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essay

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'down through all Christian minstrelsy'

Genesis, James Joyce and Contemporary Vocabularies of Creation

(For Thomas Altizer)

Like the texts, ancient and modern, with which it sports and plays, this essay is more to be devoured than understood precisely. It refuses the role of an abstract commentary, but dares to dally with the word in Scripture, in Blake and Coleridge, and above all in James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*. Its words enjoy conversations with one another, and echo across the spaces of the text, demanding the attention of a listener, as to a piece of music, as much as a reader seeking understanding. As a meta-narrative, it dares to claim an equality with those with whom it converses, as the poets with the prophets and Milton with Genesis, daring even to the "ruin of sacred truths".¹ Though such truths, it should be said can well look after themselves. Rather, in reading Joyce, I follow the example of another Irishman, the biblical scholar Stephen Moore, in the compliment which he pays to the Gospels, when he asserts that "I am eager to reply to the Gospels in kind, to write in a related idiom. Rather than take a jackhammer to the concrete, parabolic language of the Gospels, replacing graphic images with abstract categories. I prefer to respond to a pictographic text pictographically, to a narrative text narratively, producing a critical text that is a postmodern analogue of the premodern text that it purports to read."² Indeed, I presume to go even further than this in the proposing of a theology in the very language and the act of reading that it prompts and requires. In the read word is life.

The poet William Blake once remarked, rather casually, in 'A memorable Fancy':

The prophets Isaiah and Ezekiel dined with me and I asked them how they dared so roundly assert that God spoke to them; and whether they did not think at the time that they would be misunderstood, and so be the cause of imposition.³

In his time, Blake was not alone in his poetic presumption. His fellow Romantic poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge sought in his poetry the very language of heaven, words as living things, most deeply to be found in the Scriptures as 'consubstantial with the truths, of which they are the conductors'.⁴ Such words, indeed, are, in Coleridge's description of them, the very wheels of the chariot which Ezekiel beheld 'when the hand of the Lord was upon him' – the actual vehicles which bear up, for us, the very throne of the Divine. Throughout his life, Coleridge was absorbed in the mystery of the Logos, the Word of the first chapter of the Fourth Gospel, and he proposed a major (and never written) work on 'the Power and Use of Words' – the *Logosophia*.⁵ Coleridge was certainly familiar with the deeply Anglican tradition,⁶ learned from Archbishop Cranmer, and before him Erasmus, inscribed in the liturgies of the 1549 and 1552 Prayer Books, of Christ the Logos as the human form of divine speech, and the understanding of Logos not as a singular word, but as copious discourse, as 'sermo', literally to be consumed and ingested in the participation in the Eucharist and Scripture. Thus in Cranmer's Collect for the Second Sunday in Advent, we take the word of Scripture to 'read, mark, learn and *inwardly digest*' in order to 'embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life'.⁷

Both Blake and Coleridge took and embraced as poets the creative speech and Word of God, realizing fully that words are 'living powers, by which the things of most importance to mankind are actuated, combined and humanized'.⁸ Both focus insistently upon the first chapter of St. John's Gospel and its description of the Word made flesh (John 1: 14), and thus to the Word which at once names and is Jesus. Their concern is not with the historical presence of Jesus in time, but rather with the Word through whom all things come into being. This is why Blake, in all his prophetic oddity perhaps the most Christocentric of all Christian visionaries, gives such reverence to the *name* of *Jesus*, though not to the Jesus of the Church or of Christendom in whom he has no interest. This is because, for him, Jesus *is* the very vocabulary of Creation and Creativity, the utterance and enactment of an actual descent into hell that is an absolute blasphemy and that is nevertheless alone salvation, finally only realized in a poetics of silence and total presence, an absolute inwardness, so that in Christ alone, as Thomas Altizer expresses it, 'the real ending of speech is the dawning of resurrection, and the final ending of speech is the dawning of a totally present actuality'.⁹ Language then simply and impossibly *is*, that is without referential distractions. Language truly begins only when speech is truly impossible, an end which is the true beginning, as in Jesus' final word from the Cross in the Fourth Gospel Tete,lestai, 'It is finished' (Jn 19.30), both dead and perfected.

In James Joyce's two great epics, *Ulysses* (1922) and *Finnegans Wake* (1939), there is an epiphany of Satan, albeit silent and impassive, a Satan who is actually one with Christ, and a Christ who is one with Satan in the creative moment of the Fall (a Christ who is known also to Blake), that is a collapse into the necessary original sin of language acknowledged as the fortunate fall or *felix culpa*. In Joyce's words at the beginning of *Finnegans Wake*, 'The fall [...] of a once wallstrait oldparr is retaled early in bed and later on life down through all Christian minstrelsy'.¹⁰ It is actually creatively 'retaled' – endlessly retold – yet not in Christendom, but rather in the creative human act of copulation itself (understood by St. Augustine as the first sinful act after the Fall) and spoken, later in life, in the words, not of theologians and church-people but of the poets and minstrels. This deeply creative original sin is, for Joyce, God's actual creation of the world,¹¹ where, in the words of Jean-Michel Rabaté, 'There is no devouring of the host, no communion, in a word, that is not prey to the convoluted circuit of the father's bowels.' In the dialectics of mystical fatherhood in *Finnegans Wake*, the father's sin, the original sin of the divine 'Loud' of creation who thunders among the clouds, is anal – this Lord is like the God of Moses who showed his 'back parts' to him instead of his face. And in his turn, as Rabaté puts it, 'Moses, too, is a father who founds paternity upon the void, upon a cloud of incertitude that hides his own God, upon the living doubt which abhors material or maternal representations'.¹²

To forbid the adoration of visible forms in the spirit of iconoclasm is a way of barring the way back to the mother, and in Joyce's epic the original sin of creation by the Father is finally only realized in the death in which, to use Stephen Dedalus' words in *Ulysses* (Episode IX), Father and Son are 'sundered by a bodily shame so steadfast that the criminal annals of the world, stained with all other incests and bestialities, hardly records its breach'.¹³ This creative enormity is the subject of some of the most complex pages of the *Wake*, the very first part to be written, and eventually constituting the conclusion of Book II, chapter iii, most deeply sacramental and eucharistic (Joyce's word is 'Euchrerisk') and drawing deeply on the Roman Catholic liturgy for Holy Saturday. Joyce's language never ceased to feed upon the sacramental body of the liturgy even and especially in its death. In the dark monotheism of divine creation is a divine acceptance of death – *I've a terrible errible lot todue todie tootorrible-day*¹⁴ – a death realized in the language of the *Wake*, and constantly repeated, but from which arises out of the sleeping Godhead ('Grant sleep in hour's time, Loud') the 'original sun', indeed a *felix culpa* and a 'felicitous culpability'. In the dazzling word-play of the *Wake* is conjured a creation out of the

very bodily shame of the Father, which is a true and absolute negation or kenosis, a self-emptying that is only finally consummated in the last page of the book, in the resurrection of Anna Livia Plurabelle, a resurrection that absorbs the power of the Godhead and finally recovers the feminine with a creative sensuality of word that Christian theology itself has actually systematically denied and eliminated in the insistent cult of Mary's perpetual virginity.

So. Avelaval. My leaves have drifted from me. All. But one clings still. I'll bear it on me. To remind me of. Lff! So soft this morning, ours. Yes.¹⁵

The final "yes" of the *Wake* then takes us back again to the final triumphant, orgasmic shout of Molly Bloom in *Ulysses*:

[...] and then he asked me would I yes to say yes my mountain flower and first I put my arms around him and drew him down to me so he could feel my breasts all perfume yes and his heart was going like mad and yes I said yes I will Yes.¹⁶

The moment of creation, the moment of sexual consummation and conception is only realized fully in the very language and word of the *Wake* (of which more later), and which in its final anamnesis is fulfilled and completed only when it is realized that the end is simply the beginning, the last page of the book only making possible the reading, though not for the first time, of the first page, at the beginning, in Dublin. To read the book you must first read the book – the birth of the reader in the death of the author¹⁷ – but, as Joyce asks gruffly, who wrote the durn thing anyhow?

(End) Finn, again! Take. Bussoftlhee, mememormee! Till thousandsthee. Lps. The keys to. Given! A way a lone a last a loved a long the [...]

(Beginning) Riverrun, past Eve and Adam's, from the swerve of shore to bend of bay, brings us by a commodius vicus of recirculation back to Howth Castle and Environs.¹⁸

In our end is our beginning – and how to *read* this circularity in *The Wake* whereby the beginning can only be read in the light of the end, and reading only begin when it is already finished? That is the mystery, the question that the reader must insistently ask. As Samuel Beckett once said, Joyce's words are alive, living powers and words themselves made flesh, not to be taken simply with the mind, but ingested, chewed slowly and lovingly until they partake of being. So to speak is to create, is to be, as the book dies (everything to be done backwards) in a cosmic crucifixion, which alone enables a cosmic resurrection. In the reading, the words only begin to come to life when they have already been consumed, have become dead, digested by the reader whose incomprehension alone gives birth to the possibility of the light of comprehension.

The hidden reference in Joyce is to Hegel ('hallhagal') – Derrida calls Joyce 'the most Hegelian of writers' and Altizer has written: 'If Hegel was the first and last thinker who could truly know history as theodicy, that providential totality has passed into its very opposite in our world'.¹⁹ Martin Heidegger, meanwhile, never far from the conversation, once suggested that Hegel is the one Western thinker who has actually enacted a thinking experience of thought. The wary reader will understand the goodly company of those for whom words become not merely (in fact, not at *all*) instruments of reference, but themselves before all reference (how could anyone – for no-one was there, for nothing and no-one was as yet created – understand the first words uttered from the mouth of God, yet without them not one thing came into being? The truly creative word is fully active only before understanding makes its demands, demanding reference and a separation of the word from what is said. What the text says cannot ever be properly or legitimately separated from he saying and from how it is said). Joyce can

only be read as an author who is also an *auctor*, one who augments or adds to our notion of literary totality and thereby to the world's being. To read Joyce, it might be said then, is only possible beyond reading, when his absolute unreadability is confessed and reading itself passes into a kind of mysticism. This takes us back to Joyce's acknowledgement of Giambattista Vico, the inventor of Western aesthetics, who compared artistic creators to God the Creator in their production of imaginative universals. A lengthy, if interpolated, excerpt from Jean-Michel Rabaté will illustrate the point well.

Joyce agreed that Vico provided a valid philosophy of language, even if he was mistaken at times in his etymologies and historical surveys: ['In the beginning' how valid, or even conceivable, were etymologies and historical surveys anyway? DJ] it is a philosophy of language one can use for the pleasure it offers, without having to believe all of its theses. [in what Coleridge called 'that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith'.²⁰ Unlike the words themselves this faith will pass away. DJ]. Thus, for Joyce, it is the language of *Finnegans Wake* which takes Vico as a model, with its stress on playful circularity and the constant interaction of life and death and regeneration, not only because Vico bring the dynamics of language lacking in Aquinas and Hegel, but, more specifically, because Vico's philosophy carries out the aesthetic Hegel ought to have written.²¹

The language of the *Wake* simply is – of and in itself in its endless playfulness and circularities. It delights wholly in its own being. To read it is to participate in the divine joy and delight that was God's in the act of creating (Genesis 1, 'And God saw that it was good') – and no doubt Molly Bloom's genius also, in her own way.²² In Vico's words, truly to read 'should give thee a divine pleasure, since in God knowledge and creation are one and the same thing'.²³ The ideal reader of *Finnegans Wake*, therefore, alive with an ideal insomnia or 'wake', actually participates in the divine delight and enjoyment of creating a hitherto unknown world by speech and word, recreating language and history. Words are inwardly digested in a true anamnesis or memorial ('mememormee') that is a death which realizes at the same time the divinization of the reader – the reader then becomes authorized, but only in the death of the author (who wrote the durn thing anyway?) – *I sink I'd die down over his feet, humbly dumbly, only to washup.*²⁴

As Joyce's great biographer, Richard Ellmann, wrote:

If we ask Joyce to bestride literature like a colossus, he will disappoint us. No generals paid him visits of homage, no one called him the sage of Dublin. As he makes clear enough himself, in the world's eyes he began as a bad boy and ended as an old codger [...]. Yet we have to ask with Parsifal the question that Joyce also asked, 'Who is good?' [...] His passion for truth, however unpalatable, is a contagion which he would have his readers and his admirers share.²⁵

The passage has odd resonances. Joyce was certainly no Shakespearian Julius Caesar or Mark Anthony bestriding the world.²⁶ He did not emulate in old age the shuffling sage of Highgate Hill – Samuel Taylor Coleridge, whom Carlyle, in his *Life of Sterling* (1851) described as "a sublime man; who, alone in those dark days, had saved his crown of spiritual manhood".²⁷ Why Parsifal – why not the other figure who eschewed goodness – 'call no-one good, except [...] '? As with his heroes, Joyce camouflages his greatness with frailties, but only thereby the frailties of his readers aspire to greatness in the sacrifice of the author – *he finalized by lowering his woolly throat with the wonderful midnight thirst was on him.*²⁸

In *Finnegans Wake* we participate in a world of contraries in which oppositions coincide. It is writing hinged between life and art, masculinity and femininity, subjectivity and objectivity, jewgreek and

greekjew. In it we are deeply asleep and yet we 'wake'. The beginning is the end and the end is but a beginning. In the theme of death there is fullness of life, and in darkness light. As in the writings of Blake, Christ here only becomes fully himself when he finally becomes Satan, his descent into hell alone a true resurrection, a truly fortunate fall. In the *Wake* reading itself becomes truly theological as the book's extraordinary language 'dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to re-create'²⁹ and is essentially vital, not in its referentiality, but in its reflexivity and in its capacity to enact a total presence – in its very being as the word creative. A character in John Steinbeck's novel *East of Eden* remarks that the purpose of reading the Bible is not to understand, but to participate in its mystery, to take that into ourselves as readers and thereby to refashion the world. St. Augustine had made the same point in *De Doctrina Christiana*, Book 2 (how these texts tumble over one another!), suggesting that we know the books of the Bible "not necessarily to understand them but to read them so as to commit them to memory". We read Scripture in order to ingest and digest the word.³⁰ If that is so, then Joyce is the most deeply biblical of our writers, and *Finnegans Wake* the closest in modern literature to the very language of heaven. Reading Joyce's extraordinary book is, indeed, a strange and rare privilege, which few can tolerate, for it is to encounter language at its very furthest stretch, self-sufficient, reflexive, a world unto itself and yet deeply creative, celebratory and utterly sociable. From the very beginning, from the very first line, it plays with the text of Genesis, truly its closest predecessor, though filtered perversely through the narrative of the Passion in the sacrament of the Word, and with the mysteries and perversions of parentage (inevitably odd in a religious tradition which insistently celebrates virginal mothers and solitary fathers). In the patrilineal, anal perversities of the *Wake* (Earwicker, like Moses, is a stammerer, for both have alien fathers – Egyptian and Norse – and are forced to speak a foreign language), the mother is the 'only true thing in life', the Liffey flowing to her 'bitter ending': yet it is the father in being constantly denied, dethroned, negated, who generates the fall, the *felix culpa*, in the fictional field of the novel. And it is the mother, the 'riverrun' who is finally resurrected in the beginning

[...] was the Word. As in Thomas Altizer's most recent book *Godhead and the Nothing* (2003), Joyce's language is hardly comprehensible, hardly offers itself to the understanding, because it is so utterly reflexive, utterly absorbed in the task of making all things new. Like the phenomenal first words of God in Genesis, it is not meant to be heard or understood by *anyone* – it simply brings into being. It does not seek to *mean* – it hardly claims reference in its purpose. It makes a world, though the world barely comprehends it – and its desire is solely to lose itself in the act of creation itself, to be one with itself. This apocalypse Altizer describes as 'thinking and vision for which an absolute No-saying and an absolute Yes-saying are not only inseparable, but finally identical, an identity which is finally the identity of "Heaven" and "Hell"'.³¹ *Finnegans Wake* ends in silence (the silence which also falls after the great, triumphant and creative cry of Molly Bloom which concludes *Ulysses* – truly an end and a new beginning), the reader finally authorized by the total presence of the Word, which is in its realization silence. Only then we too may dine with the prophets like Blake, or more, for 'then speech is truly impossible, and as we hear and enact that impossibility, then even we can dare to say: "It is finished"'.³²

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Notes

- 1 Andrew Marvell, "On Mr. Milton's Paradise Lost" (The Poems, ed. Hugh Macdonald. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1952), pp. 64-66 (64):
 When I beheld the Poet blind, yet bold,
 In slender book his vast Design unfold,
 Messiah crown'd, *Gods* Reconcil'd Decree,
 Rebelling *Angels*, the Forbidden Tree,
 Heav'n, Hell, Earth, Chaos, All; the Argument
 Held me a while misdoubting his Intent,
 That he would ruine (for I saw him strong)
 The sacred Truths to Fable and old Song [...]
- 2 Stephen D. Moore, Mark and Luke in Poststructuralist Perspectives: Jesus Begins to Write. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press), 1992, p. xviii.
- 3 Cf. The Marriage of Heaven and Hell (1790-1793), in William Blake, The Complete Writings (ed. G. Keynes; London: Oxford University Press, 1966), pp. 148-160 (153).
- 4 Cf. *The Statesman's Manual* (1815), in Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Lay Sermons* (ed. R. J. White; The Collected Works, 6; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), pp. 1-114 (29).
- 5 On 30 March, 1820, Coleridge wrote to Thomas Allsop of his 'GREAT WORK, to the preparation of which more than twenty years of my life have been devoted, and on which my hopes of extensive and permanent Utility, of Fame in the noblest sense of the word, mainly rest [...] *Collected Letters*. Volume V: 1820-1825 (ed. E. L. Griggs; 6 vols.; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), pp. 27-28.
- 6 Coleridge's father was an Anglican priest.
- 7 Cf. The First Prayer Book of Edward VI (1549), in F. E. Brightman, *The English Rite*. Vol. 1 (2 vols.; Rivingtons: London, 1915), pp. 204-206.
- 8 See Coleridge, letter of 28 May, 1822, to William Mudford, in *Collected Letters*, vol. V, p. 228. Similar comments recur throughout Coleridge's writings and letters, most importantly in the Author's Preface to *Aids to Reflection* (1825), where, referring back to the 'celebrated work' of Horne Tooke, Coleridge describes Words as 'living' and as not merely the vehicles of thought, but the wheels. See further, Emerson R. Marks, *Coleridge on the Language of Verse* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981)
- 9 Thomas J. J. Altizer, *The Self-Embodiment of God* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), p. 96.
- 10 James Joyce, *Finnegans Wake* (London: HarperCollins, 1994), p. 3.
- 11 See: James S. Atherton, *The Books at the Wake* (London: Faber, 1959).
- 12 Jean-Michel Rabaté, *James Joyce, Authorized Reader* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), pp. 147-148.
- 13 Leo Steinberg links this statement with 'rare and psychologically troubling images' in Renaissance art indicating the Father's 'intrusive gesture' upon the Son's loins. Cf. *The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and in Modern Oblivion* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2nd edn., 1996), p. 105.
- 14 Joyce, *Finnegans Wake*, p. 381.
- 15 Joyce, *Finnegans Wake*, p. 628.
- 16 James Joyce, *Ulysses* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1969), p. 704.
- 17 See, Roland Barthes, 'The death of the author', in idem, *Image Music Text* (trans. S. Heath; London: Fontana, 1977), pp. 142-148. Barthes, probably unwittingly, anticipates the death of God – the necessary death in creation – as the great author, when he asserts that 'writing is the destruction of every voice, of every point of origin' (p. 142).
- 18 Joyce, *Finnegans Wake*, pp. 628, 3.
- 19 Thomas J. J. Altizer, *Genesis and Apocalypse: A Theological Voyage Toward Authentic Christianity* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990), p. 172.
- 20 in *Biographia Literaria* (1817) *The Collected Works*, 7; (2 vols., ed. James Engell and W. Jackson Bate; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), Vol. 2, p. 6.
- 21 Rabaté, *James Joyce*, p. 179.
- 22 See further on 'creative joy', chapter 4, 'The All-Animating Joy Within', in George Dekker, *Coleridge and the Literature of Sensibility* (London: Vision Press, 1978), pp. 142-176. In a writing of 1819, Coleridge suggested that "in joy individuality is lost [...] To have a genius is to live in the universal, to know no self but that which I reflected not only from the faces of all around us, our fellow creatures, but reflected from the flowers, the trees, yea from the very surface of the [waters and the] sands of the desert. A man of genius finds a reflex to himself, were it only in the mystery of being." Quoted in Dekker, p. 146.
- 23 *The New Science* [1725]. See, Rabaté, p.181.
- 24 Joyce, *Finnegans Wake*, p. 628.
- 25 Richard Ellman, *James Joyce* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966), p. 5.
- 26 '[...] he doth bestride the narrow world/ Like a Colossus'. (William Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*, Act 1, Sc.ii, 135-136. *The New Shakespeare*, ed. John Dover Wilson. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968. p. 12) The image is used also of Mark Antony in *Antony and Cleopatra*.
- 27 *The Life of Sterling* [1851], (in Thomas Carlyle, *Selected Writings*, ed. Alan Shelston; Harmondsworth; Penguin Books, 1971), p. 315.
- 28 Joyce, *Finnegans Wake*, p. 381.
- 29 Cf. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria* (1817), in *The Collected Works*, 7; (2 vols., ed. J. Engell and W. Jackson Bate; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), Vol. 1, p. 304.
- 30 *On Christian Teaching* (trans. R.P.H. Green; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p.37.
- 31 Thomas J. J. Altizer, *Godhead and the Nothing* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2003), p. 93.
- 32 Altizer, *The Self-Embodiment of God*, p. 96.