compelling readings of Joyce in the context of Christian epics, especially those of Dante, Milton, and Blake. A further extremely suggestive approach has been offered by Donald Phillip Verene through Vico, who after all is Joyce's acknowledged source for thinking repetition – the repetition of natural law (ius naturale gentium) in history as revelation of divine providence in such a way that "the inner form of every event in the human world is a cycle." Another recent contribution with some attention to Vico and a sense for Joyce's writing as theological revelation in the tradition of Dante – in some sense a repetition of Dante at the heart of the modernist project of "making it new" – is Lucia Boldrini's. 21

Such studies point the way towards what is now opening up as a very rich field for further investigation and for theologically sensitive methods of reading Joyce. In a reversal of the rejection of theology that has been typical, if not constitutive, of the entire modern critical frame-of-mind, theological modes of thought and representation are thus discovered to be key to Joyce's articulation of his quintessentially modernist vision. Provocative new work particularly by Gian Balsamo and Giuseppe Martella aims programmatically to redefine our understanding of the possibilities of theological disclosure in act in Joyce's language and texts. This work finds the typological poetics of the Bible employed with dazzling originality by Joyce to make himself the father of his own predecessors, just as the New Testament claims to reveal the truth of the Old.²² The dialectic of genres, moreover, particularly of law, prophecy, and gospel in the Bible is shown to be the basis for the complex interplay between forms of writing such as the novel, romance, and history or chronicle in modern discourse as reformulated by Joyce.²³ Joyce redeploys these traditional, biblical modalities of revealing truth in a burlesque, parodic manner that undermines them and yet elicits from the resulting farrago of equivocation and contradiction a divine comedy that triumphs as the only possible form of true and total disclosure in the modern age. Joyce's poem, which rewrites the sacred history of Western culture in an ironic key, is unveiled as paradigmatic for literature and as a revolutionary, modern approach to theological vision.

This line of criticism is demonstrating with increasing *éclat* how religious revelation can be continued and carried beyond the confines of the biblical canon by self-conscious literary artists and can

- 14. James Joyce, Finnegans Wake, London: Faber and Faber, 1939, p. 5.
- 15. Umberto Eco, Le poetiche di Joyce, Milan: Bompiani, 1982 writes of a "rebirth through the total acceptance, without reservations, of dissolution represented in its elementary nucleuses transposed into a linguistic key" ("... rinascita attraverso l'accettazione totale, senza riserve, della dissoluzione, rappresentata nei suoi nuclei elementari, trasposti in chiave linguistica," p. 127).
- 16. Leavis and Wilson are quoted from *The Importance of Scrutiny*, New York: New York University Press, 1964, ed. Eric Bentley, p. 316 and p. 367 respectively.
- 17. This interpretation goes back to T. S. Eliot, "Milton," On Poetry and Poets, New York: Farrar, 1957.
- 18. Northrop Frye, "Quest and Cycle in Finnegans Wake," in Fables of Identity: Studies in Poetic Mythology, New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1963.
 - 19. Altizer, History as Apocalypse (n. 10).
- 20. Donald Phillip Verene, Knowledge of Things Human and Divine: Vico's New Science and Finnegans Wake, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003, p. 201.
- 21. Lucia Boldrini, Joyce, Dante, and the Poetics of Literary Relations: Language and Meaning in Finnegans Wake, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001, p. 3.
- 22. Gian Balsamo, Scriptural Poetics in Joyce's Finnegans Wake, Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellon Press, 2002; Rituals of Literature: Joyce, Dante, Saint Thomas, and the Tradition of Christian Epics, Lewisburg, Pennsylvania: Bucknell University Press, 2003; and Joyce's Messianism: Dante, Negative Existence and the Messianic Self, Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2004.
- 23. Giuseppe Martella, *Ulisse: parallelo biblico e modernità*, Bologna: Cooperativa Libraria Universitaria, 1997.