

Joyce, Dogs, Eros, Metamorphosis, Revolution, and the Unity of Creation

by Darcy O'Brien

A wise Dublin theologian recently reminded me of Whitehead's doubts about the unity of creation. Whitehead noted that on a fine blue day he could wake up conscious that all nature was harmonious and one. But when, stepping into the street, he was attacked by a large nasty dog, nature became suddenly at least two.

Joyce hated and feared dogs, yet in *Ulysses*, a cur—the one which bounds like a hare, trots like a pony, trips like a buck, rears up like a bear, lopes like a calf, roots like a pig, claws like a panther, sniffs like a dog—becomes Joyce's symbol of protean interconnections among disparate species. Simple changes of verb link animals together.

Joyce, whose word-play was sometimes unashamedly childish, chose a dog for his symbol because of what dog spells backwards. When we speak of Joyce's sense of unity we speak of his sense of God. This is not to force Joyce back into the Church—though we should remember that, asked when exactly it was he had left the Church, Joyce replied, 'That is for the Church to decide'. Joyce's faith was peculiar and its motives may have been more literary than religious, but I am concerned here not with his salvation but with the idea of unity which his later works, especially *Finnegans Wake*, express.

Eros may be helpful here. Commonly, or in the market-place, we mean by eros that which pertains to sexual love or sexual activity. In our own day the words erotic and pornographic have come to press so closely upon one another that, in our technological way, we tend to think of erotic literature as that which may be said to induce a vasocongestive reaction in the erectile tissue of the clitoris or the penis. Yet Hesiod, in his *Theogony*, tells us that eros is not merely the god of sexual love but, born of chaos, the unifying power of the universe, the force which binds together separate and disparate elements, causing atoms not to wish to split. Spenser took up the theme a little later—

Earth hated air and water hated fire
Till love relented their rebellious ire.

And we may recall that classical mythology enshrines two Venuses, one the goddess of sexual love, the other the all-powerful force of unity; one terrestrial, the other celestial.

In relation to the terrestrial Venus, Joyce is variously enthralled, repelled, amused, bemused, moved to mockery, and in despair. Often he is the naughty Irish schoolboy, smirking nervously at sex and writing words on bathroom walls. He is the fellow with the

miniature pair of bloomers in his pocket, or he is Humphrey Chimpden Earwicker, peering at the girls peeing, or he is Richard Rowan flogging himself with his wife's imagined infidelity. Here eros, in the usage of the market-place, does not unify man and woman or, indeed, anything and anything, it shows up the separateness of every man, and nowhere more sadly than in the lonely odyssey of Leopold Bloom. For Joyce the theme of cuckoldry conveyed the betrayal, suspicion, guilt and anguish attendant upon sex.

In relation to Hesiod's sense of eros, however, *Finnegans Wake* is the most erotic of books. Only the *Divine Comedy* is a comparable celebration of the unity of all things. So wholly are separate and disparate elements bound together in *Finnegans Wake* that it may be sung, in a Dublin accent, as a hymn of praise to the celestial Venus. In it man and woman, tree and stone, sky and sea become one.

Joyce's language does the job of work. What Frank O'Connor used to like to term Joyce's 'associational mania' produces ultimately the effect that all creation is one great stew, and one ceases to care or even to be able to distinguish beef from broth or consumer from consumed. Hierarchies collapse, as everything becomes an aspect of everything else. In achieving this effect, Joyce, we now begin faintly to perceive, was, like Dante, not a solitary visionary but the eyes and tongue of his age. Both Dante and Joyce wrote of all creation's unity, but where Dante saw a highly structured system, Joyce saw an infinity of atoms interacting with one another, constantly in motion, changing places with one another, shifting shapes. The ruling principle of unity in the *Divine Comedy* is hierarchy which is, of course, the ruling principle of medieval theology, politics, and even architecture. But where Dante saw hierarchy, Joyce saw change, evolution, revolution. And so the ruling principle of *Finnegans Wake* is not hierarchy but metamorphosis. All things evolve and revolve into one another, 'till tree from tree, tree among trees, tree over tree become stone to stone, stone between stones, stone under stone for ever'.

So much is *Finnegans Wake* an expression of its place in time that, as Professor Hugh Kenner pointed out recently in a lecture given in Trieste, the language of the book, generally thought of as Joyce's singular invention, could not have evolved without the etymological studies of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century philologists. Work on the *New English Dictionary* (now the O.E.D.) began in 1857 when Richard Chenevix Trench, then Dean of Westminster, (later Archbishop of Dublin), called attention to the fact that every word in the language is a poem, carrying within itself vestiges of previous usages and civilizations, root-allusions to earlier points in time and space. A dictionary based on historical principles was launched. Prior to it (I am following Professor Kenner here) lexicographers, such as Dr Johnson, were ahistorical in their approach, concerned not so much with changes and shifts in form

and meaning, as with the notion of some absolute definition for any given word. The first forty pages of the *N.E.D.*, covering *A* to *Ant*, were set in type in 1882, the year of Joyce's birth; by 1917, as Joyce was making one of Archbishop Trench's descendants, Samuel Chenevix Trench, into the character Haines in *Ulysses*, work was well into *S*; and in 1928, when Joyce was putting *Anna Livia Plurabelle* into final form, the completed dictionary was published.

I do not know how much use Joyce made of the *N.E.D.*, but *Finnegans Wake* complements the historical dictionary. Both works are heir to the Darwinian sense of words as species which carry within them connections to the past, signs of their embryonic development. When seen in this way, language offers a principle of order and unity amid the babble of millenia: the principle of metamorphosis. Joyce's favourite game was always words, and if not from the *N.E.D.* then at least from Skeat's etymological dictionary, in which he read constantly as a youth, Joyce acquired his sense of words as historical poems and his sense of language ruled by metamorphosis. Later, as he began to play with words in his writing, he followed a path which led to the interaction and interdependence of letters, phonemes, syllables, until the sounds and roots of words could be seen to intertwine with one another like tree branches and tree roots. Till tree become stone.

We have learned that Joyce's method in writing *Finnegans Wake* was one of gradual accretion, elaboration and inclusion. He often began with a rather straight-forward sentence and then added the puns and allusions which characterize the final version. But for Joyce, to whom etymology was metamorphosis, the puns and allusions were not so much added or invented as revealed by him. They were always there, inherent in the structure and in the sound-sense of the words, implied by the rhythms of the phrases. It was for Joyce to unveil, to us and to himself, the mysterious connections among things: to dig up through his word-play the giant's head in Howth, the feet in the Castle knock-out end of the Phoenix Park and, in the cumulative revelation, the spirit and flesh of one in all, all in one book:

It's thinking of all. The brave that gave their. The fair that wore.
All them that's gunne.

As all things become one, metamorphosed by the celestial Joycean eros, we ought to be able to sense the close relation between *Finnegans Wake* and contemporary social, political and economic developments. I am not thinking of Joyce's fearful boast that he had started the Russo-Finnish war by predicting that Finns would wake again but rather of the revolutionary nature of Joyce's view of history. In *Finnegans Wake* it is clear that whatever is here today will not be here tomorrow, and the hero of the book, Everybody, is as much a publican in Chapelizod as he is Finn MacCool or Tim Finnegan falling off his ladder. By making all things one, Joyce implies the

futility of any belief in immutable hierarchies, be they theological, political, or of any other sort. His irreverence for the old rankings and filings leads him to confuse, deliberately, the Blessed Trinity with Earwicker's genitalia and Eamon de Valera with Shaun the Post, just as in the course of this century the Church begins to speak the language of the people and a student sits with his feet up on the desk of the university president, puffing a presidential cigar.

Yet Joyce was unsympathetic to the idea that change can bring improvement in the condition or even in the nature of man and society. His idea of change, or metamorphosis, is that as all things change, so they remain the same, like Yeats's spirals, always changing in the same way. In this sense Joyce was at one with the illustrators of a manuscript he loved, the *Book of Kells*, wherein geometric curves, letters, animals and plants all weave together into holy verse, and man looks on from the margin, astonished, observing as did Joyce 'those throne open doubleyous . . . seated with such flopuprightdown determination and reminding us ineluctably of nature at her naturalest. . . .' Though highly artificial, twisted and distorted, the styles of *Finnegans Wake* and the *Book of Kells* both remind us of nature at her naturalest in that each reveals patterns, connections and continuities where the blind eye would see only surface complexity and the tin ear hear only denotation. Both books show forth the nature of nature, or rather an idea of nature as governed by metamorphosis.

Joyce's idea of unity is as old as Hesiod and the *Book of Kells*, and yet as new as Darwin and Marx. Similarly, his idea of the poet is ancient and modern—new in that the poet experiments and breaks old forms, old in that the poet is the seer and revealer of the mystery of all things, gifted with the ability to absorb all creation into himself and to sing of its unity.

I am the wind which breathes upon the sea,
 I am the wave of the sea,
 I am the murmur of the billows,
 I am the vulture upon the rocks,
 I am the bull of seven battles,
 I am a flash from the sun,
 I am the fairest of plants,
 I am a strong wild boar,
 I am a salmon in the water,
 I am a lake in the plain,
 I am the word of knowledge,
 I am the head of the spear in battle,
 I am the god that puts fire in the head;
 Who spreads light in the meeting on the mountain?
 Who can tell the ages of the moon?
 Who can tell the place where the sun rests?
 (If not I?)

This bit of self-praise is supposedly the first verse ever sung in Ireland, composed by Amergin, a Milesian prince. In its conception of the role of the poet and the relation of the poet to the world, it is entirely Joycean. With unpardonable megalomania, Joyce saw himself as the bardic Demiurge of our time, creating in *Finnegans Wake* an erotic image of the universe, fluctuating but unified through time and space by language.

‘It comes at a time when the imagination of the world is as ready as it was at the coming of the tales of Arthur and of the Grail for a new intoxication. The reaction against the rationalism of the eighteenth century has mingled with a reaction against the materialism of the nineteenth century. . . . The arts by brooding upon their own intensity have become religious, and are seeking, as I think Verhaeren has said, to create a sacred book.’

That is Yeats, in 1897, writing about the Irish Literary Movement, in ‘The Celtic Element in Literature’. Not at all did he suspect that the author of the sacred book would be James Joyce.

Thomas Merton on the Contemplative Life

by Bede McGreggor, O.P.

Thomas Merton wrote in the letter in which he accepted the invitation to speak at the Congress in Bangkok where he was to die: ‘. . . the great problem for monasticism today is not survival but prophecy’. There are good reasons for thinking he was right. In the last few years most religious orders and congregations have been busily working on new rules and constitutions which are usually heavily loaded with quotable quotes from conciliar and post-conciliar documents, carefully worded résumés of current theological writing, and skilfully framed paragraphs of compromise intended to satisfy the demands of as many pressure groups as possible. In practice these new documents are often ignored, apart from a little tightening up here and loosening up there and the inevitable litter of commissions that will in due course produce more painfully contrived documents that will also be as much ignored as implemented! This may appear to be a cynical assessment of what is going on in religious life today. In fairness it must be pointed out that the Church ordered the search for new rules and constitutions, they are provisional and experimental, and the discussions that took place at every level prior to their formulation have initiated a