

INTRODUCTION: MIDDAYEVIL JOYCE

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He's weird, I tell you, and middayevil down to his vegetable soul (*FW* 423.27-28)

That Joyce was medieval, or *middayevil*, at heart and down to his vegetable soul, is surely uncontroversial. The task of the critic attempting to assess the extent, meaning and value of “the medieval” in Joyce’s work is however only deceptively simple. Despite the general recognition of Joyce’s interest in the Middle Ages and in such medieval figures as St. Thomas Aquinas, Dante, or St. Patrick, many issues still need to be investigated. Several books have been published on Joyce’s use of the work of individual philosophers and writers,¹ or on themes that evolve from the medieval roots of Christian thought.² The only book entirely devoted to an analysis of the subject in more encompassing terms, however, is Umberto Eco’s *The Middle Ages of James Joyce: The*

1. E.g. William T. Noon, *Joyce and Aquinas*, New Haven: Yale UP, 1963; Mary T. Reynolds, *Joyce and Dante: The Shaping Imagination*, Princeton: Princeton UP, 1981. On the relationship between Joyce and Dante see also, more recently, Sam Slote, *The Silence in Progress of Dante, Mallarmé, and Joyce*, New York: Peter Lang, 1999; and Lucia Boldrini, *Joyce, Dante and the Poetics of Literary Relations: Language and Meaning in Finnegans Wake*, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001.

2. For instance, Robert Boyle, S.J., *James Joyce’s Pauline Vision: A Catholic Exposition*, Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois UP, 1978; Beryl Schlossman, *Joyce’s Catholic Comedy of Language*, Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1985; Colleen Jaurretche, *The Sensual Philosophy: Joyce and the Aesthetics of Mysticism*, Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1997.

*Aesthetic of Chaosmos*³ (1989 in English, but originally part of Eco's seminal *Opera Aperta*, 1962). Eco's slim but rich book was a path-opener, but it could not exhaust the subject on its own. Nearly forty years on, we are still looking for a comprehensive framework that can help us assess Joyce's place in the larger context of nineteenth- and twentieth-century medievalism, and through which we may examine the concept of "the medieval" in his work. Did Joyce conceive of "the medieval" as a stable category offering a pre-determined set of themes and a codified language, a "tool-kit" as it were, that the modern writer could, or perhaps should, employ in the elaboration of his craft? In what ways did his writings reflect the great variety and complexity that is encompassed by the phrase "the Middle Ages"? The essays collected in this volume aim at offering some answers to these questions.

Eco's study is the natural point of departure for such an enterprise. His book remains today stimulating and insightful, and one cannot stress enough how early, and how acutely, Eco wrote what many other scholars have "discovered" years or even decades later. By nature of its approach and historical context (when Eco wrote the original version of this book he was one of the major exponents of early 1960s structuralist semiotics), *The Middle Ages of James Joyce* frames the medieval world-view as a unified, coherent field whose structural or recurrent features are shown to reappear, with varying degrees of re-elaboration, in Joyce's works. But this account of the Middle Ages as a homogeneous category upholds a view of "the medieval" that requires today some updating. Although, as we shall see, Joyce did initially work within this perception of the period, he also developed an understanding of the value of medieval literature and aesthetics increasingly attuned to its variety, range and scope, and therefore increasingly independent of the trappings of the ideological constructions of the Middle Ages common at his time. Medieval literature indeed became a benchmark in the development of his own modern poetics, a point argued by all the essays in this volume.

3. London: Hutchinson Radius, 1989. Page references will be incorporated in the text.

Eco's premise is that Joyce's work is governed by "a dialectic of order and adventure, a contrast between the world of the medieval *summae* and that of contemporary science and philosophy" (p. 2). According to Eco, in progressing from the early works to the later ones, "Joyce departs from the *summa* to arrive at *Finnegans Wake*, from the ordered cosmos of scholasticism to the verbal image of an expanding universe. But his medieval heritage, from which his movements arise, will never be abandoned. Underneath the game of oppositions and resolutions in which the various cultural influences collide, on the deepest level, is the radical opposition between the medieval man, nostalgic for an ordered world of clear signs and the modern man, seeking a new habitat but unable to find the elusive rules and thus burning continually in the nostalgia of a lost infancy" (pp. 2-3). Eco avers that "the definitive choice is not made" and that Joyce's dialectic "more than a mediation, offers us the development of a continuous polarity between Chaos and Cosmos, between disorder and order, liberty and rules, between the nostalgia of Middle Ages and the attempts to envisage a new order" (p. 3). Thus Eco attributes to Joyce a kind of "anti-modern" nostalgia which is more typical of other modernist writers, like Pound or Eliot, and which, I shall argue later, is analogous to the Victorian view of the medieval.

It may be useful to counterpoint the course that Eco traces through Joyce's oeuvre – from the "medievally" inspired and orderly early works to the chaos of the last – with the following proposition: that Joyce's works start, in part, from a position of (idealised) medievalism that seeks to find in the Middle Ages a transcendent formal language and a poetic direction while knowing that this cannot be integral to the modern world; but that he arrives at a deeper and more pervasive sense of the medieval, no longer looking for guidance and models to be imitated, taking up instead the aesthetic foundations of those models, transposing them into the modern world as part of a thoroughly modern experience, and continually testing them in order to define his own modern poetics. To put this in a convenient if perhaps simplistic formula, this progression may be represented in terms of a movement from the quest for an applicable ready-made aesthetic model to the constant interrogation of the relation between the world and a poetic activity

unceasingly searching for new rules, and unceasingly making its own. In this sense, Eco is correct I think when he writes that the Joycean “dialectic of order and adventure, a contrast between the world of the medieval *summae* and that of contemporary science and philosophy” (p. 2) does not achieve a synthesis: but not because this dialectic does not offer us “a mediation” (p. 3) but because – as Joyce recognised – the medieval world itself could not mediate all its differences, just as modernity cannot do so. Thus the dialectic described by Eco is itself absorbed, though not resolved, in Joyce’s medievalist but nonetheless modern “scribing” of the world and of history, first in *Ulysses* and later, more fully, in *Finnegans Wake*.

Medievalisms

In his excellent *Listening for the Text*, the medievalist critic Brian Stock crisply encapsulates the relationship that different periods have established with the Middle Ages: “The Renaissance invented the Middle Ages in order to define itself; the Enlightenment perpetuated them in order to admire itself; and the Romantics revived them in order to escape from themselves.”⁴ Modernism conformed to this same pattern. Like every post-medieval epoch, it too sought to define itself against and through an age that was constructed as radically different, and that could either be happily consigned to the past, or sadly lamented as too distant in history to be recovered (I shall come back to these contrasting attitudes later). As Stock argues, the Middle Ages cannot really be opposed to, but are part of, modernity and the way it defines itself: “In their widest ramifications”, the Middle Ages “thus constitute one of the most prevalent cultural myths of the modern world”.⁵

Did Joyce also conceive of the Middle Ages in similarly unified terms? To an extent he did. Did he also use the Middle

4. Brian Stock, *Listening for the Text: On the Uses of the Past*, Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins UP, 1990, p. 69.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 69.

Ages in order to define himself and his practice? He could not avoid it. But his writing displays a more direct engagement with the period on terms that are both medieval and modern. As Eco writes, Joyce was “the node where the Middle Ages and the avant-garde met” (p. xi). The Joyce of *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake* was perhaps the only one among the modernists⁶ to fully recognise that a simple opposition of “medieval” and “modern” was flawed. To be truly modern one had to acknowledge the differences and the continuity with the Middle Ages, and accept them as constituent of one’s modernity. Above all, one had to acknowledge that it is not so much the similarity or distance from the past that defines one’s identity, but the process of confrontation itself. Joyce also knew that the organic, monolithic construction of the medieval was equally flawed. (This is of course not to deny the “substantially unified and hierarchical vision by which the medieval man confronted the world”,⁷ nor the coherence and order of the theories and systems of thought proposed by individual “medieval men” – nor indeed Joyce’s recognition of this coherence. What I wish to underline is the plurality of visions and theories – many of them, surely, coherent and unified – that coexisted in that world.) The medieval *summa*, of which Stephen’s mentor Aquinas was the master but in which such poets as Brunetto, Dante and Chaucer also excelled, was the result of an intellectual attempt to impose an order on the multiplicity of the contemporary world. Like medieval allegory, the *summa* can be described as an endeavour to unify into orthodoxy a dangerously disparate body of knowledge; or, to use the terms of Eliot’s formula for *Ulysses*, as “a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance”⁸ to the immensely varied contemporary cultural landscape of the Middle Ages. It was also a framework broad enough to let differences co-

6. But see David L. Pike, *Passage through Hell: Modernist Descents, Medieval Underworlds*, Ithaca and London: Cornell UP, 1997, especially his discussion of Virginia Woolf in chapter 4, “The Gender of Descent”.

7. Eco, p. 18, amended

8. T. S. Eliot, “*Ulysses*, Order, and Myth”, in *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot*, edited with an introduction by Frank Kermode, London: Faber, 1975, p. 177.

exist side by side. What such homogenising phrasings (“*the medieval mind*”, “*the medieval man*”) betrays is in fact both our continuing tendency to reduce difference to sameness, and our difficulty to accept that plurality, heterogeneity and difference – what we regard as typical of our age – can exist outside “the modern”.

The role of “the medieval” in matters of poetics and the relationship between Joyce’s earlier and later writings are discussed by Jed Deppman in the first essay of this volume, “The Return of Medievalism: James Joyce in 1923”. Deppman argues that Joyce’s thinking about the Middle Ages was central to his reflection on art since his very early works, and that it determined core questions of poetics. Apparently minor differences in Stephen’s wording from *Stephen Hero* to *A Portrait* signal shifting perspectives in the understanding of the relation between language and experience and in the search for a way to define the place of the modern writer in the context of the literary tradition. The analysis of Joyce’s 1907 Triestine lecture “Ireland: Island of Saints and Sages” and of Stephen D(a)edalus’ aesthetic theories demonstrates that in Joyce’s early writings “the Middle Ages” is not only a fundamental historical category for the Irish: poetically, it signifies the possibility of a fully signifying, faithful language that the modern can use only ironically. This ironic positioning is the main key of Joyce’s medievally inspired 1923 sketches for *Finnegans Wake*. Through detailed references to several contemporary sources, Deppman shows that Joyce’s vision of the medieval in the early Twenties was steeped in the various musical, dramatic, philological responses to medieval subject-matter at the time – all of them at least as solemn as Stephen’s had been. However, Laforgue’s light-hearted rewriting of famous tales of the past suggested to Joyce a system for humorously re-using a codified or clichéd language. Joyce’s choice to exercise this newly discovered method on the Tristan and Isolde tale (after Wagner an overdetermined text if there ever was one) is thus shown to be in a direct line of descent from Stephen’s troubled meditations on mediocrity, irony and modernity. Laforgue’s example also enabled him to develop the language that eventually expanded into

the layered verbal punning that would become the most visible characteristic of *Finnegans Wake*.

What Deppman's discussion reveals is representative of the historical dynamics explored and exposed in Joyce's method: here we have a medieval subject-matter appropriated and translated by a modern medievalist tradition that is in turn mocked through an alternative modern literary form founded on the ironic representation of the past. Above all, what all this shows is an acute perception of the way literary history is constructed and of the cultural and ideological implications of the uses of the past. And it is such ironic eclecticism – the pitching of modes of literary representation against one another – that results in a completely new language and textual form.

Joyce's uses of the Middle Ages therefore need to be considered within the wider field of the medievalism of his contemporaries. Alongside the post-Wagnerian revival of medieval tales in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries described by Deppman, other, more general "medievalisms" can be identified, such as the Irish, the Victorian, and the modernist. In the following pages I shall try to offer a brief and inevitably simplified sketch of these medievalist contexts.

The interest in the nation's past was central to the political and cultural debate in Ireland at the turn of the century. To a large extent owing to their disillusionment with political nationalism after Parnell's demise, W. B. Yeats, Lady Gregory, and the Irish Revivalists made it their mission to encourage the sense of an autochthonous, specifically Celtic culture. The focus was on the island's mythical, pagan past – the time when nature was supposedly untainted by the traces of modernisation, and the relationship between man and the natural environment harmonic. This is the Ireland that we find in much of Yeats's poetry, especially until the early 1910s, with its idealised peasants, fishermen, women young and old, and legendary, fantastic or mythical figures. It is a vision that entirely bypasses the country's medieval Christian past, preferring to it occultist forms of spirituality. Effacing the Catholic heritage allowed its proponents to side-step the question of the deep divisions between Catholics

and Protestants, to elude the question of British rule and of the relationship between the indigenous Irish population and the Anglo-Irish ascendancy, and to avoid having to make a clear linguistic choice between English (which remained the favoured language) and Irish. Conversely, the Catholic tradition, the Gaelic language and a militant position on political independence were promoted by the “Irish Ireland” movement linked to Douglas Hyde’s Gaelic League. The appeal to the past was for both sides nostalgic, and it needed to rely on an equally artificial construction of a medieval and Catholic, or pagan and timeless, “authentic” Irish tradition. However artificial, this projection of Ireland’s past provided each side with a system of powerful symbols in which the newly asserted national identity could find its strongest embodiment.

To this idealised past, Joyce explicitly opposed a Scholastic, highly intellectual, European medieval background as the basis for the aesthetic musings of his artistic persona Stephen D(a)edalus. As he claimed in “Ireland: Island of Saints and Sages” (1907), moreover, the key in the formation of the “Irish temperament” was the combined centuries of early Christianity and of the successive waves of raids and invasions that turned into a “veritable slaughterhouse” the “unbroken record of apostleships, and missions, and martyrdoms” that Irish medieval history had been until then (*CW*159). Joyce records that the Scandinavians that had invaded the country were progressively assimilated into the community, thus contributing in essential ways to the “Irish character” (*CW* 160). A major consequence of the invasions was the loss of any racial, linguistic or cultural purity through the mingling of “the old Celtic stock, and the Scandinavian, Anglo-Saxon, and Norman races” that, despite their ethnic and religious differences, united in a common cause against the English aggression of 1169 (*CW* 161). This emphasis on the hybridity of the Irish attests Joyce’s early recognition of the cultural medley that the phrase “the Middle Ages” contained. It is also, clearly though not explicitly, a significant response to the dominant Celtic Revivalist rhetoric of his Irish contemporaries, and explains why both forms of cultural nationalism – Yeats’s or the Gaelic League’s – must be rejected as “nets” that trap the individual, deny him his freedom and prevent

the artist from forging an historically valid conscience for his race. The indigenous Irish medieval subject-matter, largely absent from the early novels and even from *Ulysses*, resurfaces in *Finnegans Wake*, Joyce's most profoundly, but also most profoundly ironical, "medieval" work, where the mythification of Irish history is part of an inclusive programme, like the *summa*, and is balanced by Joyce's trademark humour, satirical spirit, and ironic collapsing of modernity and past into a world where St. Patrick and Finn McCool coexist with Parnell and De Valera – and with the Irish hero of Scandinavian origins, H.C.E.

If the Renaissance and Enlightenment had defined themselves by opposition to the Middle Ages, the Romantics were the first true "medievalists", actively seeking to find in the pre-modern period what their age did not offer. Both these attitudes – the Enlightenment's positive self-definition by opposition to the irrationality and barbarism of the Middle Ages, the Romantics' search for alternative, non-rational, more "natural" models with which to counter an ever colder, alienating modernity – are still clearly present within the Victorian period. The former attitude is invoked mainly to sustain positivist thought, often "anti-pastist" rather than anti-medievalist, and capable of stretching the reach of the term "medieval" up to anything just before industrialisation (or, indeed, anything contemporary to it but critical of its effects). It can be found in the attacks against Catholicism, consistently identified by its opponents with backward, corrupt, superstitious medieval practices; and it was common among those artists and intellectuals who, following influential theories such as Burckhardt's, saw in the Renaissance the age that enabled the rebirth of culture and knowledge after centuries dominated by ignorance and obscurantism.

The opposite, nostalgic picture of a rich, spiritual, harmonious Middle Ages also offered a ready model that could be invoked in the many contemporary diatribes against the declining moral values, the materialism, the social conflicts and the rapid urbanisation of an increasingly industrialised Britain. This holds true whether the anti-modern attacks were made in a conservative spirit (as in the case of the aristocratic members of the so-called

“Young England” circle who, fearing displacement by the new powers of the capitalist middle classes, supported a paternalistic form of “medievalist” alliance between the gentry and the poorer member of society); in a reactionary one, as in Carlyle’s extolling of the medieval hero-worship and leadership; or in the name of a progressive, egalitarian, socialist ideal, as in the case, notably, of William Morris. The medieval model could be invoked whether the plea was for its lost spiritual unity and moral and aesthetic integrity, as we find in most of Ruskin’s writings, and, again, in Morris’s praise of medieval craftsmanship; or whether one wished to extol its natural sensualism, as in the writings and paintings of the Pre-Raphaelites (spiritualism and sensualism often coexisting as two sides of the same medievalist coin); whether the heroic golden age was identified in the germane, and Germanic, Anglo-Saxon past (as in the myth of the “Norman yoke”, still upheld in the nineteenth century by such figures as William Cobbett), or whether it was located in the laying of the foundations of modern parliamentary democracy following the 1066 Norman invasion.

That the category “Middle Ages” could contain such sharply opposed cultural, historical, national constructions and extend or contract flexibly over different periods, demonstrates yet again – and at the same time feeds into – the ideologisation of the term itself. As one critic has put it, medievalism “was part of a larger quest for cultural orientation”, offering conveniently adaptable symbols that may be used to embody present concerns and be given a whole range of different meanings: “Medievalism, then, was nothing if not a plastic language. What unites the diverse uses of medieval symbols is that they may all be seen as part of a quest for identity – provincial, national, aesthetic, religious and political”.⁹ Of course, the twentieth century too has constructed its own pictures of the Middle Ages according to its needs, ideals and ideologies – as in the glorification of the ordinariness of everyday

9. Charles Dellheim, “Interpreting Victorian Medievalism”, in *History and Community: Essays in Victorian Medievalism*, ed. Florence S. Boos, New York and London: Garland, 1992, pp. 53-54. On this topic see also, in the same collection, Chris Waters, “Marxism, Medievalism and Popular Culture”, pp. 137-168.

life found in the historiography of the Annalist school, in the historical quest for national character and identity and, more recently, in the search for the common roots that can found an historically justifiable and politically viable European Union.

The opposite anti- and pro-medievalist sides also converged in the construction of the Middle Ages as a single unified category, containing little variety and allowing for little internal dissent. One could disagree, and the Victorians certainly did, about its interpretation; but all generally subscribed to such a unified picture. In the “positive” representation, medieval society was harmonic, spiritually sound, free from social strife, ordered and contented. Ruskin and Morris sublimated the medieval guild system into the symptom of such a conflict-free community and of its organic relationship between labour and craft, nature and leisure – witness the cult of Maypole festivities, or William Morris’s famous idealisation of the perfectly hand-crafted wooden chair “in which Descartes would not have doubted his own existence”.¹⁰ Courtly literature was viewed as the portrayal of an untainted natural landscape in which idealised social and erotic relations reflected the integrity of aristocratic, heroic values. Conversely, under the fire of the positivists and rationalists, the Middle Ages provided the unified symbol of an irrational, backward tradition that had to be rejected in the name of progress. Caught between these two poles, prominent nineteenth century intellectuals remained in an ambiguous, shifting position about its meaning. Even a classicist like Matthew Arnold, for instance, could on the one hand praise the French Revolution for having emancipated Europe from the Middle Ages (this gives us yet another clue to the chronological elasticity of the expression), and, on the other, admire the great spiritual power of the medieval Catholic imagination and of its symbols, and the way it could transcend the separation between matter and spirit in such figures as St. Francis.¹¹ It is to this type of romanticised medievalism that Tolkien’s

10. Dellheim, “Interpreting Victorian Medievalism”, p. 47.

11. Cf. Kevin L. Morris, *The Image of the Middle Ages in Romantic and Victorian Literature*, London, Sydney and Dover, N. H.: Croom Helm, 1984, pp. 200-202.

twentieth-century fantasies of a rough but gallant period of heroism and C. S. Lewis's Christian allegories of Narnia also aspired. Paradoxically, while this mythical Middle Ages was a projection of Victorian ideals, nostalgia and, often, escapism, it is to nineteenth century's historicism and archival research that we owe the twentieth century's more detailed and historically accurate knowledge and construction of the period. The paradox in Tolkien's and Lewis's cases is all the more striking as both were medievalist scholars.

Dante's role in all this is absolutely central: after all for the Victorians he was himself "the central man of all the world", the individual in whom all that the Middle Ages stand for finds its synthesis, the mind that rises above his age to a universal, timeless poetic and intellectual ideal. Despite their explicit anti-Victorian, anti-Romantic proclamations, it is very much to this Dante and these mythically constructed Middle Ages that modernist poets such as T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound also turned. One can easily discern in Eliot's deploring of the modern dissociation of sensibility¹² the echo of Ruskin's celebration of an organic medieval society, aesthetics and culture, doomed by the advent of a divided, dividing modernity. In a way, Eliot's "dissociation of sensibility" carries to its modernist consequences the desire for the combination of sense and intellect emphasised in Pre-Raphaelite poetics and art, or for the fusion of spirit and matter that, according to Arnold, was promoted by the figure of St. Francis. Eliot's critique of urban squalor and cultural shallowness is similarly evocative of the Victorians' response to the ills and ugliness of modern industrialised Britain and their nostalgic appeal to the values of pre-modern literature, architecture and society. Similarly, behind the insistence on linguistic exactness, it is possible to see in Pound's fondness for Provençal and Stilnovist poetry the cult of an ordered, highly codified literary and societal structure. In his adherence to Italian fascism what we notice is the stress on (Ruskinian) "classless" corporativism and pre-capitalist economics,

12. Cf. especially "The Metaphysical Poets", *Selected Essays*, London: Faber, 1932, pp. 281-291.

while the main focus in the Fascist appeal to the past, the rhetoric of the Roman imperial ideal, appears to have had a lesser impact.¹³

Pound's and Eliot's (and Joyce's) emphasis on art as precise craft vs. vagueness and excessive, self-indulgent outpouring of emotion, though explicitly anti-Victorian and anti-Romantic in its formulations and aspiring to the exactness of classical language, also forms a continuum with the Victorian cult of medieval craftsmanship and simplicity. In medieval theory, as Eco reminds us, *ars* is understood as handicraft, and "establishes a standard of artisan integrity" (p. 14). Eco's words echo Morris's: "in those days handicraftsmen were all *artists*, as we should now call them".¹⁴ Even D. H. Lawrence – whose writings, though explicitly antagonistic to the corruption, ugliness and lack of values of modern Britain, seem hardly inspired by any "medievalist" ideal and subscribe instead to the other conflicting strand within modernism: its paganism – displays clear vestiges of the ideologically constructed aesthetics of medieval craftsmanship symbolised by Morris's wooden chair. In chapter XXVI of *Women in Love*, Ursula and Birkin admire the perfect and harmonious antique craftsmanship that produced a wooden chair, are moved by it ("of such delicacy of grace ... it almost brought tears to the eyes"; "So beautiful, so pure", Birkin says, "it almost broke my heart"), and

13. On their arrival in Europe, Pound and Eliot also brought with them their cultural baggage of American medievalism, yet another variegated concept that cannot be reduced to a single perspective and which, broadly speaking, conflated the anxiety for the lack of cultural roots in a young and materialistic country with the ideological use of medieval spirituality, for instance by seeking in the chivalric and Arthurian epics inspiration for the home-grown myth of the frontier. On American medievalism see Bernard Rosenthal and Paul E. Szarmach eds., *Medievalism in American Culture: Papers of the Eighteenth Annual Conference of the Center for Medieval and Early Renaissance Studies*, Binghamton, NY: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies 55, 1989; and *Medievalism in North America*, Studies in Medievalism VI, ed. Katherine Verduin, Cambridge: Brewer, 1994.

14. William Morris, "The Lesser Arts", *Hopes and Fears for Art: Five Lectures Delivered in Birmingham, London and Nottingham 1878-1881*, London: Reeves & Turner, 1889, p. 10.

buy it.¹⁵ Birkin attributes this chair to the age of Jane Austen or earlier, nostalgically casting back to a pre-industrial culture that the flexible meaning of “medieval” could easily encompass: “My beloved country – it had something to express even when it made that chair.... When I see that clear, beautiful chair, and I think of England, even Jane Austen’s England....”¹⁶ Lawrence’s description of the chair very closely recalls those produced by William Morris & Co., in particular the “Rossetti chair”, whose slender curved lines in the back reproduce the shape of a harp:¹⁷ “...of the purest, slender lines, and four short lines of wood in the back, that reminded Ursula of harpstrings”.¹⁸ Thus, if in evoking Austen’s England Birkin may be overshooting the Arts and Crafts target by a few decades, the sympathy with Morris’s ideal of the beauty of past craftsmanship and with his abhorrence of the ugliness of the present is obvious. One is led to wonder whether Morris’s symbolic medieval crafted chair can also offer a (possibly ironic) referent for Stephen Dedalus’ scholastically inspired question, “*Is a chair finely made tragic or comic?*” (P 214).

The analogies between Joyce’s and the Victorians’ medievalist interests transpire in such diverse areas as the life-long concern with Dante and the fusion of sensuous language, mystical

15. *Women in Love*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986, p. 443.

16. *ibid.*, p. 443.

17. Examples of the “Sussex” and “Rossetti” chairs are exhibited in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. Photographic reproductions can be found for instance in *William Morris*, ed. Linda Parry, London: Philip Wilson Publishers, In Association with the V&A Museum, 1996; and in Paul Thompson, *The Works of William Morris*, London, Melbourne and New York: Quartet Books, 1977, p. 84. The sight of Morris’s chairs still arouses emotion in his admirers: a catalogue claims of an exhibit that “in its formal purity and functional efficiency it comes close to what Plato might have meant by the form of a chair”. W. P. W. Elloway, “Loughborough Victorian Studies Group Conference Exhibition”, in *William Morris: Aspects of the Man and His Work*, ed. P. Lewis, Proceedings of the 1977 Conference on William Morris held at Loughborough University of Technology, Loughborough, 1978, p. 107.

18. *Women in Love*, p. 443.

and intellectual motifs in *A Portrait*, reminiscent of the Pre-Raphaelite brand of medievalism though also infused with Pater's Renaissance-inspired sensualism. However, Joyce's outlook on the Middle Ages is quite different from that of his Victorian predecessors, or of his more nostalgic modernist contemporaries. Unlike Tennyson or Morris, Joyce was never interested in writing serious epics of medieval subject-matter, peopled with damsels, Arthurian knights and kings. Nor does Joyce's work require either an idealised, organic medieval world or a dark, superstitious and backward one to oppose to the present in order to berate or exalt it: his Middle Ages never become the blueprint for shaping an ideological position or an anti-modern aesthetics, his world is always the contemporary one, and while his characters may have the "true scholastic stink" (*P* 214) about them and his books draw from and imitate medieval authors, they remain firmly grounded in their contemporary and very real context.

This is also the main difference from other modernists. Reed Way Dasenbrock and Ray Mines argue in their essay "'Quella vista nova': Dante, Mathematics and the ending of *Ulysses*" that the limit of Pound's project is that he never shed his all too faithful reverence towards his medieval models, Dante in particular, always vacillating between trying to imitate the *Commedia* and the recognition that the model of the world available to Dante (his "Aquinas map", or, as Dasenbrock and Mines revise it, Dante's "Euclid map") was no longer valid for the modern world. Pound remained frustratingly caught in this alternative between the desire to "copy" Dante and the incapacity to adapt the medieval poet's formal coherence to his work.¹⁹ Joyce's understanding of the

19. Pound's frustration may remind us of Stephen Daedalus' sense of the ironic inadequacy of the modern, condemned to use a medieval terminology no longer adequate to the modern experience. In a sense, Pound has yet to move beyond Stephen's earlier incarnation. For a generally different view of Pound's medievalism cf. however Georg M. Gugelberger, *Ezra Pound's Medievalism*, Frankfurt, Bern and Las Vegas: Peter Lang, 1978. Cf. also the chapter on the modernist reception of Dante in Alison Milbank's *Dante and the Victorians*, Manchester: Manchester UP, 1998.

Middle Ages, on the contrary, allowed him to perceive that Dante's (or, for this matter, Chaucer's, Aquinas', and any other medieval writer's) way of using the knowledge of his time, and not the contents of that knowledge, had to be translated into the modern context. In this sense, Joyce's concept of imitation was closer to that of the medievals, which entailed transformation rather than simple copy and was therefore more amenable to being brought up-to-date. Dasenbrock and Mines argue that the difference between Pound and Joyce – between an attempt to reproduce Dante and the break from Dante that signals the more profound understanding of the model – becomes especially clear in "Ithaca", where Joyce inserts a geometrical reference to the end of the *Paradiso* and to Dante's acknowledgement of his human incapacity to grasp the Divine. This reference, located in the penultimate chapter of *Ulysses* and followed by Molly's entirely earthly monologue, points to Joyce's moving beyond the type of Euclidean geometry on which Dante constructed his world and which must now be replaced by a new mathematical understanding of the cosmos. It also shows Joyce moving into a totally different type of space: the space of Molly and of the domestic. Dasenbrock and Mines describe this as a move from Dante to Mozart, and see it as the symptom of a move from the medieval to the modern, from the transcendence of the end of *Paradiso* to the return to the domestic and familial at the end of *Don Giovanni*.

The difference between Pound and Joyce may thus very well be that between wishing to be Dante and working out, through Dante and the medievals, how to be a thoroughly modern writer. As Dasenbrock and Mines also point out, Joyce's education equipped him with a direct knowledge of the sources of medieval knowledge and thinking, thus favouring his deeper understanding of their relation to Dante's poetry and more generally of the Middle Ages. Joyce's (Stephen's) medievalism is intellectual and scholastic, one of structures and *forma mentis* rather than of ideology. Of course, there is also another, not so secret agenda in Joyce's choice of medieval materials. If Joyce's "Artist" reads obscure medieval authors, or invokes Joachim of Fiore, it is not because it was "fashionable" in the way that medievals had become

fashionable in nineteenth century England or turn of the century Ireland, but because it helps set him apart from the “mass”. It is not by chance that Stephen D(a)edalus chooses heretics such as Joachim and Bruno as his champions during his Jesuit schooling, and that he sticks to Scholastic Aristotelianism in the midst of the Platonist circle of Dublin intellectuals. These are the intellectual equivalents of his emotional retiring, “alone ... happy and free” (*P* 59), from the triumphant cheers of his schoolmates after his victorious challenge to Father Dolan’s indiscriminate pandybat. Despite the obvious romanticism of such self-casting as solitary, misunderstood but privileged outsider, there is a very rigorous poetic stance in all this. Joyce and Stephen subscribe to and stick out for a Middle Ages different from the one of those who emphasise its irrationality, less fashionable than the past of the Platonist Celtic revivalists, less nostalgic than Eliot’s, and less slavish but ultimately more faithful than his contemporary Ezra Pound’s. This certainly enables Stephen to found an aesthetic theory that can be discarded the moment he has finished with it: “So far as this side of esthetic philosophy extends Aquinas will carry me all along the line. When we come to the phenomena of artistic conception, artistic gestation and artistic reproduction, I require a new terminology and a new personal experience” (*P* 209). But the medievalist theorising is and remains a conscious tool of the artist, functional to an ever evolving poetics that outgrows Stephen’s and becomes that of the equally evolving James Joyce. As we progress from *Stephen Hero* and *A Portrait* to *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*, it becomes increasingly evident that Joyce was not just borrowing literary material from the Middle Ages, as, rather, developing an affinity of vision, one that became ever more eclectic and which, therefore, could not “reject” but needed to embrace all.

Lines of transmission

The Middle Ages, by their very name, appear to signpost the mid-point in Western History. The medievals, of course, did not perceive themselves as such: their name was chosen by the

Renaissance to signal its return to the greatness of the Classical Age. Those “middle” centuries divided modern man from the classics and their glory – they were in the middle, “in the way”, and since the Renaissance this perception of “middleness” has stuck. More recent studies have helped to re-frame the Middle Ages in terms of a period that links, rather than divides, antiquity and modernity, and that allows us therefore to read the concept as being “on” or “along the way” – as a milestone is, or a crossroads that one passes by or returns to in historical perambulations that need not be either always linear or always cyclical.²⁰

The Middle Ages were thus a crucial moment of transmission, a time when preserving culture was as important as producing a new one, and in many cases as laborious and fraught with dangers and difficulties. To the Middle Ages we owe not only the large amount of texts written in the several centuries contained within this label, but also those we have inherited from the classics – it is indeed with some surprise that one is reminded that hardly any original text has reached us from antiquity, and that most of what we possess of that period are the medieval copies made and jealously safeguarded (at times, sure enough, under hen-scratched midden heaps) against invasions, wars, plagues and destruction. Of course, the mediating role of the age is simultaneously a moment of production: the copy and the illumination are accompanied by the gloss; the interpretation rewrites previous texts into a new body of ideas adequate to the present condition, while still allowing them to carry the seal of authority conferred by time and by the name of the *auctor*. What the Christian Middle Ages put into practice can perhaps be described as the first grand scale version of a self-

20. On the meaning and history of the term see the still very useful study by George Gordon, *Medium Aevum and the Middle Ages*, Society of Pure English Tract n. XIX, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1925. On the associations of medieval with tradition, immobility, stagnation etc. until the nineteenth century, see Brian Stock, “Tradition and Modernity: Models from the Past”, in *Listening for the Text*, pp. 159-171; also in Brigitte Cazelles and Charles Méla eds., *Modernité au Moyen Âge. Le défi du passé*, Recherches et Rencontres 1, Geneva: Librairie Droz S. A., 1990, pp. 33-44.

conscious Reception Theory, whereby the interpretation of the texts of the past is made dependent upon the horizon of expectations of the contemporary community of readers: the allegorising mode re-functionalises the past through the figural relation and explains it in terms of its relevance to modern-day Christian readers, while maintaining its sense of distance from pre-Christian sacred or pagan texts.

Counter to the image of homogeneity discussed above, this was also a period of formidable movements of peoples and of coming together of different cultures in the crucible that produced Western modernity. The eclecticism and variety encompassed by the phrase “Middle Ages” is dazzling. Let it suffice to remind ourselves here that it covers about one thousand years of history, and that it is the Age when most of the living Western languages developed. While it is generally agreed that the Middle Ages began with the fall of the Roman Empire at the hands of the “barbarians” and as a consequence of the rise of Christianity (hence the frequent association of barbarism and Christianity in the eyes of its denigrators, and generally in the name of a rationalising modernity), the medieval period also retained much from the Roman, Greek and Hebrew cultures, in time bringing these different strands together, often recuperating them through the mediation of other civilisations, such as, notably, the Arab.

The position of the Arabs and their culture at this time and the perception of them in later periods is indicative of the type of complex exchanges comprised within such an umbrella term as “the Middle Ages”. Medieval Christianity partly defined itself in opposition to Islam and the Arab conquest, just as at its beginning it had defined itself against the pagan Classics. 1492 represents the symbolic end of the Middle Ages and the beginning of the Modern Era not only because of Columbus’ “discovery” of America, but also because in that year Granada fell to the Spanish Catholic *Reconquista*, thus ending the over seven centuries of Arab kingdom in Spain. The fight against the Moors gave the Christian West a strong element of cohesion, and found its embodiment especially in the mythography of the cycle of Brittany and the glorification of Charlemagne, and, in Spain, in the epic of *El Cid*. These cycles would later evolve into the Renaissance epics of

writers like Ariosto and feed the imagination of such displaced individuals as Don Quijote. For several centuries, the fight against the Ottoman Empire continued to keep alive on the Eastern front the opposition between Christianity and Islam. Despite its move to define itself against the Middle Ages, it is thus clear that modernity, starting from the Renaissance, went on appropriating, developing and defining itself through its manifestations. Significantly – and ironically – while Charlemagne and his administration were occupied in a war against the Moors in the name of Christianity and of the Holy Roman Empire, on the intellectual front they were engaged in what is today known as the Carolingian Renaissance: an operation of recovery and transmission of culture that the Arabs also promoted through their translations and commentaries on Aristotle and other ancient philosophical texts that might otherwise have been lost. Thus it was the combination of European and Oriental efforts in rescuing, transmitting and furthering knowledge that laid the intellectual foundations of the Renaissance and of modern Europe, both in its orthodox and heterodox, even heretical, strands, at the same time as the struggle against the Orient was giving Europe a ground for its sense of cohesion and identity.

In the third essay of this volume, “Averroes’ Search: Dante’s Modernism and Joyce”, Jeremy Tambling discusses in detail the impact of Arab philosophers on Dante and, more generally, on European thought in the Middle Ages, and its value for modernity. Tambling shows how Joyce, with his keen perception of the dynamics of cultural transmission, imports this exchange into *Ulysses*. Joyce’s understanding of dualism, often interpreted in the light of Bruno’s heretical theory of the coincidence of opposites, is shown to have its roots in Averroes’ (equally heretical) theory of the “double truth”, which disallows the possibility of reconciling different kinds of intellectual and religious truths, leading to an ultimately unstable, non-centred knowledge. Dante’s references through his work to Averroes’ philosophy are taken by Tambling as proof of his modernity, which lies precisely in the difficulty to sustain one single system of thought throughout the *Commedia*. The “modernity” of this conception – the impossibility of

subscribing to universal “metanarratives” and single unified and unifying systems, what Benjamin describes as the melancholia of the modern – is thus revealed to originate in medieval philosophy, and it finds an analogy in the “demon at noontide”: the apathy, weariness or, in the *Wake*’s incomparable terminology, the “middyevil” that afflicted the hermit at the hottest hour of the day. What Tambling shows to be the crux of the problem – what cannot be integrated in any inclusive ideal system – is the material: obscure prime matter, irreducible to thought and intellectual comprehension. Both Christianity and Islam have represented this through the image of the book, symbolic of the desire to unite intellect and matter in one. Dante’s image of God as a book that “unquires” itself in the universe is a striking example of such an attempt at synthesising what cannot be reconciled. Yet even in this case, Tambling argues, the synthesis fails, because Dante has to place himself and the book he is writing outside this vision of God’s book.

Far from being a model of cultural uniformity, the Middle Ages thus appear as the locus of cultural encounters and juxtapositions, of ideological ambiguity and semantic ambivalence, and of searching questions that orthodoxy will ultimately fail to answer.

The book, in its uniqueness and preciousness, acquires a central function within medieval literature, and inevitably becomes – as it couldn’t in antiquity and as it no longer needed to after the invention of printing – the symbolic embodiment of such an operation of cultural conservation and transmission. Illuminated, copied, glossed, the book is in the Middle Ages an object of value and of cult, endowed with the status of art not only for its verbal content but also for its visual appearance and its corporeal tangibility – and, not least, for the artistry that goes into the production of the unique copy. In the most shrewd and self-conscious of writers this may produce the highly humorous effects that we are more accustomed to associating with modernist or postmodernist parodies. As an example of this, Helen Cooper highlights in her essay “Joyce’s Other Father: The Case for Chaucer” how in *Sir Thopas* Chaucer employed textual layout to disruptive effects, in order to bring out the meaninglessness of the

words. This concern for the physical substance and materiality of the book did not disappear of course after the Middle Ages. We find it, for instance, in George Herbert's "Easter-Wings", whose lines were printed vertically to reproduce the shape of wings; in the squiggles or the "marble", black or blank pages of Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*; in the Symbolist experimentation with layout and distribution of words and letters on the page. In the twentieth century there is a renewed interest in the book as object, in the interrelation between the iconographic and literary nature of writing, and in how the materiality of books and print transcends the thematic into the structural and the ideological.²¹ In Joyce's work, this appears explicitly in such instances as the annotated "Lesson" chapter of *Finnegans Wake* (II.2), which recalls the glosses of medieval manuscripts, and the "Aeolus" episode of *Ulysses*, whose layout co-operates with the signifying process.

However, less immediately obvious visual strategies connect Joyce's techniques to those employed by the medievals. In the Middle Ages copying, writing and illuminating are adjacent activities, and visual patterns inform structural principles of writing. In "Milly's Dream, Bloom's Body, and the Medieval Technique of Interlace" Guillemette Bolens argues that the medieval ribbon ornament or interlacing, of which the Book of Kells that Joyce so admired constitutes an outstanding example,²² also informs the writing of *Ulysses*. Here, lexical elements that are apparently unconnected, and whose association would indeed seem

21. See the examples of concrete poetry, of Robert Olson's "landscaped" projective verse, or of the "coffee stains" and other visual artifices in William Gass's post-modernist *Willie Master's Lonesome Wife*. See also Johanna Drucker, *Figuring the Word: Essays on Books, Writing, and Visual Poetics*, New York: Granary Books, 1998. It is probably in the age of computer-produced texts that the interaction between the material medium, the visual, and the linguistic is most fully recovered. I shall come back to the interplay of visual and verbal texts in the last section of this introduction.

22. See Richard Ellmann, *James Joyce*, New and revised Edition, Oxford: Oxford UP, 1982, p. 545. (Hereafter abbreviated *JJII* followed by the page number.)

to be totally incongruous (Bloom's lemon soap, the horse Throwaway, Bloom and Stephen urinating together, the blood sacrifices of Latin American populations...), are revealed to form part of a complex entwining of verbal threads that produce meaningful thematic and narrative links and contribute substantially to the book's creation of meanings. As Bolens shows, the visual technique of interlacing becomes especially relevant in relation to physical bodies and to the "epic of the human body"²³ that *Ulysses* was meant to represent: it is as though Joyce were consciously adapting a technique that relies on the visible and the material to the most literally corporeal elements of his narrative. In the Middle Ages, the concept of *auctoritas* entailed a parallel assent to and transformative renewal of one's sources. Bolens concludes that through the modern reinvention of the medieval technique of interlace Joyce too can lay claim to the status of *auctor* in the medieval sense of the term, insofar as he also endorses the literary tradition and simultaneously shows his independence from it.

Medieval Fathers

The issues of literary authority, imitation and transformation inform the comparative readings in the next set of essays, which focus in particular on two literary fathers: Dante and Chaucer. It was Joyce himself that used the appellation of "father" – with the attendant associations of similarity and dissimilarity, respect and competition, authority and independence – for both of these major medieval figures: directly for Dante, to whose "technique of deformation" Joyce compared the harmony he wished to achieve through the language of *Finnegans Wake*,²⁴ and indirectly but

23. Frank Budgen, *James Joyce and the Making of Ulysses*, Oxford: Oxford UP, 1989 (first edn. 1934), p. 21.

24. "Joyce ... pointed out to me the Dantean play of 'Pape Satan Pape satan aleppe'. 'May father Dante forgive me, but I started from this technique of deformation to achieve a harmony that defeats our intelligence, as music does.'" Ettore Settanni, *James Joyce e la prima*

equally explicitly for Chaucer, who he called “the father of English literature”.²⁵

Jennifer Fraser’s close intertextual reading seeks to identify the broad mythical patterns at work in Dante’s and Joyce’s work, and in her “Charting the Course of the *Commedia*’s Embryo in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*”, she argues that both writers construct the figure of the artist in the text as undergoing a literary initiation or – as she terms it – a “rite of passage” that transforms the character from pilgrim to poet, from reader to writer. In both Dante’s and Stephen’s cases this transformation is provoked by the agency of an intertext that acts as guide and prompt – the *Aeneid* for Dante, the *Divine Comedy* for Joyce. In the dynamics of initiation identified in Fraser’s essay, the authors and their texts are linked in a relationship that transforms the intertextual into the “gestatory”, leading to a rebirth which has to be preceded by a symbolic death. Like Dante, Stephen too is thus shown to represent a pilgrim / author who is not only physically but also poetically *in the middle of the way* in a journey towards self-authorisation.

Fraser’s reading of this intertextual rapport and of the way the rapport itself becomes the occasion for the poetic activity thus adds another important dimension to Joyce’s reasons for calling Dante “Father”. It also reiterates the point made earlier: that Joyce’s relationship with his literary sources is never simply one of more or less conscious borrowing of material, but constantly probes into the mechanics of literary transmission itself and creates a dynamic exchange that in turn becomes central to the definition of his poetics.

Dante’s importance for Joyce has always been taken for granted, mainly thanks to the prominence that the Florentine is accorded both in Joyce’s own biography²⁶ and in Stephen’s formation through *Stephen Hero* and *A Portrait*, so that few critics would doubt the strength of this relationship. But while the frankness, humour and humanity shared by Joyce’s and Chaucer’s approach

traduzione italiana del Finnegan’s [sic] Wake, Venice: Cavallino, 1965, p. 30, my translation.

25. *JIII*, p. 658, footnote.

26. See e.g. *JIII*, pp. 75, 218, *et passim*.

have also been pointed out and readers have in the past identified allusions in Joyce's work to individual Chaucerian tales or characters,²⁷ a comprehensive, book-length study of Joyce and Chaucer is still missing, and Chaucer's encyclopaedism and centrality deserve to be studied in greater depth than Joycean scholarship has generally conceded so far. In "Joyce's Other Father: The Case for Chaucer", Helen Cooper offers a comparative overview of the two writers' techniques, and suggests, in a somewhat challenging tone, that what we tend to regard as Joyce's daring innovations in *Ulysses* can in fact already be found in Chaucer's work, and that the *Canterbury Tales*, with their naturalism and their representation of the many facets of contemporary society, are a major unacknowledged source for the intricacies and variety of styles, narrative voices, themes and textual structure of Joyce's novel.²⁸ The comparison of the two works also shows that their authors share similar conceptions of language, of the shifting and often ambivalent relationship between world and word, and of the ways texts can be made to produce

27. Cf. e.g. John O. Lyons, "James Joyce and Chaucer's Prioress", *English Language Notes* 2 (1964), pp. 127-132; John H. Lammers, "The Archetypal Molly Bloom, Joyce's Frail Wife of Bath", *James Joyce Quarterly* 25.4 (1988), pp. 487-502. Lammers's essay has a useful list of critical works that have compared Molly to the Wife of Bath. In a recent paper ("Assertive Women, Oral Confessions: The Wife of Bath and Molly Bloom", presented at the XV International James Joyce Symposium, Zurich, 1996), Antonio Ballesteros González has argued that Molly's and the Wife's speeches can be read as examples of oral confessional discourse through which the women (and their authors) take on one of the institutions of male dominance: the control of the religious and autobiographical performative discourse of confession. Unfortunately Ballesteros González's paper could not be included in this volume and it is still unpublished.

28. This naturalism and the extremely varied range of subject-matters, slices of society, styles, registers and emotions can also be found in the work of another major medieval writer: Giovanni Boccaccio, whose best known series of tales, the *Decameron*, especially notorious for its licentiousness and humour, would also deserve more in-depth study in relation to *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake* than it has received so far.

meanings through techniques that include the manipulation of their layout and physical appearance. On the basis of the analogies identified, Cooper offers her provocative suggestion that Joyce's re-reading of Chaucer was a key factor in the transformation of *Ulysses* into the revolutionary modernist work it became with the revisions carried out after 1919 and the departures from the "initial style" of the first half of the book.²⁹

Allegories of writing

Twentieth century linguistics, literary theory and the self-conscious textuality of modernist and postmodernist literature have accustomed us to a self-reflexive concern with language and the preoccupation with the nature and function of signs, but the medievals had already been there too; in the Middle Ages all knowledge was structured in the first instance through the linguistic categories of the *trivium*: grammar, rhetoric and logic, and was ultimately conceived of as emanating from and returning to the *Verbum*.³⁰ This was linked to a very specific problem for the Christian Middle Ages: how to reconcile discrete linguistic manifestations to (the possibility of) a unique ultimate signification that could emanate only from God. Allegory afforded a solution. The immediate problem was to ensure that the Old Testament would be consonant with the New, and this was solved mainly through the application of the typological or figural relationship. As Augustine put it, in the Old Testament the New is concealed, and in the New Testament the Old is revealed. But all other texts had to be brought within the allegorical structure, and this produced a long and extremely rich exegetical tradition that recognised the presence of a system of layered meanings – all

29. For the phrase "initial style" and the chronology of Joyce's phases of composition of *Ulysses*, see Michael Groden, *Ulysses in Progress*, Princeton: Princeton UP, 1977.

30. Cf. in this regard Marcia Colish's important study *The Mirror of Language: A Study in the Medieval Theory of Knowledge*, Lincoln and London: U of Nebraska P, 1983.

different and yet all concordant, at least ideally – in every text.³¹

As medievalist scholars have pointed out,³² however, what the allegorical tradition also displays is an arresting capacity not so much to *transcend* the corporeality of existence and of things into spiritual, formless, eternal truths, but to *associate* the concreteness of common objects with symbolic, allegorical, moral meanings. Joyce explores the structure and implications of the method especially in *Finnegans Wake*, but affinities with this technique of writing and producing meaning already emerge in his earlier work. This can be seen most interestingly perhaps in *Dubliners*, the least manifestly “medieval” of his books, for instance in the way the young protagonist of “The Sisters” weighs and fears in his mind the work of such a very concrete abstract concept as “paralysis”. “Paralysis” both allegorises and is allegorised by “death”, and this creates in the text a chain of parallel meanings (i.e. an allegory) that soon becomes nearly uncontrollable.³³ The association between abstract and concrete that is typified by medieval allegory also offers a valuable context for re-examining Stephen’s theory of epiphany, according to which the commonest object is suddenly illuminated with deeper revelatory meaning. Umberto Eco points out that Stephen’s theory is based on a conflation of *fin de siècle* (Paterian, Symbolist, D’Annunzian) and Thomistic aesthetics that distorts Aquinas’ premises (p. 23-30) and eventually leads to their being discarded, thereby also abandoning any connection with the *quidditas* of things in favour of a totally interior moment (p. 27). However, Stephen could not have developed his theory on an Aquinian basis if Joyce’s way of representing and “epiphanising”

31. See Alistair J. Minnis, *Medieval Theory of Authorship: Scholastic Literary Attitudes in the Later Middle Ages*, second edn., Aldershot: Wildwood House, 1988.

32. See e.g. Eric Auerbach’s work on realism, and in particular his fascinating analysis of the episode of Farinata and Cavalcante in Dante’s *Inferno*, in *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, Princeton: Princeton UP, 1953, pp. 174-202.

33. Although not directly concerned with allegory, Jean-Michel Rabaté’s “Silence in *Dubliners*” (in *James Joyce: New Perspectives*, ed. Colin MacCabe, Sussex: Harvester; Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana UP, 1982, pp. 45-72) offers a very good illustration of this effect.

reality had not already borne a deep affinity with the medieval way of describing it in its concreteness while simultaneously transmitting a range of other, less material, more “essential” meanings. In other words, the thing can become the vehicle for an epiphanic revelation and a symbol of an interior moment *because* it is an objective, tangible reality in the first place. Stephen’s insistence on the “commonest object” and on “vulgarity” appears to bear out this point.

The structure of allegory, with its construction of parallel meanings, raises however other problems: questions about their divergence; the relationship with other structures of discourse that rely on this divergence, such as irony; the authority that can ground them; the number of levels (if there can be four, cannot there be more?); the issue of figurative language. The last two essays in this volume tackle precisely this type of questions.

In “The Medieval Irony of Joyce’s *Portrait*”, Sam Slote is concerned with the relationship between irony and allegory, insofar as both are fundamental modes of writing of medieval as well as modern literature, both allude to “other” meanings that they do not directly constitute, and both have been used as interpretative structures for *A Portrait*. As Slote shows in an impressive analysis that ranges from St. Augustine to Paul de Man, both have also been constantly subjected to attempts at stabilising their meaning by grounding it in a transcendent authority, but these attempts are constantly defeated in the writing itself, and in turn ironised as inconclusive or irrelevant. Slote’s conclusion is that the recurrent question of irony in *A Portrait* – Stephen’s allegorising as either Dedalus or Icarus – needs to be recognised as a facet of his Aquinian-Flaubertian-Mallarmean aesthetic theory: since allegory is the sign of the incapacity of language to signify universal, grounded meanings (whether grounded in the authority of God or of the poet) – since, in other words, allegory is the sign of a necessary condition of absentation of an ultimate linguistic authority – the withdrawal of the artist into a position of indifference is itself revealed to be the coming of the work into existence.

The theory that Stephen propounds in *A Portrait* may thus be not as radically different as it seems from the one that we find in *Finnegans Wake*. The artist of this novel is no longer the one who pairs his fingernails, indifferent to his creation: he is part and parcel of the creation itself at all levels – the ink with which it is composed, concocted from the poet’s own excrement (*FW* 185.14-26); its subject-matter, drawn “out of his wit’s waste” (*FW* 185.07-08); and the “integument” (*FW* 186.01) on which it is written. *Integumentum* is an important concept within the medieval theory of polysemy: it refers to the “external” meaning of a text, or literal level; thus, in a sense, by being the “integument”, the artist *literally* encompasses his work. Shem the Penman “transaccidentates” (*FW*186.03-04) himself into his creation, “perilous, potent, common to allflesh, human only, mortal” (*FW*186.05-06). But so does the artist-God of *A Portrait*, who may be indifferently above his creation, but who has transubstantiated himself into it – who *is* the creation, at its origin (“The personality of the artist, at first a cry or cadence or mood and then a fluid and lambent narrative...”) and at its end, “remaining” as he does behind or beyond or above, but also always “within” it (*P* 215). Once again, we find Joyce developing a “poetics in progress” across his entire oeuvre through an unceasing confrontation with his sources.

If allegory is the defining structure of medieval signification, then the modern theory and practice of allegory, intertwined with the ironic mode, is also essentially medievalising, and it draws out in more explicit terms what medieval theories of polysemy were already implying, though rarely openly admitting. In the essay that closes this volume, “Let Dante be Silent: *Finnegans Wake* and the Medieval Theory of Polysemy”, I argue that although such medieval theories as the fourfold exegetical system have long been associated with the structure and semiotics of *Finnegans Wake*, trying to identify the *Wake*’s levels of meaning according to such theories is not the best way of understanding their relevance to Joyce’s work. Modern polysemy, especially in such a radically experimental artefact as the *Wake*, will inevitably go beyond the too orderly enunciation of the theory that we find for instance in Dante’s *Convivio* and “Letter to Can Grande della Scala”. The

primary effect of putting the theory under the pressure of the Wakean uncontrollable and non-univocal language is in fact to pry open and expose the inherent contradictions that Dante's formulations were trying to control. Thus examining how Dante's theory of literary interpretation is taken up and transformed in the *Wake* not only highlights the analogies and the distance between the two; it also shows that any attempt at allegorical (self-)interpretation is inevitably denied closure, as it always calls for yet another interpretative stage – a process that both Dante's and Joyce's self-reflexive oeuvres, constantly re-examining themselves, implicitly acknowledge. Ultimately, the *Wake's* exploding of Dante's (self-consciously idealistic) neat system of allegorical signification becomes itself an allegory of the modern work's relation to the literary past and of its self-conscious being part of the ongoing process of literary transformation.

Postmodern middayevilism

If we look for comparable experiences of layered polysemy and of ways of using ideas, forms, systems of representation that are not simply direct imitations of medieval sources but modern ways of exploring them while remaining committed to the contemporary world, two examples in particular leap to mind. One is Eco's *The Name of the Rose* (1980), a deeply medievalist novel by an author that has for years been preoccupied with the Middle Ages, with medieval and modern allegory and theories of signs, with Joyce, and with all of these taken together.³⁴ The other is Tom Phillips and Peter Greenaway's TV "translation" of the first eight cantos of the *Divine Comedy*, *A TV Dante*, produced by Michael Kustow for Channel 4 in 1988 and screened in Britain for the first time in 1990.³⁵ A brief discussion of the latter will be useful to

34. For a detailed discussion of Eco's novel see Theresa Coletti, *Naming the Rose: Eco, Medieval Signs, and Modern Theory*, Ithaca and London: Cornell UP, 1988.

35. A companion publication accompanied the television release: *A TV Dante*, Notes and Commentary by Tom Phillips, ed. Derek Jones,

throw into relief some aspects of the nature of Joyce's medievalism as it peaked especially in *Finnegans Wake*.

A TV Dante was received with little warmth from British television audiences but caused some stir among critics and reviewers. The London *Times* for instance announced, in a review titled "Television goes to Hell with Dante", that nothing like it had been ever seen on TV before.³⁶ Phillips and Greenaway are well known for their exploration of the media and of the interrelation between verbal and visual modes of representation. Greenaway (whose other "palimpsestic" film *Prospero's Books* performs on Shakespeare's *The Tempest* what *A TV Dante* performs on the *Divine Comedy*) has described himself as "a clerk" in medieval style, who likes organising material, listing, cataloguing.³⁷ Phillips, best known perhaps for his visual poetry and his "humumentism",³⁸ had already translated and illustrated the *Inferno*, and saw the project of *A TV Dante* as an extension of his previous work.³⁹

A TV Dante is a turbulent, at times delirious, dizzying visual, verbal and aural composition, in which the *Inferno* is rendered through the juxtaposition and rapid sequence of images and sounds from a multiplicity of sources, bringing into the text a wide range of references and registers. "Boxed" commentators appear on the screen to "explain" or "gloss" the text, performing the time-honoured function of the textual interpreter while simultaneously evoking forms of television culture by association with news-

London: Channel 4 Television, 1990.

36. 28 July 1990, p. 19. Quoted in Nancy J. Vickers, "Dante in the TV Decade", in Theodore J. Cachey, *Dante Now: Current Trends in Dante Studies*, Notre Dame, Indiana, and London: U of Notre Dame P, 1995, p. 263. See also Amilcare Iannucci's introduction to *Dante: Contemporary Perspectives*, A. Iannucci ed., Toronto, Buffalo and London: U of Toronto P, 1997, esp. pp. xii-xiv.

37. Vickers, "Dante in the TV Decade", p. 264.

38. See his *A Humument*, a "treatment" of W. H. Mallock's 1892 text *A Human Document* that superimposes Phillip's illustrations and images onto "selected" words from the original. The result is an evocative investigation into the nature of the book as material and cultural object. A facsimile is published by Thames & Hudson (London, 1980).

39. "Television goes to Hell", p. 19

readers or sports commentators.⁴⁰ Weather reports supplement Dante's images of tempestuous wind in the canto of Paolo and Francesca. David Attenborough, known to the public for his wildlife documentaries, comments on the three beasts of *Inferno* I. Archival material, nineteenth century experimental photography, coverage of world events, images of manuscripts, frame, organise, and often clutter the screen. John Gielgud – one of the best known actors to the British public – appears as Virgil and immediately brings into the text of Dante the wealth of Shakespearean and other dramatic characters that his figure is today associated with. A lift brings Dante and Virgil down to the lower circles of Hell; visual leitmotifs are used in homage to Wagner.⁴¹ Urban images illustrate the “dark wood” and echoes from *The Waste Land* (where Eliot in turn echoes Dante) are heard in the third canto. Mussolini appears among the arrogant sinners of canto VIII. The vertiginous quick succession of discordant images and sounds physically recreates for the viewer the heavy, unceasing discomfort that reigns in Dante's Hell.

It is difficult, if not impossible, to think of any other text that has ever been able to convey so graphically and so dramatically the concept of multiple and simultaneous levels of meaning.⁴² It also becomes immediately apparent that the polysemy of *A TV Dante* conveys not the sense of an ordered system through which a text is created and interpreted (as in the medieval theory of allegory), but, more adequately to the infernal context of the subject-matter and the modernity of the project, the vision of a disordered, confusing post-modern, global, multimediatric world where attention must never flag or relax, and where, because of the information overload, any noise in the transmission turns meaning into entropy, but where entropy is also part of the meaning. The only other text that comes close to this ideal of simultaneity is *Finnegans Wake*, with its requirement of an insomniac reader (*FW* 120.13-14) and its concomitant split and co-operation between the visual and the aural

40. See Vickers, “Dante in the TV Decade”, p. 268

41. *A TV Dante*, p. 14.

42. Phillips explicitly refers to Dante's “Letter to Can Grande” in the Postscript to *A TV Dante*.

in the text, and between graphics, lexicons and encyclopaedias – i.e., between the actual appearance of the word on the page, the existing words it contains or recalls, in different languages, and the plurality of concepts it evokes, in various cultures.

Most importantly, however, both Joyce's and Phillips & Greenaway's works understand and succeed in reproducing the interest in textual structures, in the relation between word and world, and in the mechanics of textual functioning that developed in the Middle Ages, and achieve this through a total commitment to the exploration of new ways of producing texts that are relevant to the contemporary context. *A TV Dante* in particular prompts us to reflect on the similarity between the conditions in which such theories of the production and decoding of meaning evolved in the Middle Ages and those that prevail in the twentieth century.⁴³ For the former period two factors were especially relevant, as Brian Stock's studies have demonstrated. One is the sudden importance that words and texts acquired in the Christian context, when the link between word, text and (divine) authority became the foundation of all reflections on verbal expression. The other is the cultural impact of expanding literacy and the increasing importance of written texts in a culture that was still, to a very large degree, oral, and in which the ratio between orality and literacy was rapidly changing.⁴⁴ The magnitude of that change is perhaps only comparable with the impact of media technology in recent years. Phillips & Greenaway conspicuously foreground this; Joyce too, with his usual sense of anticipation, captured the analogy several decades ago.

But perhaps an even more striking parallel between *A TV Dante* and the *Wake* is the feeling of utter unfamiliarity, strangeness and discomfort they cause to their first time (and not only) readers and viewers. This is true for most of Peter Greenaway's productions. It was certainly true for each of Joyce's works at the

43. Vickers makes a similar point in "Dante in the TV Decade", p. 265.

44. Cf. Brian Stock, *Listening for the Text*, and *The Implication of Literacy: Written Language and Models of Interpretation in the Eleventh and Twelfth Century*, Princeton: Princeton UP, 1983.

time of their publication, and it still holds true today for any reader of *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*. All one can say is that “He’s weird, I tell you, and middayevil down to his vegetable soul”.

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