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A “FINE ARTFUL DISORDER”: LINGUISTIC INDETERMINACY AND ARTISTIC CREATION IN JAMES JOYCE’S *FINNEGANS WAKE*

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Finnegans Wake est souvent décrit comme l’œuvre moderniste qui incarne le mieux les attitudes linguistiques qui allaient caractériser le poststructuralisme des années 1960 et 1970. Le texte de Joyce constitue une tentative de façonner ce que l’auteur appelait un « désordre artistique » : une écriture qui met en scène le processus selon lequel on construit du sens à partir de signes linguistiques opaques par nature.

Cet essai analyse ce qui a conduit Joyce à adopter la méthode d’écriture atypique qui caractérise *Finnegans Wake*. Il situe cette œuvre dans l’évolution artistique de son auteur et propose une comparaison entre la trajectoire de carrière de Joyce et celle d’autres écrivains modernistes comme Ezra Pound et William Carlos Williams. En conclusion, il propose une évaluation du succès littéraire de *Finnegans Wake*, mettant en avant le décalage entre la théorie du langage de Joyce et la structure littéraire de son roman.

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1 The Language and Structure of *Finnegans Wake*

When he described his work on *Finnegans Wake* to friends, James Joyce often insisted upon the underlying simplicity of the experimental text that occupied him for most of the final two decades of his life. He told Frank Budgen, for example, that 'if there is any difficulty in reading what I write it is because of the material I use. In my case the thought is always simple' (Budgen, 1989: 291). To Eugene Jolas, the editor of the Paris-based avant-garde review *Transition*, Joyce offered the following appraisal of his book:

Time and the river and the mountain are the real heroes of my book. Yet the elements are exactly what every novelist might use: man and woman, birth, childhood, night, sleep, marriage, prayer, death. There is nothing paradoxical about all this. I am trying to build many planes of narrative with a single esthetic purpose. (Ellmann, 1983: 554)

The difficulty of *Finnegans Wake*, if we accept such statements, lies in the fact that in order to make his 'many planes of narrative' converge into a single literary edifice, Joyce felt compelled to transform the linguistic material with which he worked. Consequently, whether or not one agrees with his claims regarding the underlying simplicity of his thought, the wilful opacity of the novel's language makes it impossible to comprehend Joyce's book in a straightforward manner. Instead, the reader's attention is forced away from the referential function of language and toward what later post-structuralist theorists would term the play of linguistic signifiers. It was this state of affairs that led Samuel Beckett to famously comment that Joyce's writing in the *Wake* 'is not about something, it is that thing itself' (Beckett, 1929: 14).

Structurally, *Finnegans Wake* is often described as a vast, cosmic allegory, or as a text which confirms its author's increasing dependence upon symbolist strategies: a development that places his later writing in opposition to that of fellow-Modernists like Ezra Pound or William Carlos Williams.¹ Yet it is also important that the symbolist and allegorical gestures of Joyce's later writing be placed within the broader context of his career. During the final stages of his work on *Ulysses* (which was published in 1922) the elaborate system of correspondences he had developed in order to create associations between Leopold Bloom's movement through the city of Dublin on June 16, 1904, and the adventures of Odysseus (amongst other things) had come to seem burdensome to him. While *Ulysses'* correspondences gave encyclopaedic scope to a series of actions that otherwise would have been entirely commonplace,

¹ See, especially, Marjorie Perloff's argument regarding the division within Modernism between symbolist and anti-symbolist tendencies in her 1982 article, 'Pound/Stevens: Whose Era?'

Joyce began to feel that the disadvantages of this framework outweighed its usefulness.²

As he composed the final four chapters of *Ulysses*, he was already frustrated by the inherent lack of flexibility of the system of correspondences upon which he had once relied. In both the 'Circe' and 'Eumaeus' episodes of this novel he adopted a looser approach to this feature of his text. He chose to foreground a more fluid conception of individual identity that ran counter to the mythical parallels laid out in his tables of correspondences, and at the same time he moved away from the circular plot structure of journey and return that strict parallels with the *Odyssey* would have demanded. In 'Circe' the ebb and flow of sexual desire results in an outrageous sequence of metamorphoses (of Bloom and other characters) which are presented literally as part of an expressionist drama. In 'Eumaeus' the gap between linguistic signifiers and referents is foregrounded by Joyce's writing, and as a result attention is drawn to the fragility of individual identity. This would be further exploited in the subsequent 'Ithaca' episode, Bloom's homecoming, wherein Joyce's main character is seen through the lens of an entirely objective narration, as though he were a distant celestial body, being observed through a telescope.

These late developments in *Ulysses* represent a clear shift toward the sensibility that would predominate in *Finnegans Wake*. In his final novel Joyce avoided the type of rigid structuring device that had posed problems during his last years of work on *Ulysses*. Instead, he made use of a far looser set of symbolic clusters and established a broad allegorical framework for his text, which he based on the circular model of history formulated by the Italian philosopher Giambattista Vico in *The New Science*.³ In this way, while symbolic and allegorical gestures remained important to Joyce's writing, they could be handled much more freely than in *Ulysses*. Such features do not force their way into the foreground of the *Wake* as they had in *Ulysses*. In *Finnegans Wake*, the emphasis is laid instead upon the free interaction of linguistic particles which, it is suggested, cannot, by their very nature, be controlled by a pre-conceived literary structure. As Joyce told his benefactress, Harriet Shaw Weaver, in a letter of 1923, in *Ulysses* 'the ports of call were known beforehand' whereas in *Finnegans Wake* the textual fragments he was working to assemble were 'active elements and when they are more and a little older they will begin to fuse of themselves' (Joyce, 1957: 204-205).

² Joyce drew up two different tables in an attempt to codify these features of his work as he composed *Ulysses*. These have been much discussed by Joyce scholars and are reproduced in Richard Ellmann's *Ulysses on the Liffey* (1972), pp. 186-188.

³ Giambattista Vico, *The New Science* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984). For discussion of the relation between Vico and *Finnegans Wake* see Donald Phillip Verene, *Vico and Joyce* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987).

2 The Context of *Finnegans Wake*

2.1 *Finnegans Wake* as the Final Stage of James Joyce's Artistic Development

One way of summarizing James Joyce's artistic development, might be to speak of it in terms of a continually renewed attempt to use language as a means of expressing the full energy and complexity of living thought. The nature of the transition he made in 1922 and 1923 between the literary model of *Ulysses* and that of *Finnegans Wake* is a prime illustration of this development and of the increasing importance of linguistic experimentation to Joyce's writing at the time. Crucially, at the very moment he was doing away with the rigid framework of correspondences that had sustained *Ulysses*, he also felt compelled to transform the structure of the English language itself, in an attempt to release a creative energy that he believed to be held in check by linguistic conventions.

Towards the end of 1922, as he pondered the shape of his next work, he told his friend, the Swiss sculptor August Suter, 'je suis au bout de l'anglais' (Ellmann, 1983: 546). In order to overcome what he perceived to be the inherent constraints of his mother tongue, Joyce therefore set about dismantling the English language in order to forge an appropriate medium for his new novel. The result was a pseudo-language of his own creation: one which maintained most features of English syntax and utilized a predominantly English vocabulary, but also introduced a wide range of elements that subverted standard English phonetics, vocabulary and grammar, notably by introducing features drawn from some three or four score foreign languages. In so doing, Joyce believed he could release the creative energy that is latent in all words, but confined, in everyday usage, within the essentially stable symbolic order that must be maintained if communication is to take place. As the Joyce scholar Susan Shaw Sailer has suggested, perhaps the most useful theoretical model for understanding the linguistic experiments upon which Joyce embarked in *Finnegans Wake* is Julia Kristeva's concept of a division between symbolic and semiotic language—with the constant threat of invasion of the former by the latter.⁴

Joyce's frustration at the limitations imposed by standard English usage and his desire to foreground language's inherent energy led him to develop a method of writing that was so highly compressed and over-determined as to make the different 'planes of narrative' he described to Eugene Jolas, collide in

⁴ See Susan Shaw Sailer, *On the Void of To Be: Incoherence and Trope in Finnegans Wake* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993). Sailer's study constitutes one of the most substantial analyses of Joyce's linguistic experiments in *Finnegans Wake*, and my discussion of this subject is indebted to her work. Kristeva's concept of a division between symbolic and semiotic language is developed in Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980).

every sentence, even in every word of *Finnegans Wake*. The pseudo-language he invented in his final novel offered a new way of thinking about language in general. By liberating what various critics have termed ‘sub-semantic linguistic particles’ the *Wake* invites readers to constitute meanings that the author himself could not have anticipated.

2.2 *Finnegans Wake* and the Context of Late Modernism

To a certain extent the experiments upon which Joyce embarked in *Finnegans Wake* reflect the author’s personal evolution and the unique cultural context of the 1920s and 1930s from which the book emerged. The *Wake*’s celebration of productive linguistic disorder is also indicative, however, of a fundamental division within Anglo-American Modernism that became increasingly apparent in the years leading up to the Second World War.

It has become commonplace for critics to point out the presence of a division between Modernists such as T. S. Eliot and Wallace Stevens, who made increasing use of symbolist strategies in their later writing, and those such as William Carlos Williams and Ezra Pound who became increasingly committed to an objectivist approach in their later work.⁵ Joyce, when such distinctions are made, is unfailingly (and justly) associated with writers whose work inclined increasingly toward symbolism. A more productive way of thinking about this division within Modernist writing, however, might be to make a distinction between writers like Pound, for whom the crucial task facing the modern artist was that of bringing a seemingly impossibly complex array of socio-cultural data into productive focus, and writers like Joyce, who chose, on the contrary, to foreground productive *disorder* in their work. Whereas Pound’s *Cantos* offer a catalogue of cultural landmarks that readers are encouraged to see as ‘luminous details,’ capable of providing glimpses into crucial developments in world history and culture, Joyce’s later work determinedly eliminates such landmarks and instead celebrates obscurity. Instead of promising clarity, his writing in *Finnegans Wake* situates itself at the threshold whereupon seemingly chaotic linguistic data is transformed into meaningful information by the reader. In so doing it celebrates the irreducible plurality of thought rather than trying to bring such plurality into the type of focus Pound strives to achieve in the *Cantos*. If we were to employ the terms of Joyce’s statement to Eugene Jolas, we might say that while Pound’s experimental writing was born out of a desire to find the simplest, most efficient poetic means for expressing a highly complicated thought, Joyce was less interested in exposing a specific idea with perfect clarity

⁵ See, for example, Perloff, ‘Pound/Stevens : Who’s Era ?’

than he was in exploring the general manner in which the mind works and recording how these workings are reflected in language.⁶

3 The Paradoxes of *Finnegans Wake*: Literary Structure and Linguistic Disorder

3.1 Structuring devices in the *Wake*

The overall structure of *Finnegans Wake* is that of a vast allegory which proposes to chart the entire course of human history at the same time as it recounts the dream of a middle-aged Dublin publican named Humphrey Chimpden Earwicker. At the local level, the polysemantic texture of Joyce's writing is made decipherable by the use of devices such as repetition, recurrent sound patterns and familiar rhetorical tropes. These give the text a discernable form and allow provisional meanings to emerge, while avoiding the imposition of a strict semantic structure that would inhibit the interplay of linguistic particles upon which Joyce's writing depends. Through the recurrent use of such devices, phrases that are seemingly entirely chaotic when viewed in isolation acquire significance as they are woven into a framework of interconnected passages. In this way the text suggests a range of potential meanings that would otherwise not be readily apparent.⁷ Thus, as one reads, seeming linguistic chaos reveals itself to be rather what Joyce terms a 'fine artful disorder' (Joyce, 1939: 126). The energy instilled by this mode of writing is undeniable, as is the uniqueness of the literary effects it allows Joyce to achieve. Yet the *Wake* is also a text that risks leaving its reader disoriented in a way that *Ulysses*, for all its complexity, had not. In part this is because of its continually shifting temporal and spatial focus (from Dublin to the universal, from the narrative present to evocations of broad geological and historical processes). In part it is because the

⁶ Neither approach, of course, is immune to criticism. If critics at present are more likely to point out the authoritarian assumptions inherent in Pound's *Cantos* (where the poet situates himself in the position of seer who 'makes sense' out of apparently complicated material, at the risk of imposing his interpretation on the reader), one might just as easily object to the relativism of Joyce's writing or to the fact that the *Wake* is an inward-looking text, one which assimilates cultural data into its vast allegorical structure rather than confronting it in a way that might call its aesthetic assumptions into question.

⁷ Joyce, for example, denotes an attitude of sterile criticism (usually related to four old men who appear at intervals throughout the novel) by way of the repetition of words ending in -ion, as in the phrase: 'With however what sublation of compensation in the radification of interpretation by the byeboys?' (Joyce, 1939: 369). (The title of the collective study of *Finnegans Wake*, published in 1929 at Joyce's behest, refers ironically to this device: *Our Exagmination Round His Factification for Incamination of Work in Progress*.) By the same token, a stutter is used to signify the presence of Humphrey Chimpden Earwicker in the *Wake*, as at page 36: 'Shsh shake, co-comeraid! Me only, them five ones, he is equal combat. I have won straight. Hence my nonotation wide hotel creamery establishments which for the honours of our mewmew mutual daughters, credit me, I am woo-woo willing to take my stand, sir, upon the monument, that sign of our ruru redemption.'

book deals with conditions which defy rational treatment: the repressed desires of the unconscious, infancy, dreams, sleep and death.

Joyce's use of Vico's *New Science* to establish a broad allegorical framework made it possible to organize the different narrative levels of which he spoke to Eugene Jolas, giving the reader a means of situating him or herself within the text, while also ensuring greater fluidity than that provided by the Odyssean parallels he had employed in *Ulysses*. Vico had suggested that all civilizations pass through three major phases, which he called the ages of gods, heroes and men. He believed that these three stages recur continually, so that the end of the third historical stage (the age of men) instigates a movement of return (*ricorso*), following which a new cycle begins upon the rubble of the previous one. Joyce applied this structure to *Finnegans Wake*, organising the novel into four books, with the first three corresponding to Vico's three ages and the last enacting his movement of return. Thus, the final sentence in Book 4 (a reflection on death) stops in mid-stream and is completed by the opening sentence of Book 1:

A way a lone a last a loved a long the (Joyce, 1939: 628)
riverrun, past Eve and Adam's, from swerve of shore to bend of bay, brings us
by a commodius vicus of recirculation back to Howth Castle and Environs.
(Joyce, 1939: 3)

This circular structure has the double advantage of situating Joyce's writing in a continuous present while also multiplying points of contact between lines that would be far-removed from one another in a strictly linear reading.

Within this broad framework a number of narrative strands emerge. We come to recognise, for example, that Humphrey Chimpden Earwicker's dream focuses upon the interactions of a small family group, made up of a father (Earwicker himself), his wife (named Anna Livia Plurabelle) and their three children (two sons named Shem and Shaun and a daughter, Issy). A few basic principles govern the relations between the family members: the father is guilty of an unspecified crime (perhaps related to incestuous desire for his daughter), the two boys fight one another for recognition, when united they fight their father, and so on. More important than this family narrative, however, is the fact that the members of Earwicker's family embody basic principles and character types. Earwicker, for example, is associated with a prototypical father figure: a force which, amongst other things, imposes laws and attempts to preserve the stability of the language in which these laws are written. Anna Livia Plurabelle is associated with the generation of new life, with the passage of time and with the transmission of eroded particles of language from the past into the future. Finally, each of the family members is also associated with aspects of the landscape around the city of Dublin. Earwicker, on this level, is a giant who lies asleep under the city so that Howth Hill, overlooking Dublin Bay, is his head

and the centre of the town is built over his stomach. Anna Livia is associated with the River Liffey that flows through the city.

Finnegans Wake's insistence upon these multiple levels of characterisation and symbolic association makes it impossible to speak of the book as having stable characters in any conventional sense. Instead, Joyce developed the idea that what he called 'sigla' could be used to indicate character amalgams that might be variously embodied by any number of individual figures. Thus, rather than dramatising an archetypal father figure by developing Earwicker's character as an independent and coherent force, Joyce thinks of his protagonist as merely one manifestation of an unnameable character complex, which is occasionally indicated in the text by the figure 'π'.⁸ The 'π' complex is sometimes embodied directly by Earwicker, but more often than not it is illustrated by other fictional, mythical or historical characters from a range of traditions, including God, Allah, Zeus, Thor, Finn Mac Cool, Adam and Charles Stewart Parnell (the father of Irish Home Rule). Together with its assault upon language, *Finnegans Wake* thus also carries out an assault upon traditional notions of character. Ultimately, Joyce's linguistic experimentation is indissociable from his willingness to challenge traditional representations of individual identity: a process that began in earnest in the final episodes of *Ulysses*.⁹ His idea that characters can be thought of as what Roland McHugh aptly terms 'fluid composites, [which involve] an unconfined blur of historical, mythical and fictitious [figures], as well as nonhuman elements' implies 'a process of personality condensation which is ultimately inseparable from his linguistic condensation' (McHugh, 1976: 10).

3.2 'Can you rede its world?': Reading Joyce's Book of the Dark

A brief dialogue between two characters named Mutt and Jute, which takes place near the beginning of Book One, might be used to illustrate the types of reading strategies that are necessitated by Joyce's linguistic experiments in *Finnegans Wake*. Mutt and Jute are meant to be seen as part of the '↔' and '↵' character cluster, associated with the brothers Shem and Shaun. They also represent, amongst other things, native and invading forces in Medieval Irish history and the Mutt and Jeff comedy duo. The subject of their dialogue is the emergence of new order from the ruins of past civilisations (a recurring Wakean

⁸ At page 299 of *Finnegans Wake*, Joyce jokingly refers to this practice by speaking of his main characters as: 'The Doodles family, π, Δ, ↵, X, □, Λ, □.' His use of these sigla has been most extensively discussed by Roland McHugh in his book-length study of the subject, *The Sigla of Finnegans Wake* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1976).

⁹ This aspect of Joyce's writing, as it develops in the latter half of *Ulysses*, is examined at length in James H. Maddox Jr., *Joyce's Ulysses and the Assault Upon Character* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1978).

theme, evoked here by way of references to Prehistoric man and to the Ireland of the Dark Ages):

Jute.— Howe?

Mutt.— Here is viceking's graab.

Jute.— Hwaad !

Mutt.— Ore you astoneaged, jute you?

Jute.— Oye am thonthorstrok, thing mud.

(Stoop) if you are abcedminded, to this claybook, what curios of signs (please stoop), in this allaphbed! Can you rede (since We and Thou had it out already) its world? (Joyce, 1939: 18).

While the language in this passage is recognisably based upon English vocabulary and syntax, meanings only begin to emerge from the disorder of the Joycean text when we open our ears to the presence of foreign words and to the possibility of intertextual references. Unless we accept Joyce's idea that even the smallest linguistic particles must be seen as 'active elements,' capable of opening unpredictable connections with other such particles, even when these are located in passages that would be considered distant in a strictly linear reading, this passage will appear entirely chaotic. It is, quite clearly, incapable of rendering meaning in ways to which we are accustomed.

Generally speaking, the Mutt and Jute dialogue is a scene of comic misunderstanding between figures of opposite temperament, from different cultural backgrounds. Furthermore, the lines contain a tension between written and spoken language; the eye and the ear. On another level, the dialogue makes reference to the emergence of a written record and to the first stages in the formation of what would come to be recognized as a distinctly Irish cultural tradition. With regard to Joyce's character complexes, these lines indicate the presence of 'H' (Humphrey Chimpden Earwicker) by way of oblique references to Thor and Allah, though this character amalgam is more generally presented in a fragmentary way: related to the contents of the burial mound about which Jute and Mutt speak, and likened to indecipherable written signs or to the sediment carried along by the River Liffey. Anna Livia Plurabelle is also present, both as the river, and in the letters ALP of allaphbed, where she is united with HCE by way of the oblique references to Allah, to the riverbed and to the bed of the dreamer. A cursory summary of other gestures made by these eight lines of the *Wake* might include

Howe: How; Burial mound; Site of Norse Parliament in Dublin

Graab: German for grave

Ore: Are; Norse for ear

Oye: I; Norse for eye

Thing mud: Thing mote, the Norse Parliament in Dublin

abecede: Old English for alphabet

curio: curious; also evokes the Latin *curculio* (penis)

rede: read; German for speech

We and Thou: an oblique reference to the Koran, where 'we and thou' refers to Allah and Muhammed
 world: conflation of language with the material world.¹⁰

This is by no means a full explication of these lines, but it serves to demonstrate the type of activity required to come to terms with Joyce's writing. It also provides a sufficient basis to raise the question of why Joyce was willing to go to such lengths to fashion a text which he must have known would be widely considered a literary curiosity, foredoomed to occupy a marginal place in the English literary tradition because of the absurd demands it makes on its readers.¹¹

3.3 Joyce's Motivation for Writing *Finnegans Wake*

There are three principal ways of understanding Joyce's motivation for writing *Finnegans Wake*. Firstly, as suggested above, one can place the project within the broader context of his career, seeing it as a reflection of his preoccupation with the idea that he had exhausted the literary model on which *Ulysses* was based, and even exhausted the possibilities offered by the English language itself. His second major motivation was likely a cultural one. Throughout his career, Joyce had felt keen anxiety about being an Irish writer, forced to use what he called the language of the coloniser. In *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* Stephen Dedalus, Joyce's alter-ego, expressed this sense of disquiet when, thinking of his disagreement with the English Dean of Studies regarding the meaning of the word 'tundish,' he reflected that 'the language we are speaking is his before it is mine.' He then went on to note that 'his language, so familiar and so foreign, will always be for me an acquired speech' (Joyce, 1993: 182). In this context, Joyce's artful manipulation of the English language in *Finnegans Wake* can be seen as an enactment of his own cultural situation: forced to make use of English, while at the same time recognizing his cultural distance from it. Finally, *Finnegans Wake* can be seen as a response to the cultural climate of the 1920s wherein, due to rapid technological progress, advances in physics, the development of psychoanalysis and the trauma of the First World War, it seemed necessary to transform language into a dynamic force capable of registering the impact of these recent events. Within Joyce's

¹⁰ These associations are all evoked in Roland McHugh's monumental *Annotations to Finnegans Wake* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991). McHugh's annotations represent a landmark in the field of Joyce criticism, however they are, by the author's admission, far from exhaustive. Much of the work of explicating *Finnegans Wake* has been carried out in discussion groups. Between 1962 and 1990 much explicatory work was also done in the *Wake Newsletter*, published by Essex University. In recent years numerous *Finnegans Wake* discussion groups have sprung up on the Internet.

¹¹ Joyce famously joked about this characteristic of his writing when he expressed his need for an 'ideal reader suffering from an ideal insomnia' (Joyce, 1939: 120).

closed Parisian circle, the *Wake* was celebrated (particularly by Eugene Jolas) as nothing less than the first act in an impending 'revolution of the word.' This 'revolution,' according to Jolas, would be a response to the unique demands of the time: 'the real metaphysical problem today is the word[...] when the beginnings of this new age are seen in perspective, it will be found that the disintegration of words, and their subsequent reconstruction on other planes, constitute some of the most important acts of our epoch' (Jolas, 1962: 79).¹² It is perhaps as a linguistic enactment of the shifting intellectual paradigms of the 1920s and 30s that *Finnegans Wake* has been a most indisputable success.¹³ If its place in the history of ideas is assured, however, the literary value of the *Wake* is the subject of ongoing debate. For many readers, whatever its undeniable artistry, the book must finally be regarded as a stylistic dead-end. In such a view its 'disintegration' of basic linguistic units, while interesting in theory and entertaining in short doses, ultimately led to chaos and sterility.

3.4 Rhetorical Tropes as a Structuring Device in *Finnegans Wake*

The way in which we respond to such criticism depends upon our receptivity to the careful interactions Joyce fashions between individual passages and the broad structure of his work. His decision to foreground linguistic disorder in *Finnegans Wake* was based on his belief that, by distancing words from their standard meanings and their habitual functions within a stable symbolic structure, his text would be able to suggest an almost infinite range of potential significations, all of which could be accommodated within his vast Viconian framework. Seen as a whole, *Finnegans Wake* reflects Joyce's belief that language can be locally unpredictable while at the same time gesturing toward a coherent order. The method of writing he adopts assumes that disorder at the local level of the text can be provisionally controlled by way of suggested connections to other textual features, whose presence is hinted at by the repetition of tropes, sound patterns and various graphic cues. These features, as Susan Shaw Sailer has pointed out, enact incoherence on the local level while also 'acting upon [it so that] their productivity, their movement, suggests connexity that counters incoherence' (Sailer, 1993: 111).

Joyce's conviction (openly displayed during his final years of work on *Ulysses*) that the condition of rhetoric was that of a catalogue of exhausted

¹² Jolas's early emphasis on this aspect of Joyce's writing has been taken up by numerous later writers. The most consequential critical study of the subject is Colin MacCabe, *James Joyce and the Revolution of the Word*. (London: MacMillan, 1979).

¹³ *Finnegans Wake* is routinely cited as a major influence on various theoretical developments of the past century. It was, for example, one of the essential precursors of post-structuralism, a model for Marshall McLuhan's 'Gutenberg Galaxy' media theory, the source of the name of the quark (the basic constituent of the nucleon, discovered by Murray Gell-Mann), and the object of one of Jacques Lacan's seminars and the basis of his paradigm of the 'sinthome.'

forms had not significantly changed when he came to write *Finnegans Wake*. Yet in the latter work rhetorical figures are no longer a way of suggesting entrapment within outmoded and inadequate linguistic formulae. Rather, the 'crisis of rhetoric' he had dramatised in *Ulysses* (and especially in the 'Aeolus' episode of that novel) would be overcome by the energy of the subsemantic linguistic particles held within the rhetorical figures he employed in his last novel. Within the logic of *Finnegans Wake*, rhetorical constructions were not to be seen as a way of marshalling words in order to establish stable meanings within a local context, but rather as a way of opening connections within the book that challenge our assumptions about how rhetorical figures might be used.

Finnegans Wake makes frequent use of chiasmus, for example: a figure which traditionally employs parallelism in order to relate a sense of balance or harmony. In Joyce's use, however, the emphasis is placed not upon the harmony between the two terms the figure employs, but rather upon the moment of reversal it includes, so that readers are made aware of the contradictory nature of the two terms that the chiasmus proposes to contain rather than of any supposed parallel between them. Furthermore, Joyce repeatedly draws attention to the double action of chiasmus (which hovers between reversal and repetition) and the major form of his own work, with its enactment of the endlessly varied returns of Vico's historical cycle. An entire passage in the opening book of *Finnegans Wake*, for example, employs the 'AB-BA' movement of the chiasmus in order to juxtapose two historical moments:

1132 A.D. Men like to ants or emmets wondern upon a groot hwide Whallfisk which lay in a Runnel. Blubby wares upat Ublanium.

566 A.D. On Baalfire's night of this year after deluge a crone that hadde a wickered Kish for to hale dead tunes from the bog lookit under the blay of her Kish as she ran for to sothisfeige her cowrieosity and be me sawl but she found hersell sackvulle of swart goody quickenshoon ant small illigant brogues, so rich in sweat. Blurry works at Hurdlesford.

(Silent.)

566 A.D. At this time it fell out that a brazenlockt damsel grieved (sobralasolas!) because that Puppette her minion was ravisht of her by the ogre Puropeus Pious. Bloody wars in Ballyaughacleeaghbally.

1132. A.D. Two sons at an hour were born until a goodman and his hag. These sons called themselves Caddy and Primas. Primas was a santryman and drilled all decent people. Caddy went to Winehouse and wrote o peace a farce. Blotty words for Dublin. (Joyce, 1939: 14)

In a more habitual usage, chiasmus is used to evoke Joyce's Viconian order in the lines

Teems of times and happy returns. The seim anew. Ordovico or viricordo.
Anna was, Livia is, Plurabelle's to be. (Joyce, 1939: 215)

The effect of the chiasmus 'Ordovico or viricordo' here is to point toward the *Wake's* general framework of repetition, while at the same time suggesting the impossibility of bringing the two terms held within the rhetorical figure into the type of harmony that we are apparently urged to see. Joyce accentuates this significance with the surrounding references to repetition and return.

His attitude to chiasmus is perhaps most concisely laid out in one of the most famous lines of *Finnegans Wake*, wherein he assimilates it with 'cosmos' and 'chaos,' arriving at the neologism 'chaosmos':¹⁴

Because, Soferim Bebel, if it goes to that, (and dormerwindow gossip will cry it from the housetops no surelier than the writing on the wall will hue it to the mod of men that mote in the main street) every person, place and thing in the chaosmos of Alle anyway connected with the gobblydumped turkery was moving and changing every part of the time. (Joyce, 1939: 118)

4 Questioning the Status of *Finnegans Wake*: Modernism, Postmodernism and Contemporary Responses to James Joyce's Final Novel

Along with William Carlos Williams's *Paterson* and Ezra Pound's *Cantos*, *Finnegans Wake* belongs to a small group of texts which sit uneasily on the divide between Modernism and Postmodernism. The novel's foregrounding of the free play of linguistic signifiers and the views of authorship and readership that it encodes are clearly typical of postmodern attitudes. Yet Joyce's universal historical vision (which provides the 'map' for his work and allows his 'disintegrated words' to take their place within a totalizing literary structure) is typical of Modernist literature and runs counter to the emphasis which postmodern writing tends to place upon local contexts. By the same token, Joyce's belief in the existence of basic character complexes and in the essential similarity of various civilisational cycles runs counter to the emphasis postmodernism places upon diversity.

While *Finnegans Wake's* importance in the history of ideas is indisputable, judgments of the book's literary merit have been more nuanced. To a large extent this is due to an impression that it confines the reader within an elaborate, but ultimately closed literary structure, rather than genuinely offering the liberating experience it apparently celebrates. For, while the *Wake* undeniably offers a compelling enactment of the way in which the mind processes linguistic data in an attempt to generate meaning, it is only within the context of Joyce's elaborate literary framework that his writing becomes meaningful: a 'fine artful disorder' rather than mere chaos. Given this state of affairs it is debatable whether the constraints imposed by Joyce's model (with its

¹⁴ Joyce's word has since been taken up by thinkers from a variety of contexts, most famously Gilles Deleuze in *Différence et répétition* and Edgar Morin in his *Méthode*.

active reader who constitutes meanings as he or she confronts mutable linguistic raw materials, but who depends upon a rigorous literary superstructure) are not at least as consequent as those we associate with Pound's later work (wherein the author's vision is challenged by a material world that exists beyond the confines of the aesthetic object, and to which the text continually gestures).

Joyce, from the very beginning of his career cultivated a conception of the literary work as a world unto itself, and of the author as a figure who, in the words of Stephen Dedalus, 'like the God of the creation, remains within or behind or beyond or above his handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent, paring his fingernails' (Joyce, 1993: 207). It was this understanding of the literary artefact that allowed Joyce to image that a text could be a 'chaosmos of Alle.' As he explored this idea he went further than any other writer in formulating a certain conception of textuality. *Finnegans Wake* is the ultimate expression of this process, with its supposition that writing can be conceived as an 'artful disorder' that emerges as the reader engages with a text continually poised between the poles of total chaos ('the chaos of All') and the ideally-ordered construction of an Author-God, complete unto itself and impervious to outside intrusion ('the cosmos of Allah'). In spite of the unquestionable stylistic mastery required to sustain this literary enterprise, however, Joyce's uncompromising conception of textuality and the extreme demands he places upon his readers mean that *Finnegans Wake* runs the risk of a sterility born out of its exaggeration of the separation between word and world. It is perhaps for this reason that while numerous writers after Joyce have cited his influence on their conception of the way in which language functions and its role in shaping individual and cultural identity, few have pursued his literary experiments. Paradoxically, the status *Finnegans Wake* has acquired over the years is that of a text which marks, at the same time, a bold new direction in Twentieth Century thought and a stylistic dead end.

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