

## The Modern Middle Ages in James Joyce: From Medieval Bestiaries to the United Field in *Ulysses*

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**T**his paper examines the influence of medieval bestiaries on Joyce's *Ulysses*. It considers typical figures from bestiaries present in the novel of the Irish writer through direct allusion. It also focuses on the cultural-ideological facets of these works and highlights the features they share with *Ulysses*, such as their dual character, their nature deriving from different sources, their organic composition, their cyclical nature, their didactic purpose, and so on. Along with these features, the study looks at other influences on Joyce's work as regards the bestial features of man. These include the philosophical ideas of Nicholas of Cusa (1401-1464), Giordano Bruno (1548-1600) and Giambattista Vico (1668-1744). The paper concludes by explaining the significance and influence of bestiaries in Joyce's *Ulysses* as a polymorphous element that converges in unity.

Jacques Derrida stated that writing is having a passion for origins,<sup>1</sup> and if this statement is appropriate for many writers, it is even more so in the case of Joyce. It is so to the extent that as prominent a literary critic as Cyril Connolly argued that the Irishman was "by temperament, a medievalist."<sup>2</sup>

In the society of the Middle Ages human beings communicated not only with other human beings; men and women then believed in all kinds of unreal and non-human beings: angels, spirits, the dead, wraiths, ghosts, martyrs, animals, goblins, God, and so on. During that time witches and seers fornicated with animal spirits and maintained special links with the creatures of the forests. It was a context in which heroes and heroines had regular visitations from saints and martyrs; for example, Joan of Arc had regular visions, which she believed were visitations, from saints such as Saint Ann and Saint Catherine. It is in this context that we must place

ourselves to understand the role of medieval bestiaries as icons of an ideology.

Medieval bestiaries were books which essentially consisted of collections of animal stories or descriptions. It is also true that, although mostly devoted to animals, both plants and even rocks could also appear. These stories recreated different Christian allegories with the aim of advising and instructing on different religious and moral issues. They were fundamentally books on Christian moral values in the guise of allegory.

We know that many medieval bestiaries were influenced by the Greek work *Physiologus*, a text by an unknown author which was probably written in Alexandria between the second and the third centuries A.D. This book is fundamentally composed of stories based upon facts taken from natural science. We also know that the first Latin translations of this work into Anglo-Saxon were undertaken before 1000 A.D. and that a little known figure, Thetbaldus, wrote a metrical version in Latin of thirteen sections of the book. This would be the translation which was the basis for the only medieval bestiary written in Middle English, which dates from the twelfth century. This version and other lost Middle English and Anglo-Norman texts had a great influence on the development of fables about beasts and extraordinary creatures in English literature. We can thus see that there has been a bestiary tradition since the dawn of English literature. But a great number of the rarities or strange characters of the stories from the bestiaries are based upon false premises grounded in natural history. Thus, for example, the "ichneumon" was a creature that entered through the crocodile's jaws and eventually devoured its intestines. Other creatures have lasted and are nowadays part of popular folklore, as is the case of the phoenix, a bird reborn from its own ashes, or the hedgehog, an animal associated with provisions for the winter. It is worth noting as well that many of those creatures today part of popular folklore have developed a full range of allegories, symbolism and even images in which few people would recognize medieval origins, a circumstance indicating that the role of medieval bestiaries has been underestimated in our time. Their role in the Middle Ages was in fact far greater. They not only arose through illuminated and handwritten work; their imagery was widely used in the visual culture of the Church, through many different sculptures and pictures, as we see in many fantastic creatures dwelling in the capitals and other architectural structures of medieval churches. Churches and cathedrals at the time were authentic books in stone. If we acknowledge the fact that common villagers had access to religion only through

sermons and images, we realize the importance of visual culture and, of course, of bestiaries as texts transmitted through it.

In Gifford and Seidman's *"Ulysses" Annotated*, glosses for the following creatures are indexically placed under the heading "Bestiary": Basilisk, Bat, Dog, Eagle, Hyena, Lapwing, Panther, Pard, Pelican, Phoenix, Roebuck, Unicorn, Upupa, and Wren.<sup>3</sup> The glosses not only refer to the appearance of these creatures in *Ulysses* but also give information about their meaning through history. We know, for instance, that in the Middle Ages the bat was a symbol of black magic, darkness, danger and torment. The dog in Celtic mythology was the guardian of secrets. The hyena was a beast with the capacity of changing its sex; it lived near cemeteries, rummaged through graves and ate corpses. The eagle was a creature which was able to look at and face the sun and which could renew its sight by flying towards this star. The lapwing was considered unreliable, and in the Bible it appears, together with the bat, as a hateful creature that should not be eaten. The pelican, with the passing of time, came to be a symbol of Christ within Christianity, but in medieval bestiaries it was a creature that paid special care and attention to its young. The panther, together with the leopard, signified adultery. The phoenix was the mythical bird that once every one thousand years was consumed by fire and was reborn from its ashes. It was also an emblem of Christ in bestiaries. The unicorn was a creature which was able to live for a thousand years and was, in general, a symbol of purity and chastity; it was one of the attributes of the saints and the Virgin, who could resist temptation. The roebuck represented virility, and the upupa was a flesh-eating bird that built its nests with human excrement. Lastly, the wren was a bird which secretly aspired to be the king of all birds by riding on top of eagles.

Aside from the glosses in Gifford and Seidman's annotations, there are numerous other references and allusions in *Ulysses* to fabulous creatures and beasts. In the "Circe" episode, "Gadarene Swine"<sup>4</sup> refers to the swine to which Jesus casts the demons that had possessed two men, the swine finally to go mad and throw themselves into the sea. In relation to this, we recall that Circe turned Odysseus's sailors into swine. Lemur (*U* 539) is a further reference; for the Romans and the Etruscans the lemurs were ghosts from the dead and also mythological creatures. "Circe" also holds the terms "dogsbody" and "bitchbody" (*U* 539-40), in tune with the hybrid character of the creatures from bestiaries. At times this hybrid character reaches the deities, and thus the novel refers to Gea-Tellus (*U* 688), a mixture of the Greek and Roman goddesses. There are also references to the devil, and even Jesus Christ is split into two names,

“Hiesos Cristos” (*U* 178). Dragons and sirens are likewise mentioned: “It rains dragon’s teeth” (*U* 555); “Von der Sirenen Listigkeit, Tun die Poeten Dichten” (*U* 616). Zoomorphic references occur with regard to several characters, as in “Houyhnhnm, horsenostrilled. The oval equine faces, Temple Buck Mulligan, Foxy Campbell, Lantern Jaws” (*U* 40). To these examples we add fascinating images revealing the hybrid, beast-like features of characters. Consider the following passage from “Proteus”:

Patrice, home on furlough, lapped warm milk with me in the bar MacMahon. Son of the wild goose, Kevin Egan of Paris. My father’s a bird; he lapped the sweet *lait chaud* with pink young tongue, plump bunny’s face. Lap *lapin*. (*U* 40)

Lastly, we observe in “Oxen of the Sun” the way Joyce presents a zodiacal host of strange creatures, the spirits of the oxen, Helios’s sacred cattle:

Muttering thunder of rebellion, the ghosts of beast. Huuh! Hark! Huuh! Parallax stalks behind and goads them, the lancinating lightning of whose brow are scorpions. Elk and yak, the bulks of Bashan and of Babylon, mammoth and mastodon, they come trooping to the sunken sun, *Lacus Mortis*. Ominous, revengeful zodiacal host! They moan, passing upon the clouds, horned and capricorned, the trumpeted with the husked, the limonaded, the giantlered, snouter and crawler, rodent, ruminant and pachyderm, all their moving moaning multitude murderers of the sun. (*U* 394)

Apart from these allusions, *Ulysses* also shares much of the ideology and iconography of medieval bestiaries. On structural and ideological grounds there are two features that show *Ulysses* to be in tune with these: on the one hand, its dual character, its significance as a process in a double direction; on the other, its meaning as a mixture of different sources, as a random compilation. As regards its dual character, we can account for this by examining the work which has had the largest influence upon bestiaries, *Physiologus*. In this text the animals that appear are creatures or artistic representations that reproduce features of the God-devil for men’s souls.

*Ulysses* also becomes linked to bestiaries through the use of different sources and through its *modus operandi*. If we consider *Physiologus*, we realize that the different stories transfer us to old Indian, Egyptian and Hebrew sources, over which a series of Christian content

glosses are added. Thus the question arises: is not Joyce glossing over, in a secular and profane way, sources that belong to multiple traditions?

The random character of bestiaries is not only clear through the use of different sources, but also in the loss and renewal they acquire through the translating process over time: from Greek into Latin and eventually into the vernacular language; from the Greek tradition that includes Indian and Egyptian sources to the one that finally transmutes and incorporates Celtic and Old German elements through the Christian prism. The medieval reader who travelled through bestiaries felt in the same way as the contemporary reader who travels through *Ulysses*. He feels close to some elements that are similar or related, elements which provide him with a feeling of safety, but at the same time, he feels lost and insecure within the chaos of the book. The reader of bestiaries was familiar with domestic and wild animals from western culture but was ignorant of exotic creatures such as the lion, the elephant or the honey badger of Ethiopia. We can speculate that the readers of the bestiaries, like the readers of *Ulysses*, place themselves in a limbo of credulity. This limbo is reached in both cases, because in both the coexistence of realistic descriptions, minute details and fantastic elements is possible. This is akin to a hybrid creature in a bestiary, described in detail and at the same time located in fable.

A further link lies in an organic sense in both bestiaries and *Ulysses*. Bestiaries copied each other through added and suppressed passages until the work acquired its own organic shape. Thus we know that in Isidore of Seville's *Etimologia*, composed in the late sixth and early seventh centuries, there are many stories overlapping with those of *Physiologus*. And we know as well that Rabanus Maurus in his work *De Universo*, written in the eighth century, mixes his own allegorical interpretations with stories taken from Isidore of Seville, stories that he himself touches up. *Ulysses* behaves in the same way; it is an organic entity that has taken and suppressed materials from different sources. It started as a process that took from different sources until its creator considered the text had acquired a life on its own. Joyce's own aim for *Ulysses* is that of providing the work with an organic sense, a sense that goes beyond the boundaries of its biological time. We could even venture that *Ulysses* shares a teaching aim with medieval bestiaries. It is obvious that the latter have a didactic aim, but what does Joyce pursue when he states that he wants the Irish to look at themselves in the mirror of *Dubliners*? As regards the cyclical character of bestiaries, the *Aberdeen Bestiary Project* finds it to be a frequent feature in them. According to the

*Project* there are at least six medieval bestiaries which include an illustrated cycle of creation.<sup>5</sup>

Yet another coincidence of *Ulysses* and medieval bestiaries is that in both the reader at times confuses symbol and allegory. It is true that the boundaries between the two are clear in our times, but in the Middle Ages, and as Umberto Eco points out,<sup>6</sup> they were almost synonymous. Linked to this, as Jeri Johnson remarks, is Joyce's gift to join and transform images, allegories and symbols:

Homeric places were translated as Joycean themes: Scylla the Rock became Dogma, while Charybdis the Whirlpool became Mysticism; or Helios' sacred Oxen became fertility, or Penelope's Suitors, Scruples. Joyce had an infinitely adaptable creative mind which thrived on noticing the ways in which one thing (a Dublin conversation, say) both was and was not like another (a battle between a Greek warrior trying to get home and the immediate opponent who stood in his way). It is this not-quite-sameness which Joyce exploits in his connecting *Ulysses* and the *Odyssey*.<sup>7</sup>

It is not by chance that Joyce spelled out in 1907 much of his theory of Ireland in his Italian lecture "Ireland, Island of Saints and Sagas," and Cyril Connolly<sup>8</sup> regarded *Ulysses* as a work full of fables where myths and legends were of utmost importance.

There is, in addition, a profane and polytheistic sense in the medieval bestiaries' influence on Joyce. The Irish author began to reject his childhood Manichean Christianity very early, and this rejection was transferred to his creation and aesthetic interpretation. There is a clear vindication of the pagan element through the breaking with principles of Christianity; examples would be monogamy and monotheism. Furthermore, *Ulysses* represents in many ways a liberation, or at least a presentation, of "coincidentia oppositorum" as typical fears of human sexuality. Thus there is a rapprochement to the unknown and even to the uncanny and to superhuman powers.

This polymorphic character is also linked to the idea of transformation, and needless to say, it is key and omnipresent in the medieval bestiaries as it is in *Ulysses*. For Joyce art was a "process whereby the real took on the epiphanic contours of the magical."<sup>9</sup> In this sense, if we pay attention to the idea of mutability, we cannot ignore two other important concepts that are well related to it: Joyce's notions of "metempsychosis" and "parallax". Metempsychosis is a doctrine which

posits that the soul after death is reborn in another body. Bloom gives an interpretation of the term in *Ulysses*:

- Metempsychosis?
- Yes. Who's he when he's at home?
- Metempsychosis, he said, frowning. It's Greek: from the Greek. That means the transmigration of souls. (*U* 62)

There are several examples of metempsychosis throughout the book, but one of the more striking and direct appears in “Telemachus”:

Bag of corpsegas sopping in foul brine. A quiver of minnows, fat of a spongy titbit, flash through the slits of his buttoned trouserfly. God becomes man becomes fish becomes barnacle goose becomes featherbed mountain. (*U* 49)

Metempsychosis, as a process of transmigration, is directly connected to the multidimensionality of the bestiaries and the multidimensionality of the human condition in Joyce's particular aesthetics, and parallax reflects this as well. Parallax denotes an apparent displacement in the location or direction of an object when observed from two different points of view. In lay terms and when applied to the novel, parallax results in apparent change in the position of an object resulting from the position of the observer. Bloom seems to leave no clear sense of its meaning:

Fascinating little book that is of Sir Robert Ball's. Parallax. I never exactly understood. There is a priest. Could ask him. Par it's Greek: parallel, parallax. Met him pike hoses she called it till I told her about the transmigration. O rocks! (*U* 147)

Discernible examples of parallax occur when Bloom sits in Davy Byrne's and sees two flies copulating on the window and then moves into a daydream about kissing Molly on Ben Howth, or at the end of the novel, when Molly's thoughts conclude the novel. Parallax is understood in *Ulysses* as an enlivening force that allows constant shifting. It is, at the same time, a changing of perspectives and an attitude of anti-paralysis. In this sense, parallax and metempsychosis are but different perspectives through different media, just like the polymorphism and the power to shift perspectives in medieval bestiaries.

In Joyce and *Ulysses*, however, the beast-like elements and their meanings are not exclusively consigned to bestiaries. Specialists look in

addition to the important influence exerted by philosophers like Giambattista Vico (1668-1744), Giordano Bruno (1548-1600) and Nicholas of Cusa (1401-1464). To make a connection properly with these philosophers, we must set up a context and remember that in the medieval conception God is above all spheres, eternal, and man is in the sublunar world. In the Middle Ages man is at the same time angel, matter and spirit, and his soul appears divided into three parts: vegetative, animal and rational. We realize, therefore, that man's animal features were essential to interpret his own nature.

In the case of Giambattista Vico, the philosopher's life, according to his biographers, was marked by alternations of enthusiasm and discouragement. This fact seems to have determined the fundamental axis of his vision and interpretation of reality. His conception of human society was that of a long evolution with stages of growth and decline. These stages correlate with different ages: a first represented by a "bestial condition", and after it successive ages: "the age of gods", "the age of heroes", and "the age of men". Once all these ages concluded, a new cycle with a primitive barbarian age would start, a cycle characterized by the "bestial condition", and so forth. The second basic notion in Vico's conception is that man has a mixed nature that remains closer to the beast than to the angel. Man is a coward who hides his evil intentions behind flattery and hypocritical wheedling. For him, the poor degenerate wretch does not doubt in becoming subjected to the most despicable actions with the sole aim of taking shelter and protection. There is a third notion, as Isaiah Berlin reminds us. For Vico there are two kinds of knowledge: "scienza", a *per causa* knowledge, a truth one has about one's actions. This is an interpretation of knowledge clearly influenced by Francis Bacon and Thomas Hobbes. The second kind of knowledge, "filologia", is understood as an anthropological historicism, as knowledge is assumed as not static and cannot be traced through the evolution of symbols, words, expressions, and their patterns of change, functions, structures and uses. Joyce is clearly influenced by these two Viconian interpretations and will make use of both. On the one hand, he makes use of the direct element in its most empirical way; on the other, he relies on a whole series of patterns, models and symbols. Among these patterns, models and symbols are medieval bestiaries, which are essential in order to assess his vision and interpretation of human beings.

A second philosopher who had a remarkable influence on Joyce was Giordano Bruno. It is highly significant that the title of one of his works is *Spaccio de la bestia trionfante* (1584) (*The Expulsion of the Triumphant Beast*), a satire about contemporary vices and superstitions



where there is a strong criticism of Christian ethics, especially those of Calvinism. Another of his works well within the same pattern is *Cabala del caballo Pegaseo* (1585) (*Cabal of the Horse Pegasus*), where there is a discussion between the human soul and the universal soul that concludes with the negation of the absolute individuality of the former. As we can see, it certainly draws our attention to the importance of elements related to beasts or bestiaries used by Bruno to speak about the union of different natures.

The question that arises, however, is, where do the medieval bestiaries coincide in Vico, Bruno, Cusa and Joyce? The answer undoubtedly lies in the polymorphism which leads to unity. Sheldon Brivic, when referring to *Ulysses*, admits that the different creatures of the novel, after an apparent lack of unity, tend to a unity or fusion: "It [*Ulysses*] may be said to exhale the creatures of the text insofar as these individuals are given the freedom of their own natures and . . . in moments of inspiration they are subject to intimations of unity and fusion".<sup>10</sup> Joyce, as Stuart Hampshire acknowledges,<sup>11</sup> will look back to Vico and his sense of the "ricorso" to find a unitarian interpretation of mankind. Joyce is to understand that the universal family of man arises not in social structures, but in language. He is to interpret the history of mankind through the language creation potential.

Bruno, in his *De la causa principio e uno* (1584) (*Concerning the Cause, the Principle, and One*) and through the monistic conception of the universe presented in it, leads us up to Joyce. The work implies a basic unity of all substances and the coincidence of opposites in the infinite unity of the being. But Joyce also heeds Nicholas of Cusa's conception of unity. Cusa distinguishes four different degrees of knowledge: the senses, which provide incoherent and confusing images; reason, which diversifies and orders the images; the intellect or speculative reason, which unifies them; and intuitive contemplation, which, by taking the soul to God, acquires knowledge in the unity of opposites. For Cusa the unity of opposites is "coincidentia oppositorum" and the place where supreme truth lies.

Needless to say, Vico's polymorphous language is directly linked to the polymorphous images in the medieval bestiaries, which, at the same time, appear under the common denominator of Bruno's monism. Last but not least, the Cusian "coincidentia oppositorum" is reflected through the unity of opposites and is perfectly represented in the inner pugnacity of the different creatures of bestiaries. This is exemplified in *Ulysses* in what for Umberto Eco is "a contrast between the world of the medieval *summae* and that of contemporary science and philosophy."<sup>12</sup>

But how can we link this Joycean way of thinking even more closely with medieval bestiaries? There is an abstruse sense in bestiaries, a sense of a remote element made close because unreal elements are somehow mixed with real ones. It is then that we fully understand Michael Hollington's statement about modernist writing; he indicates that "Non-events are distinctive features of modernist writing".<sup>13</sup> These features are clearly present in *Ulysses*. In the Irish writer there is a principle of "characters' ectojection", a principle of characters' outer projection. We could even add that the Joycean characters in *Ulysses* are truly real characters, because they are based upon a pattern of reality as chimera. This pattern is also clearly dual and resembles bestiaries, because in fact our reality and our own existence are but an illusion.

*Ulysses* is a testimony of Joyce's attempt to escape time and history by using myth, casual experience and the interlinking of patterns. These are used as pillars to sustain the argument that everything is the same. With Joyce in *Ulysses* we discern the principle of total convergence. When we read the book we feel as if we have already lived our lives. We certainly know that the experiences shown are not ours, but the Joycean unlimited semiosis has suggested a life that could well be ours. On the other hand, this principle of convergence is a principle that he inherited from Giordano Bruno, Nicholas of Cusa and Giambattista Vico. Through this principle in one day a life is reflected, and this is a life that reflects all lives.

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<sup>1</sup> Jacques Derrida, *La escritura y la diferencia* (Barcelona: Anthropos, 1989) 403.

<sup>2</sup> Cyril Connolly, *The Condemned Playground* (London: Hogarth, 1985) 2.

<sup>3</sup> Don Gifford with Robert J. Seidman, "*Ulysses*" *Annotated: Notes for James Joyce's "Ulysses"* (U of California P, 1989) 647.

<sup>4</sup> James Joyce, *Ulysses*, ed. Jeri Johnson (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998) 538. Henceforth cited parenthetically in the text.

<sup>5</sup> See Michael Arnott and Iain Beavan, *Aberdeen Bestiary Project—University of Aberdeen* <<http://www.abdn.ac.uk/bestiary/what.hti>>.

<sup>6</sup> Umberto Eco, *De los espejos y otros ensayos* (Barcelona: Lumen, 1988) 233.

<sup>7</sup> Jeri Johnson, "Introduction", in James Joyce, *Ulysses* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998) xvi.

- <sup>8</sup> Cyril Connolly, *The Condemned Playground* (London: Hogarth, 1985) 10.
- <sup>9</sup> Declan Kiberd, "Introduction", in James Joyce, *Ulysses* (London: Penguin, 1992) lxxix.
- <sup>10</sup> Sheldon Brivic, *Joyce the Creator* (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1985) 22.
- <sup>11</sup> Stuart Hampshire, "Joyce and Vico: The Middle Way", in *Giambattista Vico's Science of Humanity*, eds. Giorgio Tagliacozzo and Donald Philip Verene (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1976) 32.
- <sup>12</sup> Umberto Eco, *The Aesthetics of Chaosmos: The Middle Ages of James Joyce* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1989) 3.
- <sup>13</sup> Michael Hollington, "Svevo, Joyce and Modernist Time", in *Modernism. A Guide to European Literature 1890-1930*, eds. Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane (London: Penguin, 1991) 431.