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Joyce's Messianism: Dante, Negative Existence, and the
Messianic Self, and: Rituals of Literature: Joyce, Dante,
Aquinas, and the Tradition of Christian Epics (review)

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in *Italy*, 7, ed. Rosa Maria Bollettieri Bosinelli and Ruggieri (Rome: Bulzoni Press, 2002), 67-76.

³ Jacques Aubert, "Joyce's Romantic Propositions and Position," *Joyce Studies in Italy*, 8 (Rome: Bulzoni, 2003), 14; Bernard Bosanquet, *A History of Aesthetic* (London: S. Sonnenschein, 1892); and Georg Friedrich Wilhelm Hegel, *Aesthetic* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1998).

⁴ Senn, "Byronic Rumbblings," a paper delivered at the "Romantic Joyce" conference in Rome, 11-12 April 2002, and included in *Joyce Studies in Italy*, 8 (pp. 25-34).

⁵ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria, or, Biographical Sketches of My Literary Life and Opinions* (London: G. Bell and Daldy, 1870); Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Goetz of Berlichingen, with the Iron Hand: A Tragedy*, trans. Sir Walter Scott (London: J. Bell, 1799); David Friedrich Strauss, *The Life of Jesus: Critically Examined*, trans. George Eliot (London: Chapman Brothers, 1846); and Thomas Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus: On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History* (London: J. M. Dent, 1908), p. 145.

⁶ Carlyle, *Past and Present* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1909), and *The French Revolution: A History* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1837).

⁷ Carlyle, *The Life of Friedrich Schiller: Comprehending an Examination of His Work* (London: Taylor and Hennessey, 1825), and Goethe, *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship: A Novel from the German of Goethe*, trans. Carlyle (London: G. and W. B. Whittaker, 1824), and *Wilhelm Meister, Goethe's Werke* (Stuttgart: J. G. Cotta'schen Buchhandlung, 1817-1819).

JOYCE'S MESSIANISM: DANTE, NEGATIVE EXISTENCE, AND THE MESSIANIC SELF, by Gian Balsamo. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2004. 168 pp. \$34.95.

RITUALS OF LITERATURE: JOYCE, DANTE, AQUINAS, AND THE TRADITION OF CHRISTIAN EPICS, by Gian Balsamo. Lewisburg, Pennsylvania: Bucknell University Press, 2004. 160 pp. \$35.00.

Gian Balsamo reads Joyce as deploying a rhetorical force comparable to the meliorative strain claimed by Holy Scripture. In his two latest books, *Joyce's Messianism: Dante, Negative Existence, and the Messianic Self* and *Rituals of Literature: Joyce, Dante, Aquinas, and the Tradition of Christian Epics*, his third and fourth volumes on the author, the focus is on this imperative from Joyce's early declaration of literature's independence in the essay "Drama and Life" (CW 40) through to *Finnegans Wake*.¹ For Balsamo, this redemptive vein draws on the legacies of sacrificial ritual, Attic theater, and Christian liturgy. Such an amalgam constitutes an apocalyptic poesis, an ideal mode of reading, a messianic accent with the all-inclusive representational horizon of Dante's *Divine Comedy*.

Balsamo's Joyce is leery of any detraction, figurative or denotative, from this complex plenum. The exploration of creative transcendence

goes hand in hand here with attention to the transformative power of literature. Such interdependence is foreshadowed in the Augustinian obliteration of what Balsamo calls Gabriel's "distinct selfhood" at the end of "The Dead" (*Messianism* 47) and in Stephen Dedalus's swooning in *A Portrait* "into some new world, fantastic, dim, uncertain as under sea, traversed by cloudy shapes and beings" (*P* 172). Such states draw on a negative poesis—a reaching after un-representable insight, an ideal intimacy proof against silence and logorrhea. As Thomas J. Altizer notes in the afterword to *Rituals of Literature*, Balsamo is concerned with "a scriptural poetics, one in which poetry and scripture are not only finally indistinguishable but truly universal in history and society" (*Rituals* 131). The aspect of the drama balks at representation while closely engaged with the problematic.

Perhaps Balsamo's most impressive reading in this vein comes when he links the creative originality in the drama of Stephen's reflections on his mother's death to the Heideggerian emphasis on "irreducible separation between existential experience of factual life . . . and the ordinary representations of human existence" (*Messianism* 13). Stephen's silence, and his composition of the vampire poem, testify to the scope of something like the "via negativa" in theology. The poet strains for a note that resounds with this "negative"—non-existent—matrix of phenomenal experience. As procreation is responsible for life, "negative poetics" finds its voice in an "intimacy with the divine" (*Messianism* 30). Art, like a mother's love, aims for something beyond itself. Joyce's language, aware of its powerlessness when it comes to representing human conception, the initial term, or death, the final term, strains after this unattainable totality as its purview.

Joyce's Messianism examines the migration of these "negative poetics" through Joyce's texts, characterizing the lynchpins of the movement as "instantiations" (*Messianism* 21). Balsamo interprets the term to refer to "the code-like document (from the Canonic Bible to the American Constitution, from a poem to the displayed bundle of my inherited and acquired characteristics) whereby an individual constitutes himself/herself as a person vis-à-vis another individual and/or a community" (*Messianism* 21). In other words, in the potent un-representable medium that Joyce takes for granted, self-awareness is inevitably interpersonal and theatrical. The medium is akin to the existential poetry of negative historicity, which the pilgrim Dante experienced in his unearthly encounters with souls. All phenomena, including the reader's assumptions, tend to attain characterization through dialogue. *Joyce's Messianism* provides studies of this negative aura, this representation at odds with adequate representation but committed to its comprehensive scope, in portraits of Gabriel Conroy, Stephen Dedalus in *Ulysses*, Leopold Bloom, and Shem.

The term "messianic" indicates resistance to "the tyranny of com-

mon, ordinary experience" (*Messianism* 123). Herewith, literature usurps the function of liturgy (pace Buck Mulligan!) with the "universal drive toward altruism and generosity" for its "existential agenda" (*Messianism* 123). The account of Stephen, which I think is Balsamo's strongest reading, interweaves Dante, W. B. Yeats, Douglas Hyde, Bram Stoker, and Stéphane Mallarmé and gives fresh resonance to Sam Slote's observation that the poet, now mute, still sustains his poetic vacation in his self-effacement.² The issue for messianic drama is the "Word's coming into its most authentic own in total silence at the end of human history, . . . [as] the virtual countertype to all Scriptural types, inclusive of the Incarnation and Crucifixion" (*Messianism* 92). The reading reconnects recalcitrant Stephen in "Telemachus" with Joyce's total achievement and St. Augustine's effacement of individuality in the afterlife with art. Refusing to shrink "human existence" to the needs of any "literal and/or metaphoric hermeneutics," Balsamo asks for the recognition of "existential impulse" (*Messianism* 123).

Rituals of Literature: Joyce, Dante, Aquinas, and the Tradition of Christian Epics examines the genre of this messianic concentration. The tradition treats "four apocalyptic paradigms . . . the necropolitan journey, the felix culpa, the resurrection of the flesh and the sacrificial immolation" (*Rituals* 98) and makes possible individual self-collection and in-gathering in the liturgical locus transposed to the Christian epic. Dante, the character and the historical author, is pivotal to the transposition of the drama from archaic sacrifice, Attic theater, and the Christian altar to the *Imitatio Christi* to the epic focus in Joyce's writing, sustaining "an organic sort of textuality," an endless "process of redrafting and reconfiguration" (*Rituals* 121).

In the *Divine Comedy*, Balsamo notes, Dante models "a two-fold personification of author and character" speaking an impossible necropolitan tongue and authorizes the un-referentiality that is the warrant of literature's formal autonomy (*Rituals* 22). In Joyce, the apocalyptic paradigms sustain comparably self-referential and non-mimetic essays at cumulative understanding. Shem, in *Finnegans Wake* (FW 186.03-06), "transaccidentated" (not, be it noted, transubstantiated) "as a text, or Scripture, made of human parchment (his own skin) and of human waste (feces and urine, his own as well)" presents such dis-individualization (*Rituals* 114). Stephen Dedalus's model of the maternal womb, as the analogue of "divine Creation . . . a gynecoid hourglass with not one but two necks, a neck of entrance and a neck of extinction," is yet another example (*Rituals* 100).

As we seek the genre's identity, we reconfigure the "text's sacrificial thrust . . . [as] a matrix of individuality and social responsibility" aligning "the formative principle of the exceptional and individual" with the "historical (the iterative and the typical)" (*Rituals* 126). Balsamo is subtle enough to comment on the teleology of *A Portrait*

and on the “resurrection of the flesh, envisioned in Stephen’s vampire poem in Shaun-Kevin’s reverse birth into the womb by way of Anna Livia’s ‘grand tryomphal arch’” (FW 590.09-10) and in Shem’s anti-Thomistic communion with his bodily wastes (*Rituals* 100, 108, 115). The genre then becomes perceptible through such variations.

Balsamo’s supple, holistic grasp of Joyce allows for many more dialogues concerning the exceptional and original in his works. These are recondite and densely written texts, whose enduring value lies in the fact that they rework the setting for *A Portrait*’s definition of the epic as equidistant, as the “mediate relation” between the artist and others (P 214). When readers seek existential effects in Joyce, they will “instantiate” codes and prompt identifications. Heuristically fascinating, the suggestion that the Christian epic supplies Joyce with a moral compass should foster a many-sided debate.

I close with two considerations that merit a place in any discussions of Balsamo’s writing. The first concerns his silence on Henrik Ibsen. I would have liked Balsamo to address the relationship between Joyce’s legacy from Dante and his much more widely recognized Ibsenite theatrical inheritance. How does Ibsen’s theater mesh with the altruistic *telos* Balsamo ascribes to the Christian epic? Aestheticized and morally demanding, Ibsen’s drama seems to provide an opening comparable to Balsamo’s suggestive analysis of the influence of the *Divine Comedy* on Joyce’s aesthetics.

My second concern involves the continuum between the liturgy and the epic. Balsamo’s two earlier books on Joyce, *Pruning the Genealogical Tree: Procreation and Lineage in Literature, Law and Religion* and *Scriptural Poetics in “Finnegans Wake”* prepare the ground for the intermeshing of deconstructive critiques of genealogy, procreation, repetition, and typology, grounding the inquiry in traditions of scriptural interpretation.³ Still it appears that the model of epic derived from liturgy accords Bloom much less than his due. *Rituals of Literature* depicts the epic configuration in Joyce through Stephen and Shem. When *Joyce’s Messianism* looks to Bloom for an epic hero, many of his deeds are staged in the alimentary canal. We are assured that “Bloom’s culinary feats bestride the analogy between the ordinary food necessary to the process of vital functions and the sacred food under whose aegis a corpse is ceremoniously dispatched to the afterlife” (*Messianism* 95). Citing Karen Lawrence’s point about the fermented foods Bloom ingests during the day pending Molly’s return to their love-making on Howth Head and the conception of Milly,⁴ Balsamo argues for a “close-looped interaction between his seminal and Molly’s nutritional secretions—a profane sacrament of transcorporealization” (*Messianism* 106).

In such an emphasis, the private/public dichotomy central to Bloom’s characterization seems to get lost. Does the continuum

between liturgy and epic swallow up such distinctions and alternate starting points for thinking about the epic? My own research into the genre suggests that the existential bias outlined in Balsamo's suggestive discussion of biography looks quite different when we treat historiography (the Bloom-Sinn Fein connection) or photography (Milly Bloom) as our touchstones. Is it possible that Joyce entertains different models of epic mimesis and brings different facets of the epic tradition into the foreground, in a manner analogous to his heterogeneous—"transaccidentated"—approaches to style? Perhaps a dramatization of just such a need to re-conceive the role of liturgy is at stake in Buck Mulligan's mockery of the Mass in "Telemachus." Balsamo's studies will stir debate. There is every reason to expect that he has still more substantial contributions to make to our understanding of Joyce.

Reviewed by Andras Ungar

NOTES

¹ Quotations in this review from *Joyce's Messianism* will be indicated by *Messianism* and from *Rituals of Literature by Rituals*.

² Sam Slote, *The Silence in Progress of Dante, Mallarmé, and Joyce* (New York: Peter Lang, 1999), pp. 74, 83.

³ Gian Balsamo, *Pruning the Genealogical Tree: Procreation and Lineage in Literature, Law and Religion* (Lewisburg, Penn.: Bucknell Univ. Press, 1999), and *Scriptural Poetics in "Finnegans Wake"* (Lewiston, N.Y.: Edwin Mellen, 2002).

⁴ Karen Lawrence, "Legal Fiction or Pulp Fiction in 'Lestrygonians,'" *"Ulysses"—Engendered Perspectives: Eighteen New Essays on the Episodes*, ed. Kimberly J. Devlin and Marilyn Reizbaum (Columbia: Univ. of South Carolina Press, 1999), pp. 108-09.

"*ULYSSES*" ON MONTMARTRE: AN EARLIER ULYSSES IN ANOTHER NIGHTTOWN, A FRENCH SHADOW PLAY (1910), ITS TRANSLATION, AND AN ESSAY ON ITS RELATION TO JAMES JOYCE'S "ULYSSES," edited by Akram Midani and Erwin R. Steinberg. Pittsburgh: Carnegie Mellon University Press, 2002. 101 pp. \$14.95 paperback.

"Möbiuser and möbiuser," said Alice, "the involuntary parody of a critical edition of the script of a shadow-theater play parodizing an epic of classical antiquity, charged with sexual innuendo and satirical references to prominent but insider Parisian figures given to slumming. All this and Montmartre, too!"