

1. Joyce's Literary Fascism

—...Do you believe your own theory?

—No, Stephen said promptly.¹

Picasso said once when he and Gertrude Stein were talking together, yes, Braque and James Joyce, they are the incomprehensibles whom anybody can understand. Les incomprehensibles que tout le monde peut comprendre.²

“The novel, in the hands of an unscrupulous writer, could be despotic”, claims the narrator of Flann O'Brien's *At Swim-Two-Birds*; but this sentiment should not be interpreted as an expression of libertarian concern. Literary despotism, he argues, could be useful:

The modern novel should be largely a work of reference. Most authors spend their time saying what has been said before—usually said much better. A wealth of references to existing works would acquaint the reader instantaneously with the nature of each character, would obviate tiresome explanations and would effectively preclude mountebanks, upstarts, thimble-riggers and persons of inferior education from an understanding of contemporary literature.³

James Joyce is the prime candidate for the role of O'Brien's unscrupulously erudite and elitist writer: *Finnegans Wake* in particular amply demonstrates this literary theory.⁴ As suggested, *Finnegans Wake* is almost entirely a referential work, does not claim to contain anything new, is full of repetition—which is “tautologically the same thing” (6.30)⁵—and is laden with

¹ James Joyce, *Ulysses*, ed. Hans Walter Gabler (London: Penguin, 1985) 175.

² Gertrude Stein, *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (London: Penguin, 1966) 229.

³ Flann O'Brien, *At Swim-Two-Birds* (London: Penguin, 1967) 25.

⁴ It is also a fair description of this thesis, with the one exception being that mountebanks, upstarts, thimble-riggers and persons of inferior education should not feel precluded in any way.

⁵ “Tautau” is a repetition of “tauftauf” (3.10). German: *taufen*: baptise. (*Annotations*.)

quotations, allusions and characters from historical, literary, mythological, musical and cultural sources arranged into an archetypal order based around a single family. It explicitly acknowledges its own textual materiality and creates itself out of the textual, cultural substance of everyday existence. It is, as many an upstart has found, very, very difficult to read and understand.

As *Finnegans Wake* is made up of scraps of literary debris it speaks, in its frequent moments of self-reference, of its language in material terms. The language of the *Wake*, as Beckett pointed out, does not describe things, it is those things. Form and content are not separate categories, but “form is content, content is form”.⁶ Thus language in *Finnegans Wake* is, amongst other things, water, food, mud, shit and litter. In I.7, for example, we are presented with a portrait of Shem the Penman at home in the textual debris that decorates his Inkbottle house. As his environment is described, ideas, objects, actions, sounds and representations are jumbled together, all transformed into the tangible items of a material reality of language. Objects used for the production of writing such as ink and quills appear side by side with scraps of food, clothes, and language itself in the forms of writing and speech:

The warped flooring of the lair and soundconducting walls thereof, to say nothing of the uprights and imposts, were persianly literated with burst loveletters, telltale stories...alphabeticformed verbage...omputer dictas...ahems and ahahs, ineffible tries at speech unassyllabled, you owe mes...borrowed brogues...best intentions, curried notes...twisted quills, painful digests...once current puns, quashed quotatoes, messes of mottage, unquestionable issue papers, seed/

⁶ “[Joyce’s] writing is not *about something*: it is *that something itself* When the sense is sleep the words go to sleep. When the sense is dancing, the words dance” [Beckett’s emphasis].

Samuel Beckett, “Dante...Bruno. Vico..Joyce”, Beckett et al., *Our Exagmination Round His Factification for Incamination of Work in Progress* (London: Faber, 1929) 14.

“Many of the ideas contained in the essay, particularly the the interpretations of Bruno and Vico, came directly from [Beckett’s] conversations with Joyce”.

Deirdre Bair, *Samuel Beckett* (London: Vintage, 1990) 80.

ejaculations, limerick damns...spilt ink, blasphematory spits
(183.8-24)⁷

These associations are, in the peculiar language of *Finnegans Wake*, not simply metaphors. The equations are the result of puns: they are based on purely linguistic similarities. There is, for example, no mimetic connection between the quotations and potatoes that are united in “quashed quotatoes” (183.22), only a certain phonetic and symbolic similarity. Both contain the letter and sound combination “otat”, and that allows them to be blended by the language of the *Wake* in the portmanteau word “quotatoes”. In this sense language in *Finnegans Wake* is a self-referential, self-contained system. Its technique focuses on the qualities of the words themselves ahead of their referential, meaningful qualities. This is one of the basic assumptions, or conceits, of *Finnegans Wake*: it does not refer to a reality separate from language or to a reality which is mimetically recreated by language, but to the materiality, and thus the reality, of language itself.

Finnegans Wake is the primary evidence of Joyce’s fondness for literary fascism. Joyce famously expressed a desire for a personal language, “a language which is above all languages, a language to which all will do service”,⁸ and to be subject to Joyce’s linguistic domination is the unfortunate fate of the *Finnegans Wake* reader. The language of *Finnegans Wake* is so idiosyncratic and complex that to understand even a fraction of the book at the textual level the reader is forced to submit to the laborious task of unravelling and contextualising a portion of Joyce’s extravagant style, a task demanding large amounts of time and effort. The book does not present itself within the boundaries of an understood genre, but as a chaotic mixture of references, genres and languages—a

⁷ Italian: *imposte*: shutters. Montesquieu: *Persian Letters* (1721). Italian: *persiana*: shutter. French letters. Phrase: every picture tells a story. Alphabet. Latin: *obiter dictum*: incidental pronouncements made by judge, not binding. Him and her. Ineffable. I.O.U.s. Phrase: the road to hell is paved with good intentions. Currant buns. Mashed potatoes. Esau sold his birthright for a mess of pottage. French: *mots*: words. Tissue paper. Phrase: no use crying over spilt milk. (*Annotations*.) Ahem and ahah: sound of throat clearing. Brogues refers to both shoes and dialect. Mottage: motley and mottled.

⁸ Richard Ellmann, *James Joyce*, Revised Edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982) 397.

“booksyful stew” (268.14)⁹—it forces the reader to shift perspective to gain understanding and “the plain reader be damned”.¹⁰ Predictably then, despite Joyce’s fanciful hope that the book might find a wide audience, the extreme difficulty involved in actually reading *Finnegans Wake* has inevitably led to its status as a “white elephant of literature”.¹¹

But there is a paradox here. The exclusiveness of *Finnegans Wake* is also a key to an understanding^{of} the work. Its apparent unassailability gives even the most ill-equipped reader an immediate point of reference. The book is written in a comical, nonsensical language where words and their meanings are moved away from any suggestion of a direct, singular correspondence and are deliberately given multiple implications. The language of *Finnegans Wake* is a suggestive language based on contingency; it is linguistic fun and games stretching the possibilities of language “for the greeter glossary of code” (324.21).¹² The book’s road of excess is its purpose and thus saves it from absolute white elephant status. *Finnegans Wake* can be instantly understood as an exaggerated example of literature (literature being understood in its broadest possible sense), a caricature which nevertheless operates according to the same principles as other punning, comic literary works; and since language is used in such an exaggerated fashion, *Finnegans Wake* is able to find its niche, and its audience, as a touchstone and an inspiration for any and all kinds of linguistic theorising.

There are numerous plausible frameworks that can—and have been—applied to the reading of *Finnegans Wake*, and many of the ideas used to understand the book, though they have often simply

⁹ *Alice in Wonderland* X: ‘Soup of the evening, beautiful soup’. (*Annotations*.) Full of books. Beautiful.

¹⁰ This phrase comes from Eugene Jolas’ “Manifesto: The Revolution of the Word”, which, despite Joyce’s dislike of manifestos, could easily nominate *Finnegans Wake* as a case in point. It claims, amongst other things, that “Pure poetry is a lyrical absolute that seeks an a priori reality within ourselves alone”; that “The literary creator has the right to disintegrate the primal matter of words imposed on him by textbooks and dictionaries . . . [and] has the right to use words of his own fashioning and to disregard existing grammatical and syntactic laws”; and that “The writer expresses. He does not communicate”. Ellmann, *James Joyce* 588N.

¹¹ Harry Levin, *James Joyce: A Critical Introduction*, Revised Edition (London: Faber, 1960) 121.

¹² Jesuit motto: For the Greater Glory of God. (*Annotations*.)

been contingent, have nonetheless been extremely fruitful. Derek Attridge argues that the idea that *Finnegans Wake* is the depiction of the dreams of one man on a single night—one of the most dominant frameworks, if not the most dominant, used to understand *Finnegans Wake*—is of dubious validity. The historical grounds that form the basis of the assumption that the book is a dream are shaky—they are based on asides by Joyce that are possibly misleading and undoubtedly gross simplification of his work—and the idea is not necessarily supported by a close reading of the text. This idea has nevertheless been an extremely productive one and cannot be entirely discounted. The book's language can at least be considered as dream-like in its qualities, even if it is not actually understood as a representation of a dream or even several dreams. In practice, thanks to the complexity of the text, the assumption of a framework or frameworks, even if they are of dubious plausibility, is perhaps an inevitable starting point for attempts at reading *Finnegans Wake*:

It may be that standard interpretive strategies have no purchase on *Finnegans Wake*, and that we *have* to read in terms of some prior framework, derived from critics or from Joyce himself [His emphasis]¹³

As such, even though the dream form was considered by Joyce only to be a convenient device allowing him to incorporate a vast amount of diverse material¹⁴ (and, presumably, a simple answer to the question “what is your book about?”), and not a restrictive, encompassing definition, and at the risk of making a “freudful mistake” (411.35-36), the dream does at least provide a starting point.

There is a great deal of evidence to support the claim that *Finnegans Wake* can be understood as a Freudian dream. Despite Joyce's stated dislike for Freudian theory, several critics have argued persuasively for the relevance of a Freudian interpretation of *Finnegans Wake*, in particular John Bishop and Margot Norris; the latter points out that “virtually every one of the ‘typical dreams’ described by Freud constitutes a major theme in

¹³ Derek Attridge, “Finnegans Awake: The Dream of Interpretation”, *James Joyce Quarterly*, Vol.27, No.1 (Fall 1989) 24.

¹⁴ Ellmann, *James Joyce* 544.

Finnegans Wake".¹⁵ The *Wake*, considered as a dream, can be understood in terms of Freud's theories, not just in the relationships and desires of its characters, but particularly in its dream-like approach to language. In dreams, Freud argues, "words are frequently treated...as though they were things". The language of the dream, like that of *Finnegans Wake*, is made up of fragments of speech from multiple external sources:

A speech in a dream is often put together from various recollected speeches, the text remaining the same but being given, if possible, several meanings, or one different from the original one.

Dreams are also often contradictory since "Each train of thought is almost invariably accompanied by its contradictory counterpart, linked with it by antithetical association". This is because dreams have no mechanism for expressing "logical relations between dream-thoughts", other than presenting them simultaneously, so conflicting alternatives are not represented as a choice but as a contradiction:

The alternative 'either-or' cannot be expressed in dreams in any way whatever. Both of the alternatives are usually inserted in the text of the dream as though they were equally valid.

The only logical means a dream has at its disposal to express relationships between things is the concept of similarity:

One and only one of these logical relations is very highly favoured by the mechanism of dream formation; namely, the relation of similarity, consonance or approximation—the relations of 'just as'...Parallels or instances of 'just as' inherent in the material of the dream thoughts constitute the first foundations for the construction of a dream; and no

¹⁵ Margot Norris, *The Decentered Universe of Finnegans Wake* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976) 3.

Bishop argues Joyce was not directly influenced by Freud but rather that the two were competitors who drew upon a common currency of ideas. Both lived within, and contributed to, the European artistic and intellectual atmosphere of their time. Their thinking and their interests, therefore, contain areas of overlap, despite Joyce's hostility. Broadly speaking, Bishop suggests the work of each man illuminates the other.

John Bishop, *Joyce's Book of the Dark* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1986) 15-18.

Shelton Brivic has also applied Freudian ideas to Joyce and, more recently, has investigated the implications of the post-Freudian ideas of Jacques Lacan in relation to Joyce's texts. See Bibliography.

inconsiderable part of the dream-work consists in creating fresh parallels where those which are already present cannot find their way into the dream owing to the censorship imposed by resistance. The representation of the relation of similarity is assisted by the tendency of the dream-work towards condensation.

All of which can be seen to apply to the language and themes of *Finnegans Wake*. The Freudian understanding of the workings of a dream conforms with the *Wakean* depiction of the materiality of language and its construction from scraps of language and culture. The text of *Finnegans Wake* is, as we have seen, explicitly materialistic and relies on the possibilities created by coincidental similarities for expression. The text is also frequently contradictory and this contradiction is personified in the characters of the twins, Shem and Shaun, whose opposed positions remain equal and unchanging. And finally, since the dream offers no logical connections between concepts beyond ~~simultaneity~~ ^{simultaneity}, "The restoration of the connections which the dream-work has destroyed is a task which has to be performed by the interpretative process", an observation that can apply equally to the always ambiguous text of *Finnegans Wake*.¹⁶

Finnegans Wake lends itself readily to systematisation, and Freud's ideas are not the only ones whose relevance can be demonstrated. Even though *Finnegans Wake's* style is intimidatingly complex, once the reader begins to tackle the text many of the allusions begin to fit into place so that, like the definition provided in *At Swim-Two-Birds*, the content is not just exclusive but on close examination often self-evidently generic. *Finnegans Wake* participates in several obviously identifiable genres. There are incidents presented, for example, in the form of fables, a play, a school textbook and a radio quiz. The characters, too, are frequently presented as archetypes, becoming versions of various historical, fictional and mythical personas as a way of explaining their personalities and roles. These archetypes are not based on any received symbolic understanding, but rely for their significance upon internal associations, created and maintained

¹⁶ Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, trans. James Strachey (London: Penguin, 1991) 401, 422, 427, 431, 422.

within the context of *Finnegans Wake*. The suggestion of universality which accompanies the use of archetypal forms is an affectation of the text: it is an implication that is played upon by the text's persistent reinforcement of the roles and images assigned to each character. The significance of the tree and the stone as symbols for life and death or Shem and Shaun, for example, relies upon textual reinforcement within *Finnegans Wake* and not any preconceived symbolic meanings for trees or stones. Even though archetypal ideas may have been taken by Joyce from external sources, they are always to be understood as they are contextualised, and are used only as they conform to the *Wake*'s system of arrangement.

The opposed twin brothers thus have their universal significance thrust upon them and are, like all of the figures who emerge from the murk of the *Wake*, multilayered as characters and in their roles in the "stories" of the text. On one level the "enemy twins clearly constitute a divided self".¹⁷ Earwicker, we are informed very early in the book, is "a pentschanjeuchy chap" (4.25)¹⁸ who, as the reference to Punch and Judy implies, is wracked with violent internal disagreements. He contains both sides of every argument. He is, to choose one example of his contradictory personality from many, "unhesitant in his unionism and yet a piggotted nationalist" (133.15-16).¹⁹ This internal conflict finds its expression in Shem and Shaun, each representing one side of the divide, but who also "coalesce, their contrarities eliminated, in one stable somebody" (107.28-30). On another level, however, it is equally clear that the characters of Shem and Shaun are individuals, siblings, and the children of Earwicker and Anna Livia; and on another level the twins act as archetypes composed of hundreds (if not thousands) of separate historical, fictional and mythological identities which order

¹⁷ Norris, 50.

¹⁸ Pentateuch. German: *panschen*: mix (water and wine). Punch and Judy. Lazare Sainéan: *La Langue de Rabelais*, Paris, 1922: *Jean-Jeudi*: penis. (*Annotations*.)

¹⁹ Piggott: hesitency. [This refers to] the attempt of the forger Richard Piggott to incriminate Parnell in the Phoenix Park Murders of 1882 by means of false letters. Piggott was trapped at the enquiry into these letters by his spelling of the word 'hesitancy' as 'hesitency', and the latter form is used here as a gloss in reference to the incident. Bigotted. (*Annotations*.)

and the cyclical imagery that is so common in *Finnegans Wake*. We are in the midst of a “whirled [world] without end to end” (532.20-21), a fate reflected in numerous cyclical images, and one that can be as ~~gruesome~~^{gruesome} as it is comic:

—Hey! Did you dream you were ating your own tripe, acushla,
that you tied yourself up that wrynecky fix?

—I see now. We move in the beast circuls. (480.22-24)²¹

The book is not just broadly circular but also knotted: there are circles within circles, minor loops within the wider structure of the book; incidents are overlaid so that there “are sordidly tales within tales” (522.5), and each element of the book is repeated.²²

Hegel’s name refers to the other main structural principle of *Finnegans Wake*: the dialectic. But, despite Joyce’s early reference, and in spite of the clue hidden in the question “who in hallhagal wrote the durn thing anyhow?” (107.36),²³ Hegel, unlike Vico, does not figure prominently in the *Wake*’s teeming cast of characters. Glasheen, in her third census, lists a paltry four references, one of which (604.6) is extremely dubious.²⁴ Joyce later preferred to explain the dialectical element of his new book to Harriet Shaw Weaver by alluding to an earlier ~~dialectician~~^{dialectician}, one who is mentioned far more frequently in the final version of *Finnegans Wake*, Giordano Bruno:

His philosophy is a kind of dualism—every power in nature mus.
evolve an opposite in order to realise itself and opposition
brings reunion etc. etc.²⁵

²¹ The speakers are Luke and Mark repectively. Anglo-Irish: *acushla*: my pulse (endearment). Wryneck: person with a crooked neck. German: *Reinecke Fuchs*: Reynard the Fox (poem by Goethe). Best circles. Circus. (*Annotations*.) Eating your own tripe.

²² For a more detailed discussion on the use of circularity as a structural idea and as a theme see: Clive Hart, *Structure and Motif in Finnegans Wake* (London: Faber, 1962).

²³ Hell. Armenian (Eastern dialect): *khaghal*: to play. Russian: *durnci*: bad. (*Annotations*.)

²⁴ I am not sure if Glasheen sees Hegel’s name in “Higgins” or “Egen” or perhaps a combination of the two, but neither of these options seem to me to be particularly plausible. Adeline Glasheen, *Third Census of Finnegans Wake* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977) 123.

²⁵ Joyce, “To Harriet Shaw Weaver”, 1 January 1925, *Letters*, ed. Stuart Gilbert, 224-5.

The influence of this idea is clearly of significance in *Finnegans Wake*. “Duality of being is perhaps the most important of all the basic structural concepts in *Finnegans Wake*...everything in the book exists in two versions, one exalted and one debased”.²⁶ It is in the depiction of the twin brothers Shem and Shaun that this dialectical feature of the book is most obvious. The brothers are explicitly and repeatedly described as opposites: Shaun “points the deathbone and the quick are still” (193.29); Shem “lifts the lifewand and the dumb speak” (195.5). Large portions of the book are taken up with their quarrelling back and forth between polarised positions. In “The Mime of Mick Nick and the Maggies” (II.1) we see the twins as “they are met, face a facing. They are set, force to force” (223.15), and this pattern is repeated throughout the book, “for these are not on terms, they twain” (246.26-27). Each is “prexactly unlike his polar andthisishis” (177.32-33): opposed and irreconcilable.

There is, however, a very basic conflict between these two structuring principles. The dialectical view of history is a progressive philosophy: it claims that out of the clash of thesis and antithesis comes a synthesis, which in turn becomes a new thesis requiring a new antithesis, and so on. Human history, therefore, according to this theory, develops towards something, it progresses by logical and gradual steps, and as such humanity is constantly improving itself through new understanding and creation. But a circular structure creates a closed system and is therefore based on the endless recurrence of the same forms. Therefore, a circular structure does not allow for the possibility of improvement or the creation of anything new; all new events are destined to be repetitions of past events. The dialectic, as it appears in *Finnegans Wake* is thus a pseudo-dialectic. Even though the clash of opposites that is represented by Shem and Shaun is portrayed as the driving force of history, history does not progress. The progression of history is, in *Finnegans Wake*, a non-progression.

This combination of contradictory ideas, which is also a feature of the dream-like qualities of the language, manifests itself in the formality of paradox. The contradictory and paradoxical nature of *Finnegans Wake* is one of its defining features and it is in the

²⁶ Hart, *Structure* 153.

recurring paradoxes and contradictions that its significance lies. The ideas expressed in the book are “old butte new” (13.14) and even though “Tam Fanagan’s weak yat he’s still going strang” (276.21-22).²⁷ Deliberately contradictory statements like these are a common feature of the text and are a major part of the way the text works to hinder the extraction of a single, authoritative meaning. Seán Golden points out, for example, that not only do the *Wake*’s puns often contain contradictory meanings, but the syntax of the *Wake*’s sentences also leaves them open to contradictory interpretations, and there are cases when the syntax of a sentence contradicts the sense. The sentence describing Earwicker’s reaction to the cad’s (possible) accusation can, Golden argues, be read as an assertion of Earwicker’s innocence or his guilt.²⁸ Like much of the language in *Finnegans Wake*, it expresses two contradictory meanings simultaneously, and there is no indication given to suggest that one interpretation should be favoured over the other.

This kind of contradiction occurs so frequently that there can be little doubt it is a deliberate textual strategy designed to confound interpretation at the level of textual detail. The use of paradox in *Finnegans Wake* is thus a formal design, a way of trying to express the inexpressible. Since a paradox expresses an idea that is contradictory in form, it offers no point of rest, no equilibrium between the conflicting poles of language it contains. It is therefore, to some extent, illogical because it retains this basic element of contradiction. A paradox is something that expresses an idea that makes sense as it does not make sense. As a formal construction of language, paradox is the expression of a disruption in the logic of language that has been hauled back into the restrictions of ordered language and therefore can only rely on its internal contradiction for expression. Joyce’s language in *Finnegans Wake*, with its emphasis upon deliberately contradictory statements, retains the formality of paradox to a

²⁷ Butt Bridge, Dublin. Song: Tim Finnegans Wake. Johnnie Walker whiskey slogan: ‘still going strong’. (*Annotations*.) The spelling gives the impression the speaker has an Irish accent.

²⁸ Seán Golden, “Parsing Rhetoric: The Cad As Prolegomena to the Readings of *Finnegans Wake*”, Bernard Benstock, ed., *The Seventh of Joyce* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982) 173-4.

large extent, despite its attempts to break out of the everyday logic of language. A paradox is illogical, but illuminating; it operates according to a logic that works against the vehicle of its own expression by exposing insufficiencies of language. But a paradox is only able to refer to the outside of our existing means of ordering the world without ever actually being outside that existing order. So to describe *Finnegans Wake* as being ordered chaos, for example, is an attempt to express that it is both and neither of these things, but it also retains and perpetuates the categories of order and chaos as opposed and defining elements of the work.

The preference given to Bruno ahead of Hegel as the *Wake*'s chief ~~dialectician~~^{dialectician} is a reflection of the satirical emphasis in the book. Bruno's conception of the dialectical forces that govern the universe lacks the historical progression towards utopia that is a part of Hegel's system; instead, it emphasises the constant interaction between opposed forces and the "coincidence of contraries". Bruno's ~~dialectic~~^{dialectic} lacks the generative element of Hegel's, and it is in the relentless circularity of *Finnegans Wake* that its dialectic follows Bruno at the expense of Hegel. As Shaun, appearing as Yawn, explains in typically obscure terms:

When himupon Nola Bruno monopolises his egobruno most unwillingly seses by the mortal powers alionola equal and opposite brunoipso, *id est*, eternally provoking alio opposite equally as provoked as Bruno at being eternally opposed by Nola. Poor omniboose, singalow singlearum: so is he! (488.7-12)²⁹

The polarity, Shaun states in a distinctly baffling, roundabout fashion, is a monopoly and is also circular. It is a cycle that swings from one extreme to the other and back again, between Bruno and Nola: the Nolan divided by his own theory into Shaun and Shem. Each side is equally powerful, so neither gains a lasting superiority. This is also, significantly, described as a universal principle: it applies to everyone for ever and ever: *per omnia saecula saeculorum; pro omnibus*.

²⁹ Bruno of Nola. Sees / senses / seizes. All in Nola / all in all. Latin: *ipso*: self. Latin: *id est*: that is. Latin: *per omnia saecula saeculorum*; for ever and ever. Latin: *pro omnibus*: for everyone. German: *Löwe*: lion. Bantu: *singa*: lion. (*Annotations*.) Latin: *alio*: in another direction; elsewhere.

The contradiction between these two main organising ideas in *Finnegans Wake* has led some critics to devalue the significance of the *Wake*'s circularity, but it is the circular structure and the circular ideas that are its most significant feature because it is through this relentless circularity that the book gains its satirical force. Earwicker is subjected to the mockery of the text for his cyclical fate: "Hohohoho, Mister Finn, you're going to be Mister Finnagain!...Hahahaha, Mister Funn, you're going to be fined again!" (5.9-12). Vico's model becomes in *Finnegans Wake* a "vicious circle" (98.19) which forces us to "ceaselessly return" (108.25), and the twins particularly are satirised for their limited understanding and intransigence. Contrary to the usual dialectical model, *Finnegans Wake* is actually characterised by being regressive rather than progressive. Characters and scenes that at first glance appear to be new are on closer inspection revealed to be following the same old patterns with the same old figures reappearing out of the gloom over and over again. Margot Norris, reflecting on Joyce's use of Vico, notes this lack of progression in the *Wake*:

the Viconian plan is...historical in its foundation on the linear progress of events through time. The movement is both cyclical and evolutionary: events, though repeated at the end of the cycle, unfold in a logical and necessary sequence. *Such evolutionary progress is difficult to discern in the Wake.* [Emphasis added]³⁰

Norris' observation raises the question of how we are to understand Joyce's adoption of these theories in his writing. Clearly Vico's thought is not adhered to in any strict sense. Harriet Shaw Weaver claimed Joyce considered the structural and conceptual ideas he used, such as Vico's theories or the idea that *Finnegans Wake* is the portrayal of a dream, as little more than a convenient framework for his elaborate technique and, supporting her view, *Finnegans Wake* shows little respect for the subtleties of the theories it uses. Vico and Bruno (and, to a lesser extent, Bruno's fellow dialectitian Hegel) have their theories presented only in a caricatured form, and like the language that expresses them, they are layered and ambiguous in their significance. As Norris points out, Joyce does not closely adhere to

³⁰ Norris 24.

Vico's ideas about history but uses them only in the most general and literal sense. Vico's theory is reduced to the concept of circularity and the vaguely defined stages of the book, while Bruno's ideas are simply represented in the ongoing battle between the eternally opposed natures of the twins, Shem and Shaun. The entire process is described in mechanical terms, stressing its artificiality and pretensions to all-encompassing systematisation:

Our wholemole millwheeling vicocicrometer, a tetradomational gazebocro-ticon...autokinatonetically preprovided with a clappercoupling smelting-works exprogressive process...receives through a portal vein the dialytically separated elements of precedent decomposition for the verypetpurpose of subsequent recombination so that the heroticisms, catastrophes and eccentricities transmitted by the ancient legacy of the past, type by tope, letter from litter, word at ward, with sendence of sundance...anastomosically assimilated and preteridentified paraidiotically...may be there for you. (614.27-615.8)³¹

The mechanical imagery, suggesting systematisation, order and efficiency, is combined with bodily images, suggesting humanity, history and life, and is presented in a mocking, obfuscating scientific dialect. The process is active, kinetic, circular, but also regressive, a decomposition. It is paradoxical and contradictory, an "exprogressive process": it is history itself, recombined, dialectical and idiotic, presented for the perusal of the reader, neatly contained, with every fragment taking part in the process, but going nowhere.

In *Finnegans Wake* Bruno's thought is a combination of Hegel and Vico. His conception of the dialectic, like Joyce's but unlike Hegel's, is closed and circular, emphasising the constant interaction and interdependence, and thus similarity, of opposed ideas, instead of the progressive quality of Hegel's model:

³¹ Wholemeal. Cyclometer: instrument attached to wheel, measuring revolutions. Vico's cycles. 4-dimensional. Dominational. Gazebo: turret or lantern on housetop. Autokinesy: spontaneous motion. Work in Progress. Portal vein takes products of digestion from gut to liver. Dialysis: separation of colloids and crystalloids through membrane. Dialectical. HCE. ALP. Greek: *topos*: place. Ascendence. Anastomosis: connection of two vessels, esp. blood vessels, by a cross branch. Latin: *praeter*: previously. Greek (artif.): *paraidiōtikos*: almost privately. (*Annotations*.) Mole-hole / molehill. Heroicism / eroticism. Idiotically.

Certainly, if we estimate well, we see corruption to be none other than a generation, and generation none other than a corruption; love is hate, hate is love, in the last resort. Hate of the contrary is love of the similar; love of one thing is hate of another. In substance and root, then, love and hate, amity and disorder, are one and the same thing...he who wants to know the greatest secrets of nature should regard and contemplate the minima and maxima of contraries and opposites. [...]

One contrary is the principle or starting point of the other, and therefore transmutations are circular, because there is a substrate, principle, term, continuation and concurrence of both.³²

The significance of this understanding of the dialectic to Joyce's writing has been noted (without reference to Bruno) by Christine van Boheemen-Saaf who sees in this interpretation of the dialectic an affinity between the ideas of Joyce and Derrida:

in contrast to Blake and Hegel—dialecticians who believe that “contraries” produce “progression”—Joyce (like Derrida) does not understand opposition as the prerequisite step to ~~transcendence~~ ^{transcendence}.³³

Although it can be argued that “Antitheses are usually resolved, not by picking one side and refuting the other...but by trying to get past the antithetical way of stating the problem”,³⁴ this is precisely what *Finnegans Wake* does not do. The dialectic in *Finnegans Wake* does not lead anywhere and so transcendence or avoidance of duality does not occur. *Finnegans Wake* maintains an antithetical structure and endlessly sets the two sides against each other within a broader circular structure. There is only a superficial progression through Vico's stages of history—represented by the division of the text into four numbered

³² Giordano Bruno, *Cause, Principle and Unity*, cited in Francis M. Boldereff, *Hermes to His Son Thoth, Being Joyce's Use of Giordano Bruno in Finnegans Wake* (Woodward, Pennsylvania: Classic Non-fiction Library, 1968) 46, 95.

³³ Christine Van Boheeman-Saaf, “Deconstruction after Joyce”, Bonnie Kime Scott, ed., *New Alliances in Joyce Studies*, (London: Associated University Press, 1988) 32.

³⁴ Northrop Frye, *Fables of Identity: Studies in Poetic Mythology* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1963) 9.

sections—while the twins' squabbling remains unchanged and reappears at every stage.

There are several occasions when the opposed twins merge into a single figure in opposition to their father. Butt and Taff, while narrating the story of how Buckley Shot the Russian General, become "one and the same person" (354.8); Burrous and Casseous become Antony to win Cleopatra; and the twins' respective symbols—the tree and the stone—become a single person in "Treestone" (113.19), Tristan, King Mark's rival for the affections of Isolde. Importantly, however, "these theoretical unities do not seem to affect the actual relationship of the brothers".³⁵ The mergers are brief and do not constitute a synthesis of their opposed positions, but rather a repetition: the duality is always perpetuated in the antagonism that the combined figure of the brothers demonstrate toward a father figure—Antony has Caesar as a rival; Tristan opposes King Mark; Buckley shoots and kills the Russian general. The dualism in these cases represents the Oedipal rivalry between Earwicker and his sons instead of the sibling rivalry representing Earwicker's divided self. The polarity shifts so that Earwicker assumes one side and the sons the other, and the opposed qualities that are usually divided between the sons are distributed similarly in the new conflict. When Earwicker is challenged by the devilish, and therefore Shem-ish, can he adopt Shaun-like qualities by loudly expressing a sense of moral indignation in response to a superficially innocent request. In other cases the transformation is reversed. When the Shaun-like witness is accusing someone he thinks is Earwicker in "The Trial of Festy King"—one of the investigations into Earwicker's mysterious crime—many of the charges are similar to those directed at Shem in I.7.³⁶ By the conclusion of the scene it is apparent the defendant is actually Shem, not Earwicker. These fluid transformations are related to the tendency of the two brothers to slide on occasion into three. As the three soldiers in the park or Tom, Dick and Harry, Shem and Shaun are implicated

³⁵ Michael Begnal and Grace Eckley, *Narrator and Character in Finnegans Wake* (London: Associated University Press, 1975) 53.

³⁶ Though it is implied initially that Earwicker is in the dock, the defendant actually turns out to be Shem in disguise. See Chapter 6: Repetition.

in the hostility against their father, as they are when they appear as a unity; but when they appear as a pair—which is most of the time—they tend to represent the internal conflict felt by Earwicker. After they have appeared briefly as one (or three) they return unchanged to their familiar roles. Shem and Shaun remain set in their ways, unable to maintain their existence apart from their dialectically determined roles as warring opposites.

The description of the birth of the twins—even before they were born, Yawn remembers, they “were wombful of mischief” (482.18)—is narrated in a tone that parodies a children’s story or nursery rhyme, and establishes their contradictory characters in the broadest terms:

Two sons 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. (14.11-14)³⁷

Caddy, the Shem-figure, writes, drinks, and shows a disposition towards peace and farce. Primas is the Shaun-like sibling and displays a fondness for law and order. His name is Welsh for chief and the military connotations in his description (sentryman, drill) indicate that this is the way he behaves: his thinking is inflexible and he is arrogant and aggressive. It is also significant that the names Caddy and Primas are not assigned by their parents but are what “These sons called themselves”. Shaun appoints himself chief; Shem admits he is a cad.

Soon after, an example of the twins’ interaction occurs when they are encountered again in the form of Mutt and Jute—names adapted from the Mutt and Jeff comic strip—who discover the prostrate and drunkenly unconscious body of Finnegan. After examining the body (15.29-33), they attempt to communicate in various languages with the sleeping figure whose only response is to give increasingly loud and irritated groans:

³⁷ Welsh: *primas*: primate, chief. Nursery rhyme: “St. Patrick was a gentleman and came of decent people. Santry: district of Dublin. Nursery rhyme: “Taffy came to my house and stole a piece of beef”. A piece of verse. “O peace”, a farce. (*Annotations*.) His name also suggests the Latin *primo*, meaning “first”, and similar, derived words in English (primary, crime, primal, etc.) meaning originality, precedence, superiority, etc.

Scuse us, chorley guy! You tollerday donsk? N. You tolkatiff
scowegian? Nn. You spiggotty anglease? Nnn. You phonio saxo?
Nnnn. (16.5-7)³⁸

This attempt at communication being unsuccessful, the two decide to talk to each other:

Let us swap hats and excheck a few strong verbs weak oach
eather. (16.8)³⁹

Typically for exchanges between the twins a dialectical split occurs in the distribution of characteristics, but in this case the division^{is} not straightforward and the text is contradictory. The verbs (or words) they will exchange, for example, are to be both strong and weak.

As a result of the contradictory text, a problem arises in determining which voice belongs to the Shem character and which is that of the Shaun character. At first it appears as if Mutt is Shaun as he admits to being a little hard of hearing:

Jute. - Are you Jeff?

Mutt. - Somehards. (16.12-13)⁴⁰

As we have been warned, however, the two have decided to “swop hats”, suggesting that they have exchanged roles and are acting the parts of each other, or rather “oach eather”, a spoonerism whose swapped vowels reinforce the idea that a switch may have taken place. The question itself, as it is put to Mutt, also adds to the doubt over identity since the question not only asks “are you deaf?” but also “are you Jeff?”, to which one interpretation of Mutt’s response must be “sometimes”.⁴¹ Later in the conversation, however, it appears as if it is actually Jute who is hard of hearing:

Mutt. - Aput the buttle, surd.

³⁸ Sorley Boy McDonnell: rebellious Ulster chief. Danish: *Taler de Dansk?*: Do you speak Danish? River: Tolka. Nautical slang: *scowegian*: Scandaravian. Jespersen. *Language* XX.4: “Panamanians, when addressed, used to reply ‘No spiggotty (speak) Inglis’.” Pigott, (hesitency). Do you speak Saxon? Saxophone. (*Annotations*.)

³⁹ McHugh’s *Annotations* glosses “swop hats” as “shake hands”, but this interpretation seems doubtful since “hats” is not misspelled and the misspelling of “swap” in no way suggests “shake”. There also does not appear to be any further textual evidence to support this interpretation.

⁴⁰ I interpret “Somehards” to be a reserved answer in the affirmative, meaning something like “yes, I am sometimes somewhat hard of hearing”. Sometimes perhaps due to some hard times.

⁴¹ Added to this confusion is the possibility that, being a little deaf, he simply misheard the question.

Jute. - Whose poddle? Wherein? (16.20-21)⁴²

There are further contradictions: Jute asks if Mutt is a deaf mute to which the answer is strongly negative:

Jute. - But you are not jeffmute?⁴³

Mutt. - Noho. (16.14-15)

But two lines later Mutt states “I became a stun a stummer”, meaning both a stammerer and a mute (German: *stummer*: mute person). Mutt also states that he is “an utterer” (16.15), a term meaning he is not only a speaker but someone who passes counterfeit coins, but later it is Jute who passes Mutt a coin of dubious currency, “a piece of oak” (16.31).

There are further indications that it might actually be Jute who is Shaun, but again these are not unambiguous. Jute complains:

You that side your voice are almost inedible to me. Become a bitskin more wiseable, as if I were you. (16.23-25)⁴⁴

In this passage Jute not only hints again that the twins might be acting as each other (“as if I were you”), but also displays qualities attributable to both Shem and Shaun. He complains that he is having trouble hearing his companion, but also asks Mutt to become more visible as if he is having trouble seeing. It is the Shaun-like qualities that dominate, however, as perhaps Shaun’s most consistent characteristic—his gluttonous appetite—surfaces in both the complaint of inedibility and the advice that follows, to “become a biscuit”.⁴⁵ The suggestion that Mutt act a bit more wisely (i.e. more like Jute) is also characteristic of Shaun’s egotism and moralism.

None of this evidence identifies the two antagonists conclusively. It is impossible to tell if Jute is Shaun pretending to be Shem or Shem pretending to be Shaun. It is also unclear whether they simply reversed roles at the beginning of the dialogue or if there is a continuous process of hat-swapping taking place. As the last example (spoken by Jute) demonstrates, there are

⁴² Latin: *apud*: with. Bottle. Latin: *surdus*: deaf. *Surd*: stupid. Poddle River, Dublin. Erin. (*Annotations*.)

⁴³ This question also concerns the identity of the speakers, asking if Mutt is not a combination of Mutt and Jeff, or perhaps one acting as the other.

⁴⁴ Voice / noise. Inedible / inaudible. German: *a bisschen*: a little. Archaic: bit-kin: little bit. Biscuit. Wise / visible. (*Annotations*.)

⁴⁵ The spelling also suggests “bit of skin” and “bit kin”, again emphasising that Jute is Shaun-ishly telling Mutt to become like him, his kin.

no means to determine which characteristics are genuine and which are simply being acted out as a part of the hat-swapping. The reader is not given the initial, unambiguous identity which would form the basis for interpreting the role-playing that is going on; the only clues are characteristics that are opposed and come to be aligned with each twin. Within this early dialogue their interaction plays upon the confusion and ambiguity of their still only vaguely defined roles within the book.

While the attempt to establish the identities of Mutt and Jute is inconclusive, what is established is the pseudo-dialectical process of Shem and Shaun's interaction. At this early stage of the book the brothers have not become as distinct as they will become (generally their identities are quite distinct and separate), but it is at least clear that Mutt and Jute represent the feuding brothers in some form: they are sarcastic and antagonistic towards each other and together they examine their fallen father with childish curiosity. Importantly, the qualities that define and describe each of them, though not consistently distributed, remain opposed but are constantly interacting with each other, stressing their interdependence. Almost the whole book is an amplification and a restating of this initial dialogue. While identities become confused, blurring in and out of focus, the same differences recur and coalesce into warring factions and the twins come to represent an infinite series of corresponding opposites. Shem is thin, blind, quiet and reclusive; Shaun is fat, deaf, loud and outgoing. As their contradictory natures express themselves, the same arguments occur over and over again. Each time opposites come into conflict in *Finnegans Wake*—and they meet frequently—the two positions are personified in the form of the twins. Each feud is therefore a reflection of every other. In Mutt and Jute there are echoes of the two washerwomen gossiping across the Liffey in I.8, Butt and Taff, the Ondt and the Gracehoper, and so on. As Mutt points out, “the same returns” (18.6): each new exchange remains essentially the same.

This is the main satirical thrust of *Finnegans Wake*. Despite their similarities, communication repeatedly breaks down between the two sides; mutual incomprehension is the basis of the twins' relationship. They are “anticollaborators” with “intermisunderstanding minds” (118.25) and each is “prexactly unlike his polar

obvious systematisation to the understanding of the work. When Derrida, in his essay on Hegel (actually on Bataille on Hegel), states that “Hegel is always right, as soon as one opens one’s mouth in order to articulate meaning”, he is not arguing for the universality of Hegel’s system but against it; but he confirms the system by becoming the negative side of the argument, and so he must concede this superiority to Hegel. A similar contradiction is at work in *Finnegans Wake*: there is both a strong tendency towards systematisation and a deep ambivalence present simultaneously in the text. Derrida reads Bataille as exceeding Hegelian dialectics through laughter:

Laughter alone exceeds dialectics and the dialectician: it bursts out only on the basis of an absolute renunciation of meaning, an absolute risking of death, what Hegel calls abstract negativity.

Hegel has a name for it, but does not account for it:

the burst of laughter is the almost-nothing into which meaning sinks, absolutely...This is why laughter is absent from the Hegelian system, and not in the manner of a negative or abstract side of it. “In the ‘system’ poetry, laughter, ecstasy are nothing. Hegel hastily gets rid of them: he knows no other aim than knowledge. To my eyes, his immense fatigue is linked to his horror of the blind spot”. [Citing Bataille]⁴⁸

This, then, is perhaps the loophole through which the reader can escape Joyce’s literary fascism. Joyce’s system is universal but not universal. Unlike Hegel, Joyce’s system does allow for laughter, for nothingness, and therefore allows for the possibility of its own meaninglessness. Joyce’s most intimidating production, despite its not strictly Hegelian but bogglingly Hegelian-like universalism, is simply a joke. It is meant to make us laugh; it should not be taken seriously:

Come on, ordinary man with that large big nonobili head, and that blanko berbecked fischial ekksprezzion...Your machelar’s mutton leg’s getting musclebound from being too pulled. (64.30-33)⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Jacques Derrida, “From Restricted to General Economy: A Hegelianism without Reserve”, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978) 263, 256.

⁴⁹ Knobbly. Latin: *non oblitus*: not forgotten. Ido (artificial language): *nonnobli*: base. Barebacked. Facial. German: *fisch*: fish. Visual expression.

The themes and characterisations in *Finnegans Wake* are self-consciously ridiculous. There are constant reminders that the roles into which the characters fit are, like the grand plan of history, simply an affectation. The characters allude to the fact that what they are doing is acting their part in the broader context of the book. Thus the metaphor of the stage is common, both in obvious examples, as in “The Mime of Mick Nick and the ~~Maggies~~^{Maggies}” or Shaun’s dramatic, anticlimactic entrance in III.1, and in more subtle hints, such as the distribution of characters by Jaun as he introduces Dave to Issy in III.2. “Let us be holy and evil and let her be peace on the bough” (465.13-14), he suggests, assigning them once more the same roles they have been playing all along.

This playful self-consciousness that is common to *Finnegans Wake* emphasises that the system of *Finnegans Wake* is not only striving for universality, but is doing so ironically. The brothers act as eternally opposed opposites, not of necessity, but because it is expected of them, they are parts of a greater whole. Roles are handed out like masks which the characters dutifully wear, notwithstanding the occasional knowing wink to the audience. As characters they conform to the dialectical and circular form of the book and the fact that this is achieved with such scope and uniformity is one of the chief reasons it appears preposterous. (Was everyone Joyce disliked or disagreed with really as appalling as Shaun, for example?) The system appears as a self-conscious attempt at intellectual simplification, a parody of universalism and idealism.

But *Finnegans Wake* is not simply ironic, it presents layers of overlapping ironies. The recurring metaphor of the world of the text as a stage with characters acting upon it (and with an audience observing) is an example of the way ironies and contradictions emerge from the text of *Finnegans Wake*. The tripartite model consisting of a writer, an actor or character, and an observer is problematised by the *Wake*’s strange language and its playfulness with its range of offered perspectives. All three perspectives are manipulated and commented upon by the text. As Jaun’s introduction of Dave in III.2 progresses Jaun increasingly

Italian: *sprezzabile*: contemptible. Italian: *macellaio*: butcher. (Annotations.)

takes on the roles of director and spectator. He tells Dave and Issy how and who to act by a list of instructions and characters:

You try a little tich to the tistle of his tail...Be ownkind. Be kithkinish. Be bloodysibby. Be irish. Be inish. Be offalia. Be hamlet. Be the property plot. Be Yorick and Lankystare. Be cool. Be mackinamucks of yourselves. Be finish...Can you reverse positions? (465.29-466.3)⁵⁰

He encourages Dave and Issy into an incestuous union and then takes pleasure in watching them, shouting encouragement in a scene reminiscent of Bloom's observation of Boylan and Molly in the "Circe" episode of *Ulysses*.⁵¹ At the same time he assumes the voice of an unscrupulous pornographer, sounding like a cross between a circusmaster and a pimp, ensuring his public get what they want no matter how retrograde the voyeurism:

Put me down for all ringside seats...Rip ripper rippest and jac jac jac. Dwell on that, my hero and lander! That's the side that appeals to em, the wring wrong way to wright woman. Shuck her! Let him! What he's good for. Shuck her more! Let him again! All she wants! (466.6-17)⁵²

But this possibly pornographic scene is shielded from the gaze of the audience. We are watching the watcher; it is not the action of a play appearing in the text, but the words of the director who is watching for us.

This is followed by a curious question that acts as both a continuation and a self-referential disruption of the scene. Jaun asks:

Could you wheedle a staveling encore out of your imitationer's jubalharp, hey, Mr. Jinglejoys? (466.17-18)⁵³

⁵⁰ Try / tie. Little Tich: English music hall comedian. Tickle. Tassel. Own kind / unkind. Kith and kin. Blood / sibling / bloody silly. Irish: *inis*: island. Ophelia / County Offaly. Popish plot 1678. York and Lancaster (Wars of Roses). Yorick and Lancaster (Shakespeare). Irish: *muc*: pig. Mookse. Making a muck. Finn MacCool backwards. (*Annotations*.)

⁵¹ Joyce, *Ulysses* 462.

⁵² Jack the Ripper. Hero and Leander. (*Annotations*.) Shuck / fuck. Tristram Shandy claims to know which is the right end and which is the wrong end of a woman.

Laurence Sterne, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983).

⁵³ Stave (music). Starveling. Jubal Cain: ancestor of those who use harps and organs. Jew's harp. Wyndham Lewis compared Joyce's style with that of Jingle in *Pickwick Papers*. (*Annotations*.)

On one level this is a continuation of the instructions Jaun has been shouting out to Dave and Issy, since Joyce has explicitly included himself as one of the many figures included in the character of Shem and, by extension, Dave. On a second level it is also a self-referential moment and a break in the narration in which Jaun, from the text, steps out of the scene (which is not really a scene at all) and calls directly to Joyce, the writer and creator, to request a repeat performance and comment on the roles that are being acted out before both him and (second hand, via Jaun) before us. Jaun becomes not only the eyes but also the voice of the reading audience calling for an encore, and by addressing Joyce by name he also ironically assumes the role of a member of Joyce's reading public placing demands and manipulating Joyce's production from within Joyce's text.

The question is a dislocation of the scene's narrator; an acknowledgement of its artifice that serves to destroy verisimilitude (which could be viewed an almost irrelevant term for *Finnegans Wake*), and it is a common technique in *Finnegans Wake* that is used to draw attention to the work as a text, as language. The disruption is like an actor breaking off mid-speech and ceasing to be in character in order to address someone offstage, only to resume the speech as if nothing had happened; it emphasises that the lines the actor speaks are not his own, but are the product of another, controlling mind, and thus alludes to a person behind the representation, creating the artifice. The mystique of the performance—assuming the performance had some initial mystique—could not survive such an assault on our credulity. But in *Finnegans Wake* there is nothing behind the representation; in fact, it is even debatable that *Finnegans Wake* can be said to “represent” at all. The joke in this case is that there is no actor playing Jaun; Jaun is playing himself. There is no interaction between figures through language, only language. Joyce is not an external figure, but is also a construction of the text. Joyce materialises as a figure inside his own writing as a reminder of the artifice of the text and the reader is made to focus on the work as artifice, but the text simultaneously undermines the assumption that there is an essential meaning or character or scene being expressed by or behind the artifice. The scene is language, but language does not extend beyond itself to describe

The only discourse integrally to achieve the 0-2 poetic logic is that of the carnival. By adopting a dream logic, it transgresses rules of linguistic code and social morality as well.⁵⁴

Finnegans Wake's polyvalent, contradictory, comical language seems to be a prime example of this form of logic. Bakhtin argues that the carnival, with its sense of mockery and uninhibited laughter, subverts authority. The carnival's irreverent spirit gives freedom to basic desires and represents "a reaction against...cold rationalism, against official, formalistic, and logical authoritarianism". It is a reaction that avoids being reactionary; the carnival liberates the mind by allowing it to see possibilities normally obscured by the voice of authority and, most importantly, it is a universal uniting force. It avoids nihilism by finding a basic joy and a common bond in human existence that it is impossible for authority to negate or suppress:

Carnival with all its images, indecencies, and curses affirms the people's immortal, indestructible character. In the world of carnival the awareness of the people's immortality is combined with the realisation that established authority and truth are relative.

The power to overcome authority comes from the implicit knowledge that is necessarily a feature of laughter, as with this knowledge comes the ability to overcome fear:

Laughter...overcomes fear, for it knows no inhibitions, no limitations. Its idiom is never used by violence and authority.

Laughter also has other liberating effects:

Laughter purifies from dogmatism, from the intolerant and the petrified; it liberates from fanaticism and pedantry, from fear and intimidation, from didacticism, naivete and illusion, from the single meaning, the single level, from sentimentality.

It is important to note, however, that not all laughter is liberating, carnivalesque laughter. "Satirical laughter", according to Bakhtin, is "actually not laughter but rhetoric":

The satirist whose laughter is negative places himself above the object of his mockery, he is opposed to it.

⁵⁴ Julia Kristeva, "Word, Dialogue and Novel", *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, trans. Thomas Gora, Alice Jardine and Leon S. Roudiez (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1981) 70.

In other words, the moment any suggestion of superiority creeps into the tone of the laughter it becomes exclusive and loses its universal qualities.⁵⁵

There is as much evidence to argue for a carnivalesque interpretation of *Finnegans Wake* as there is for any number of other theories. The female characters particularly “function as the constant excess of any limits prescribed by the male and an excess which demonstrates those limits as limits”.⁵⁶ Anna Livia is described in universal, carnivalesque, life-affirming terms:

She is living in our midst of debt and laffing through all plores
for us (her birth is uncontrollable). (11.32-33)⁵⁷

Shem too, unlike Shaun, appears to have an irreverent sense of humour. Caddy, the early incarnation of Shem, writes of peace and farce. When the Shem-ish Gripes first addresses the papal Mookse his speech is accompanied by the braying laughter of jackasses. The top of Shem’s head is not a crown but an “uncrown” (169.13). “The Four Watches of Shaun” are often interpreted as being narrated by Shem⁵⁸ in the form of an ass belonging to the four old men, and many of the questions that are asked of Shaun are openly mocking Shaun’s attitudes and weaknesses and undermine his authoritarian pronouncements.

There is, however, irony in the transcendental comic power attributed to Shem. Unlike the laughter of Bakhtin’s carnival, *Finnegans Wake* has, in many of its episodes, satirical aims and thus “is not laughter but rhetoric”. This is particularly relevant to the relationship between the twins. Even though the target of the satire in *Finnegans Wake* is continually shifting and no one character escapes the text’s mockery, there are unmistakable satirical elements to Joyce’s prose. The artist’s moral, spiritual and

⁵⁵ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984) 37, 256, 90, 123, 51, 12

⁵⁶ Colin MacCabe, *James Joyce and the Revolution of the Word* (London: Macmillan, 1979) 151.

⁵⁷ Applause. French: *pleures*: mourning. Mirth. Birth control. (*Annotations*.)

⁵⁸ Begnal, who approaches *Finnegans Wake* with the assumption that much of the book “is presented to us from the point of view and in the voice of a specific, or at least recognisable, character”, sees the Elizabethan inflections in the narrator’s speech (“Methought”, etc.) as a sign pointing to a Shemish donkey.

Michael H. Begnal, *Dreamscheme: Narrative and Voice in Finnegans Wake* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1988) 7.

possession of the key to understanding is inevitably ^{to} prove yourself right. And wrong.

Despite Joyce's claim that *Finnegans Wake* is supposed to make people laugh, most anecdotal evidence suggests that Joyce also took the universal, systematic elements of *Finnegans Wake* seriously. Joyce's universal history, populated by universal characters, and written in a universal language is not really universal. It subverts its own claims to universality through its rigorous systematisation of its elements. The dialectic is satirised in *Finnegans Wake* as a form of logic. It is a prison, a trap created by language from which escape is impossible. The denial of the dialectic is also its affirmation, thus we must be "tolerant of antipathies" (163.15), not for peace, love and understanding, but because it is a logically ~~tyrannical~~ ^{tyrannical} system that, once entered, will not permit departure. It is the system of language, continuous and without origin, that causes this dependency: there cannot be anything new. Language flows from language; antipathies are generated and repeated. Thus Joyce, with knowing irony, to be free from tradition, wrote within and from a tradition, acknowledging it in every line, and to destroy the ~~tyranny~~ ^{tyranny} of the absolute created an absolute system.

2. Everyone's a Critic

One often hears of writers that rise and swell with their subject, though it may seem but an ordinary one. How, then, with me, writing of this Leviathan? Unconsciously my chirography expands into placard capitals. Give me a condor's quill! Give me Vesuvius' crater for an inkstand! Friends, hold my arms! For in the mere act of penning my thoughts of this Leviathan, they weary me, and make me faint with their outreaching comprehensiveness of sweep, as if to include the whole circle of the sciences, and all the generations of whales, and men, and mastodons, past, present, and to come, with all the revolving panoramas of empire on earth, and throughout the whole universe, not excluding its suburbs. Such, and so magnifying, is the virtue of a large and liberal theme! We expand to its bulk.

[..]

There are some enterprises in which a careful disorderliness is the true method.¹

While the amount of criticism that attempts to explicate Joyce's work is exorbitant (and yet still not enough), the fraction of that criticism dealing with *Finnegans Wake* is disproportionately low, considering that Joyce's last book is the product of approximately half his creative life. While there are numerous works dealing with *Finnegans Wake* alone, it is, thanks to its complexity, rarely given an adequate hearing in context with his more accessible works. Frequently books dealing with Joyce's oeuvre reiterate a few critical commonplaces about *Finnegans Wake*, taken from *Our Exagmination* or Harry Levin's introduction to Joyce, and half-heartedly associate them with a main thesis in a short chapter buried late in the book. Attempts at interpreting sections of the text in detail are (understandably) avoided, presumably for fear of being sucked into a literary black hole.

¹ Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick or, The Whale* (London: Penguin, 1992) 496-7, 395.

A recent example of this reluctance to interpret *Finnegans Wake* is *The Illicit Joyce of Postmodernism* by Kevin J. H. Dettmar which banishes *Finnegans Wake* in a startlingly brief chapter of nine pages called "On Ignoring *Finnegans Wake*". His argument is that we do not have to worry about Joyce's final book because it is too long, too boring and too difficult to be bothered with, and it is only an aberration anyway, and besides Stanislaus and Ezra Pound and Nabokov and a few others did not understand it and hated it so it cannot be any good. He compares the relatively small number of *Finnegans Wake* readers to the converts of a religious cult. Without resorting to any textual exegesis, Dettmar concludes none is required, since he classifies *Finnegans Wake* as a bloated, failed experiment that extends the modernist and post-modernist implications of *Ulysses* too far and survives only by riding on the coat-tails of Joyce's reputation. *Finnegans Wake*, unlike the favoured *Ulysses*, has only one aspect: "Its 'initial style' is also its final style", he argues.²

There are two points to be made in response: firstly, *Finnegans Wake* anticipates and accepts all of his objections; and secondly, as an examination of the text will show, it problematises them. *Finnegans Wake* may command a high level of devotion and present itself as a universal, religious text, but it also mocks and subverts religious pretensions and its own claims to divinity. Converts to the divine church of the *Wake* must be heathens and existentialists as well as believers. While *Finnegans Wake* does not adopt the new-style-every-chapter approach of *Ulysses*, and thus does, in one sense, maintain a greater uniformity of technique, it can hardly be said to lack diversity and inventiveness; as Issy observes, there is "None of your cumpohlstery English here!" (271.N3). Almost never is exactly the same linguistic manifestation repeated and there are hundreds of different idioms included in its cultural mix. And, like *Ulysses*, *Finnegans Wake* is concerned with the processes of writing, reading, meaning, and understanding, and thus its self-conscious difficulty cannot be grounds for dismissal. It is, as critics such as Margot Norris have pointed out, based on a series of questions, absences and misunderstandings.

² Kevin J. H. Dettmar, *The Illicit Joyce of Postmodernism: Reading Against the Grain* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996) 209-217.

Experimental it certainly is, but the question of its failure or success as an experiment depends largely upon what it is being expected to achieve.

There are recent works that deign to read *Finnegans Wake*, and these have tended to emphasise its functioning as language; that is, its means of expression and its deconstruction of familiar ideas of literature.³ The outrageousness of the language in *Finnegans Wake* makes it a prime target for this kind of analysis. *Finnegans Wake*, simply by being unlike standard spoken or written English, destroys the complacency with which we approach language on an everyday basis and therefore, by drawing attention to itself as an artificial language and the “mnice old mness it all mnakes” (19.7-8), it provokes questions about how and why things can become meaningful. As an extreme example of the functioning and disfunctioning of language it is thus always going to be a useful and demonstrative work when inquiring into the limits and possibilities of expression and understanding.

While these questions are important, they should not necessarily lead to the conclusion that means of expression are the only theme in *Finnegans Wake*, or that the nature of its language overrides all other concerns raised by the book. While questions about the nature of language must inform all aspects of the book, *Finnegans Wake* does retain the more traditional elements of plot, character and narrative, albeit in an extremely modified, fragmented form designed to make interpretation problematic. There are teasing hints suggesting there are, beneath the riot of languages, more traditional concerns being raised by the book, for example when we are told “‘Tis as human a little story as paper could well carry” (115.36). There also appears to be present in the book’s snatches of narrative a satirical drive, not only in the questioning of the means of expression, but also in the interaction of the characters when viewed from the more traditional, if somewhat shaky, ground of narrative. On close reading, while complexity is the general rule, some of the obfuscation actually reinforces ideas emerging from the text rather than acting as a signpost to confusion so that out of the deliberate haziness of

³ As well as other ideological constructs. See Chapter 5: Shem, Shaun, and Non-ideological Ideology.

Finnegans Wake some consistent themes do emerge, beyond the obvious theme of the undermining and reworking of everyday language.

The question, in short, is this: does the destruction—if it actually is a destruction—of previously accepted means of expression undermine *all* of the other ideas emerging from the text? If this is the case then the book can be viewed as a work of Dada: absurd, random meaninglessness is its meaning. Joyce's famous meticulousness argues otherwise. *Finnegans Wake* lacks the revolutionary manifesto that informs Dadaism and rejects: the Dadaist abandonment of conscious form in favour of chance and nonsense. But this is only partially true. Joyce's text is revolutionary (in more than one sense) and does embrace coincidence, unconscious association and outright non-meaning. There are thus two conflicting tendencies at work in Joyce's writing:

This is writing which is prodigal and therefore disconcerting because of its economy, which refuses to regulate itself, to give itself laws: sometimes restrained, finely calculated, strategic, intending by the systematic use of networks of symbols and correspondences to impose a rigid grid on the reader, to produce an effect of mastery; sometimes, on the other hand, within the same textual web, surreptitiously, perversely, renouncing all demands, opening itself up without any resistance to the incongruous, introducing metaphors which never end, hypnotic and unanswerable riddles, a proliferation of false signs, of doors crafted without keys: in other words (spoken in jest), it is an extraordinary free game which should shatter *any habits* of reading. [Her italics]⁴

These two directions that are implied by the complex associations in Joyce's writing coexist in the language and structure of *Finnegans Wake*, and the paradoxes that characterise the work are a reflection of this contradiction. *Finnegans Wake* is both orderly and disorderly; it simultaneously suggests coherence and incoherence. One of the paradoxical consequences of refusing to follow laws is the need to follow laws occasionally lest not

⁴ Helené Cixous, "Joyce: The (r)use of writing", *Post-structuralist Joyce*, ed. Derek Attridge and Daniel Ferrer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984) 19.

adhering to laws becomes a law in itself. And if *Finnegans Wake* were actually to shatter habits of reading absolutely, it could not be considered language in any form and could not be read at all.

More traditional critics mostly ignore the more revolutionary implications of Joyce's language in *Finnegans Wake* and focus on interpreting the text in the same way as any other—*i.e.* with rigorous research and scrupulous attention to detail—the assumption being that their task has simply been made a great deal more difficult by the perversity and meticulousness of the author. More recently, however, critics focusing on the nature of Joyce's language point out that *Finnegans Wake* raises questions about language and its interpretation that problematise these traditional methods of interpretation and understanding. These opposed approaches to the text have been noted by Grace Eckley, in the process of declaring her own bias:

my position regarding criticism of [*Finnegans Wake*] is that it can be appreciated and understood—and it is enjoyable—when sufficient information is gathered to improve comprehension of it...My view almost diametrically opposes that of Margot Norris, who writes in the conclusion of *The Decentered Universe of Finnegans Wake*: “The greatest critical mistake in approaching *Finnegans Wake* has been the assumption that we can be certain of who, where, and when everything is in the *Wake*, if only we do enough research”.⁵

They are both, to some extent, correct, and there are examples from the text to support both arguments. On the one hand we are advised to remain patient “and remember patience is the great thing, and above all things else we must avoid anything like being or becoming out of patience” (108.8-10). Even though we “may have our irremovable doubts as to the whole sense of the lct...we must vaunt no idle dubiousity as to its genuine authorship and holusbolus authoritativeness” (117.35-118.4).⁶ Perhaps the most helpful advice comes from Issy, advice that is heeded by Eckley:

⁵ Grace Eckley, *Children's Lore in Finnegans Wake* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1985) xi.

⁶ McHugh's *Annotations* glosses “holusbolus” as “all at once” (*Annotations.*), but it also carries the connotation of “hocus pocus” or “bogus”, suggesting that its authority may be illusory and fraudulent. The statement could then be read as being mocking in its tone.

“Wipe your glosses with what you know” (304.F3). On the other hand, *Finnegans Wake* points out that we are “experiencing a jolting series of prearranged disappointments” (107.33), and that the “sword of certainty which would identify the body never falls” (51.5-6), and “the unfacts, did we possess them, are too imprecisely few to warrant our certitude” (57.16-17).

Finnegans Wake allows room for contradictory possibilities. Joyce, ever accommodating, has anticipated and given plenty of scope for both approaches to his text. This is a contradiction like the contradictions personified by the twins, that is not to be resolved, but contemplated and accepted. We are dealing with fact and fiction, knowledge and ignorance simultaneously.

Who in his heart doubts either that the facts of feminine clothiering are there all the time or that the feminine fiction, stranger than the facts, is there also at the same time, only a little to the rere? Or that one may be separated from the other? Or that both may be contemplated simultaneously? or that each may be taken up and considered in turn apart from the other? (109.30-36)⁷

I. Conservative Anarchy

The conservative aspect of Joyce’s texts is their obsession with order, detail and structure. All of Joyce’s works, including *Finnegans Wake*, present themselves as artifice. They appear as unified and complete artistic works that have been created with precision by an ultimate authority. *Finnegans Wake* tells us that the object we are examining bears “several of the earmarks of design” (66.1), and the world that is elaborated in its pages is explicitly divine: “Creator he has created for his creatured ones a creation” (29.14-15).

One of the most striking things about reading *Finnegans Wake* is the way in which Joyce has been able to connect such a large volume of seemingly disparate information. Joyce once boasted

⁷ Carlyle: *Sartor Resartus* X: ‘For our purposes the simple fact that such a naked world is possible, nay actually exists (under the Clothed One) will be sufficient’. Phrase: truth is stranger than fiction. (*Annotations*.) Clothing. Rear. Re- : prefix indicating repetition or withdrawal.

that he could account for every line in every one of his works and expressed doubts that the same could be said for many of his contemporaries and imitators, and *Finnegans Wake* also makes the claim that, despite appearances, it is an orderly and structured work:

it is not a miseffectual whyacinthinous riot of blots and blurs
and bars and balls and hoops and wriggles and juxtaposed
jottings linked by spurts of speed: it only looks as like it as
damn it. (118.28-31)⁸

This totalising, controlling attitude at work in Joyce's fiction argues for a conservative approach to the interpretation of *Finnegans Wake*. It implies that an attentive reading will be rewarded. Joyce's books are artistic creations that are whole, tightly constructed, and therefore, at least theoretically, containable. In short, this suggests that it is possible for Joyce's writing to be interpreted and the difficulties associated with reading *Finnegans Wake* are due to its complexity, not its ultimate unintelligibility.

So whether *Finnegans Wake* actually encompasses all of history is irrelevant; what is important is that it feigns to encompass all of history. Its range extends, theoretically, to everything, and in this sense it argues against division. Earwicker is explicitly referred to as the universal Everyman "Here Comes Everybody" (32.18) and is "magnificently well worthy of any and all such universalisation" (32.20-21); Anna Livia is the "Mother of us all" (299.3); and even the invented language used in *Finnegans Wake* is "told in sounds...universal...polyglutteral...anythongue athall" (117.12-16).⁹ The twins, too, are described in all-encompassing terms. The Gracehoper's song claims that "These twain are the twins that tick *Homo Vulgaris*" (418.26), meaning that they are both the internal conflicts of their Everyman father and the dialectical force shaping the history of mankind. Viewed in this way *Finnegans Wake* does not fragment and disperse meaning, but consolidates meaning into archetypal forms with its techniques of condensation and substitution, even while blurring the

⁸ Hyacinth. (*Annotations.*)

⁹ Universal: an artificial language. Polyglot. (*Annotations.*) Guttural. Glut. Anything at all / any tongue (language) at all.

conventional boundaries that structure language. The basis of the book's technique is repetition: events, myths, numbers and, most obviously, words, are linked on the basis of coincidental similarity.

To insist upon division and exclusion is to create conflict. *Finnegans Wake* proposes an anti-antidote. It presents itself as a unified subject—an all inclusive subject—that defies division. No matter how contrary and irreconcilable ideas, objects or places may seem, they are, in the *Wake*, all related, they are all one. *Finnegans Wake* is often described as encyclopedic because of the wealth of historical, mythical and literary material that it contains, and this information spills from its pages, linking the book to external sources.¹⁰ The *Wake*, because of its complexity, demands reference to external source material without which much of the book remains incomprehensible, and through this demand it generates its own context by locating itself within a complex web of cultural information. This in turn implies a position in conceptual space and time, and a sense of completeness. Similarly, within the pages of the book information exists in a network where each idea or event is linked to all others in an associative web. This gives the work coherence by apparently allowing anything at all to be fitted into its system, as Clive Hart explains:

The coherence is...potentially limitless. Joyce, the master craftsman, made *Finnegans Wake* so brilliantly and so inclusively that it is about anything that ever happened anywhere. Thus any reading is true, provided it has some meaningful link with some other idea in the context. The network of relationships may lead in any direction, though some relationships will be more immediate than others and may have more appeal to the individual explicator.¹¹

It is this system of internal associations that Eco refers to when he describes *Finnegans Wake* as an “excellent model of a Global

¹⁰ The book is literally encyclopedic. Joyce used a set of *Encyclopedia Britannica* as a source for the historical trivia he packed into *Finnegans Wake*.

Ellmann, *James Joyce* 628.

¹¹ Clive Hart, “*Finnegans Wake* in Adjusted Perspective”, *Critical Essays on James Joyce's Finnegans Wake*, ed. Patrick A. McCarthy (New York: G. K. Hall and Co., 1992) 22.

Semantic System”¹²: the book is based on a tightly constructed network of linked ideas. On this level *Finnegans Wake* exists as an argument for the rejection of techniques of encyclopedic classification, despite all of the information it contains. Instead of dissecting and categorising in fine detail, Joyce presents the opposite tendency: he takes detail and separateness and blurs it into a whole.

The effect of this complex networking of ideas is a heightened sense of context. It is possible to isolate sections of the work but only with an acute awareness of the disruption this causes to the network. The arbitrariness that is a necessary part of the process of quoting is exposed, as a passage can be isolated and examined, but only with some loss of its previous significance that no amount of explaining can regain. This is true of any quotation given a new context, but *Finnegans Wake* heightens the awareness of this by its *exaggerated* sense of context: the relationship of the quotation to the rest of the book and related texts presents too many links to allow for it to be resituated.

The implication remains, however, that finally to identify all the links is to capture the total meaning, and it is in this way that the text presents itself as encyclopedic and ideally universal. *Finnegans Wake* feigns including all history, all literature, and all religion (and consequently becomes a religion to itself). As a holy book—or at least a parody of a holy book—it claims to be systematic and all inclusive by constructing itself as a totalising mythical system, an idea suggested by its borrowed structure, taken from Vico’s circular theory of history.

Umberto Eco has detected similarities with medieval thought in Joyce’s obsession with order:

The medieval thinker cannot conceive, explain or manage the world without inserting it into the framework of an Order...The medieval thinker knows that art is the human way to reproduce. in an artifact, the universal rules of cosmic order. In this sense art reflects the artist’s impersonality rather than his personality. Art is an *analogon* of the world...Every word embodies every other because language is a self reflecting world.

¹² Umberto Eco, *The Role of the Reader* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979) 68.

Language is the dream of history telling itself to itself. Language is a book readable by an ideal reader affected by ideal insomnia. If you take away the transcendent God from the symbolic world of the Middle Ages, you have the world of Joyce.¹³

This identifies several key tendencies in the structuring of *Finnegans Wake*, in particular that the book attempts to achieve universality and order by relying on internally established and maintained associations. The key word here is “ideal”. This approach *assumes* that the correspondences will all check out, as Hugh Kenner has admitted.¹⁴ (The absence of a God from this picture is also problematic—Joyce humbly places the author in the position of Godhead—but this will be dealt with later.) Eco elaborates on the universal pretensions of *Finnegans Wake* as evidence suggesting a medieval framework for the book. The desire for strong ordering themes leads to Joyce’s frequent use of myths and archetypes which are ultimately linked back to one man and the book’s claims to universality:

H. C. Earwicker acquires the symbolic role of the scapegoat who assumes within himself the whole of humanity (“Here Comes Everybody”), fallen and saved by resurrection...[He is] involved in all myths and religions.

Eco offers the following accurate, though inevitably reductive, summary of the *Wake*:

From the beginning, *Finnegans Wake*, announces what it will be—a nocturnal epic of ambiguity and metamorphoses, the myth of a death and a universal rebirth in which each figure and each work will stand in place of all the others. It will be an epic without clear divisions between elements, so that each event may implicate the others to form an elementary unity that does not exclude the collision and opposition between contraries.¹⁵

Finnegans Wake is not universal but it is significant that it pretends to be universal and is structured accordingly. Every

¹³ Umberto Eco, *The Middle Ages of James Joyce* (London: Hutchinson Radius, 1982) 7.

¹⁴ On the subject of cross-references in *Ulysses*, Kenner says: “it is surprising how our sense of the book’s integrity comes to depend on our faith that they will indeed check out”. A comment that could with even more justification be applied to *Finnegans Wake*.

Hugh Kenner, *The Stoic Comedians* (London: W. H. Allen, 1964) 60.

¹⁵ Eco, *The Middle Ages* 5, 62.

minute detail is placed in relation to the web of associations that structure the text and conglomerate around a few general themes, and therefore it is possible to have a clear understanding of the broad thematic basis of the book.

According to this interpretation, *Finnegans Wake* is on the surface a prickly and contrary beast, but if the reader can uncover the concept that links one word, allusion or image to another then she is led into the circle for another journey around and back again, and has, through the understanding of a fragment, actually understood the entire work. To use Humpty Dumpty as an example, imagine that this hypothetical reader has not heard of Humpty. After the fall on page three (lines 15-17) we are told of the prostrate body

that the humptyhillhead of humself promptly sends an
unquering one well to the west in search of his tumptytumtoes
(3.21-22)

and following this initial clue are dozens of references to Humpty Dumpty, scattered liberally through the text of *Finnegans Wake*. To our hypothetical and less than ideal reader the references to Humpty Dumpty would be unrecognisable, meaningless and therefore nothing more than a source of confusion, but as soon as this reader learns "Humpty Dumpty sat on the wall, Humpty Dumpty had a great fall" the significance is revealed: he falls. Humpty becomes associated with the other archetypal fallers who populate the book, and is positioned in the web of allusions as yet another example of an endlessly repeated story. The context of the book expands to meet and include the new information, and the new knowledge reinforces the reader's existing understanding by providing a new dimension to that understanding. This suggests, surprisingly for such a notoriously difficult book, that *Finnegans Wake* is actually *easier* to understand (thematically that is) than most books. Once a few basic concepts have been identified all allusions will return to them at some point as the textual obfuscation is compensated by thematic repetition and the circular structure.

The conservative approach to interpreting *Finnegans Wake* assumes that this process is possible with every fragment in the book and works towards locating every element within the ever expanding web of knowledge that both surrounds the book and is

its substance. The fall, for example, exists in a conceptual network that eventually traverses the entire book, but is immediately surrounded by a group of personas, both real and imagined, who are linked as archetypes by the fact that they all fell in some way: Satan, Adam and Eve, Tim Finnegan, Parnell, Humpty Dumpty, Oscar Wilde, and so on. Each of these examples can then form a new centre from which it is possible to depart in a new direction. New information about Humpty, for example, reveals new associations. Humpty Dumpty is not only a faller, but he is also an egg, and this provides a conceptual link to Easter, breakfast, and resurrection: all, again, recurring ideas in *Finnegans Wake*.

Or, to follow the chain of associations in another direction, Humpty Dumpty appears as a character in Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass*. Humpty, Alice observes, is "very clever at explaining words". He explains the nonsense poem "Jabberwocky" to Alice, tells her about "portmanteau" words which occur when "there are two meanings packed into one word", and in the course of their encounter expresses some interesting and dictatorial opinions about language:

"When *I* use a word", Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less."

"The question is", said Alice, "whether you *can* make words mean so many different things."

"The question is", said Humpty Dumpty, "which is to be master—that's all."

Like *Finnegans Wake*, Humpty Dumpty treats words as things and works them hard, but fair: "When I make a word do a lot of work like that...I always pay it extra", he claims.¹⁶ All of which links the character of Humpty Dumpty back to *Finnegans Wake* and its peculiar language where "every word [is] bound over to carry three score and ten toptypical readings" (20.14-15); and which acknowledges its predecessor by describing itself as "jibberweek's joke" (565.15) or, as someone exclaims at one point, "Lewd's carol!" (501.36).¹⁷ Further, it establishes another link, this

¹⁶ Lewis Carroll, *The Complete Works* (London: Penguin, 1988) 196-198.

¹⁷ Topsy-turvy. Typical. (One for each year of man's life.) Lewis Carroll: *Jabberwocky*. Lewis Carroll. (*Annotations*.) Gibber. Wake.

final attention inwards, towards the book's construction as a series of related ideas without end. The images create a hall of mirrors, a kind of over-determined self-reflexivity, where all of the elements of the work are drawn into the game. As a consequence of this gravitational attraction there is no outside of the text, in the sense that there is no stable, objective vantage point from which the text can be observed. The reader is caught by the observer's paradox. To attempt a reading of *Finnegans Wake* is to be made aware of your subjectivity. It simulates the universe: it is finite but expanding; it grows and contains. It contains the reader by refusing to allow the reader to step outside its magnitude to view it externally. It is for this reason that the sense of unity suggested by *Finnegans Wake* cannot be finally established with any certainty, it can only ever be speculated upon. The work implies that it is a unity, but this unity can only be conceived of theoretically; it is a claim that can never be proven.

II. Anarchic Conservatism.

The flipside of the conservative tendency—the anarchic impulse—is equally prevalent in Joyce's texts, particularly *Finnegans Wake*. The tendency to break rules and conventions of writing in order to disrupt the process of meaning is one of the most striking features of *Finnegans Wake*, and it can be evidenced simply by looking at the unconventional linguistic mutations that occur on every page. Despite statements to the contrary, for the reader the text is a "riot of blots and blurs" that undermines attempts to interpret the work. The text also acknowledges this aspect of itself, and the reader is even taunted with its obscurity:

You is feeling like you was lost in the bush, boy? You says: It is a puling sample jungle of woods. You most shouts out: Bethicket me for a stump of beech if I have the poultriest notion what the fareset all he means. (112.3-6)²⁰

²⁰ Pure and simple jumble of words. Swift called Wood (of Wood's half-brother) a son of a beech. German: *Buch(e)*: beech. German: *Buchstabe*: letter. Samuel Beckett. Poultry / poultry. Forest. (*Annotations*.) Poultry alludes to the "kindly fowl" (112.9) who digs up and examines the distorted letter in 1.5. Beckett took dictation from Joyce for some sections of the *Wake*. Ellmann, *James Joyce* 649.

The reader is depicted as a drowning man, struggling in heavy seas, clinging to a tiny scrap of meaning in a tumultuous ocean of linguistic confusion, and waiting in vain for divine assistance:

we ought really to rest thankful that...we have even a written on with dried ink scrap of paper at all to show for ourselves...cling to it as with drowning hands, hoping against hope all the while that, by the light of philophosy (and may she never folsage us!) things will begin to clear up a bit one way or another within the next quarrel of an hour. (118.31-119.6)²¹

Needless to say things do not clear up. Like Earwicker, the languishing reader is “subjected to the horrors of the premier terror of Errorland” (62.24-25), and remains, like the children in “The Mime of Mick, Nick and the Naggies” as the darkness of night falls, “circumveiled by obscuritads” (244.15).²²

There are other clues that the confusion created by the book’s language is self-conscious. Not only do the complexities and vagueness create difficulties for the reader but the text at times appears deliberately to disrupt the process of meaning. Language is treated in ways that suggest *Finnegans Wake* is “Binomeans to be comprehended. Inexcessible as thy by god ways” (285.27-29)²³; inaccessible because it is intentionally excessive. Language is not only distorted, but is fragmented into “bi tso fb rok engl a ssan dspl itch ina” (124.7-8).²⁴ It is this element of Joyce’s writing that resists containment by upsetting expectations and frustrating the attempt to locate meaning in his work.

Anarchic criticism stresses the impossibility of containing *Finnegans Wake* within a single reading, and further suggests that Joyce’s texts deliberately frustrate the desire for a sense of

²¹ Phrase: a drowning man will clutch at a straw. Sainéan: *Langue de Rabelais: filofol*: term for ‘philosophy’ suggesting ‘fine folie’ (lit. ‘fine madness). Greek: *phôs*: light. Sainéan: *Langue de Rabelais: saige-fcl* (lit. ‘wise-crazy’): epithet of character Triboulet. Forsake. Quarter/quarrel. (*Annotations.*)

²² Enveloped. Latin: *circumvallatus*: walled around. Spanish: *obscuridad*: darkness. (*Annotations.*) Ireland. Veiled. Obscurity.

²³ Binomials / by no means. Comprehended. Yeats: *A Vision* 142: ‘as inaccessible as God or thou’. (*Annotations.*) Spanish: *comprender*: to understand. Inaccessible / in excess.

²⁴ Bits of broken glass and split china. (*Annotations.*) The letter cluster “engl” indicates that we are dealing with broken English as well as crockery.

completion. In "Ambiviolences: Notes for Reading Joyce" Stephen Heath writes:

The writing of *Finnegans Wake*...work in progress...develops according to a fundamental incompleteness; the text produces a derisive hesitation of sense, the final revelation of meaning being always for 'later'. [His emphasis]²⁵

This is a neat summary of the anarchic impulse in Joyce's writing, and is also representative of the post-structuralist approach to Joyce criticism which stresses the ultimate impossibility of arriving at a satisfactory explanation of Joyce's meaning. Stutters, slips of the tongue, and other linguistic misfires and misunderstandings are the substance of the book—"Hirp! Hirp! for their Missed Understandings! chirps the Ballad of Perce-O'eille" (175.27-28). Total meaning is always deferred and therefore exists only in a mythical future that cannot be realised, so when reading Joyce we are always in the presence of a partial meaning that hints at a greater whole but frustrates all attempts to comprehend that whole. Meaning is a presence that makes the reader aware of a greater, pressing absence of meaning.

In *Finnegans Wake* the sheer volume of material prevents the comprehension of the work in its totality, but a partial understanding always points to the wealth of excluded material which refuses to be silenced and demands a total interpretation that is always beyond reach. This creates a problem for any attempt at *Wake* criticism:

Where criticism explicates, opening out the folds of the writing in order to arrive at the meaning, *Finnegans Wake* is offered as a permanent *interplication*, a work of folding and unfolding in which every element becomes always the fold of another in a series that knows no point of rest. [His emphasis]²⁶

The critic is defeated before he has begun by being forced to admit the inadequacy of any attempt at explanation because it can only ever be a partial reading of a work that demand the reader be "ideal". Criticism requires a fixed point—or at least the illusion of a fixed point—which the text strongly denies. A portion of the text or

²⁵ Stephen Heath, "Ambiviolences: Notes for Reading Joyce", *Post-structuralist Joyce: Essays from the French*, ed. Derek Attridge and Daniel Ferrer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984) 31.

²⁶ Heath 32.

a thematic thread must be extracted and constructed as a whole to allow examination, but inevitably lacks the authority granted by the illusion of being definitive.

It is for this reason that critics such as Heath and Derrida favour an approach that exposes the *unintelligibility* of *Finnegans Wake*, rather than attempting to explain or work towards greater understanding of the text. The work must be understood in terms of its incomprehensibility. Derrida, for example, has said of Joyce:

You're not only overcome by him, whether you know it or not, but obliged by him, and constrained to measure yourself against this overcoming. Being *in memory of him*: not necessarily to remember him, no, but to be in his memory, to inhabit his memory, which is henceforth greater than all your finite memory can, in a single instant or single vocable, gather up of cultures, languages, mythologies, religions, philosophies, sciences, history of mind and of literatures. [His emphasis]²⁷

This view sounds suspiciously similar to the previously discussed conservative approach; compare, for example, Derrida's remarks with the earlier quotation by Hart claiming that *Finnegans Wake* is about "anything that ever happened anywhere".²⁸ There is, however, a slight but important change in emphasis. The volume of information and the complexity of its arrangement places *Finnegans Wake* always beyond the possibility of comprehension as a whole, and this is precisely the point. It is for this reason that Derrida focuses on the possibilities of only two words in his reading. The endless variations that Derrida demonstrates are possible from such a tiny fragment are multiplied inconceivably when the rest of the book is brought into consideration. *Finnegans Wake*, therefore, is not even comprehensible in theory, but is an example of the slipperiness and the inessential qualities of literature and language.

²⁷ Jacques Derrida, "Two Words for Joyce", *Post-structuralist Joyce: Essays from the French*, ed. Derek Attridge and Daniel Ferrer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984) 147.

²⁸ As Shelton Brivic has observed, "Derrida, who [has] contributed to the critique of authorial presence, [has] been impressed by Joyce's authority in his work". This is an apparent contradiction in Derrida's thinking which is generally concerned with undermining concepts of textual mastery, singular unambiguous meaning, totality and closure. Shelton Brivic, *The Veil of Signs: Joyce, Lacan and Perception* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1991) 15.

At the textual level, the problem of interpreting *Finnegans Wake*, and thus establishing some degree of meaning, is one of division. Any attempt to isolate a portion of the text by dividing it from its context is met with a dissolution of boundaries. This can be illustrated by considering the problem of character. To propose writing a thesis on, say, Shaun the Post is in some respects to admit inadequacy before a word has been written, because the thesis will be unable to account for, or even satisfactorily define, its object of study as separate from the context in which it exists. There is no clear beginning and end to Shaun. Is he one or many? Should, for example, Jaun or Yawn or Chuff be considered the same character? If they are different, how are they different? Not even Shaun can "isolate i from my multiple Mes" (410.12). Although there are clear characteristics that are associated with Shaun, such as his dogmatism and arrogance, he is associated with a host of other figures, both real and imagined, and even occasionally merges with his arch-enemy Shem. There is no point at which it is possible to say that Shaun's absence has been conclusively established or, conversely, that he is fully constituted and unambiguously present. Readers must make their own distinctions between characters in "the labyrinth of their samilikes and the alteregoases of their pseudoselves" (576.32-33).²⁹ In *Finnegans Wake* characters exist as "bundles of characteristics rather than distinct individuals"³⁰ and thus to speak about Shaun the Post as a character is misleading since it cannot be assumed that he represents a physically distinct person in the way we can assume that Hamlet and Ophelia are representations of single autonomous human beings. The difference between Hamlet and Ophelia and the characters in *Finnegans Wake*, though they are all created by words, is that the Shakespeare characters are clearly delineated: they are set apart from each other on the page to avoid the confusion of not knowing who is speaking and to make it clear that they are meant to be regarded as separate characters. In contrast, Shaun could be considered as a single character, or as one half of Earwicker's divided self, or as an archetype

²⁹ Alter egos. (*Annotations.*) Same. Alike. Semi-like.

³⁰ David G. Wright, *Characters of Joyce* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1983) 105.

representing hundreds of literary and historical figures. He is actually all three possibilities. The characters in *Finnegans Wake* can be read as overlapping in several ways, as the text often lacks the clear textual markers that would allow the reader to distinguish between characters and between levels of meaning amongst the confusion of figures and blended voices. The text frustrates the expectation of a complete understanding, while teasing the reader with hints and partial comprehension.

At the level of the individual word the text also presents the problem of distinguishing between the elements it contains. The space that surrounds, and thus isolates, words that are normally considered autonomous is breached, and conventional words are blended and distorted into unconventional forms. As a result, if a reader wants to understand the elements of one of the book's polyglot words, he must consciously and deliberately separate that which the text refuses to separate. For example, to understand "twone" (3.12) as consisting of a condensation of the words two, one, and twin, it is necessary to recognise that there is a pun on twin and observe that the word combines two conventionally spelled English words, two and one. These elements are separated and understood as component parts of a word that the text presents as a whole. This process is essential, in fact, because "twone" is not a word in English or any other language, and some form of relation to a language needs to be established before any understanding can occur. However, in consciously imposing this reading upon the text the reader is no longer reading the text itself, but fragments of the text and the products of his own operation. He has distinguished between elements that *Finnegans Wake* does not distinguish between: two and one are not separate, identifiable elements in *Finnegans Wake*, and by falling back on these distinctions the reader fails in his attempt to comprehend the logic of the book because he is effectively translating its language back into the standard English that *Finnegans Wake* rejects. And there are further problems: once a decision has been made to divide "twone" into two, one, and twin, it must be conceded that there is no particular reason to stop there. "Twone" could also contain won or on or, more adventurously, tone. It could even be Elmer Fudd attempting to pronounce throne. Although the text *could* be suggesting all of these things, it actually *says* none of

them; it simply says “twone”. The act of reading *Finnegans Wake* is paradoxical: the text remains incomprehensible without the process of isolating and examining elements, but this process of understanding moves the reader away from the text as it actually appears.

The difficulty lies partly with the multiplicity of levels, but also with the absence of an origin. There is no single level that appears as the self-evident starting point and thus there is no basis for stability in any reading. Every point in the text directs the reader to other points and possibilities, creating a permanent shifting of meaning that always extends beyond the horizon. There is no point of origin, no guiding hand, and in this sense *Finnegans Wake* denies the metaphysical concept of the single, ideal point of rest from which everything springs. There is no first cause and even the artist and creator is caught in the cyclical movement of the text of history. With each attempt to begin we are told to begin again. This means that it is impossible to read *Finnegans Wake* objectively, only subjectively. To begin the reader must impose an origin, a conceptual starting point, and thus *subject* the text. The reader, in this sense, fills the void and becomes the divine origin of the text, creating the levels and divisions and defining concepts where none existed previously. Even the idea that there are many levels is an imposition, as any levels that are isolated and identified are created by the reader’s action of dividing the text. The reader must carve out a thematic path and then attempt to sustain this path against the text’s mockery and contradiction. The reader becomes the God of *Finnegans Wake*. The ideal reader is the critic who joins “the links between creation and knowledge, art and science, myth and concept”, creating and determining, forming order out of chaos by favouring select possibilities from the possible permutations.³¹ The universe of *Finnegans Wake* must be interpreted into a meaningful existence.

Significantly, however, the reader—like the author, who is also depicted as a perversion of a deity³²—is a distinctly fallible God whose divine status is constantly subject to the mockery of the text.

³¹ Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (London: Penguin, 1990) 354.

³² See Chapter 3: Shem the Penman.

The reader is constantly reminded of the exclusiveness and inadequacy of his limited vision by the unknowable complexity of the writing before him. The necessary concept of divinity or universality is thus satirised in the act of reading itself: the striving for comprehension always, inevitably falls short. Against the claims of significance and transcendence are the counter-claims that the book is nothing more than an elaborate joke with no significance at all:

Coccolanius or Gallotaurus, wrote it, wrote it all, wrote it all down, and there you are full stop. (118.13-14)³³

The reader is in an impossible position. Every attempt to read is met with mockery at the presumption this act requires, but the alternative is to have no understanding whatsoever. Metaphysics is determined as a necessary starting point for comprehension at even the smallest level, but it is simultaneously undermined by the material reality of the text. Divinity is both demanded and rejected; it is necessary and impossible.

The absence of a single, divine essence at the heart of *Finnegans Wake* that is caused by this ambivalence, means that the text is a structure that has no centre. It is “decentered” to use Margot Norris’ word, or characterised by a “subject-waiting-for-itself” in Helene Cixous’ terminology.³⁴ The centre of *Finnegans Wake* is an absence: the absence of a fixed, dogmatic intent. This is a consequence of the book’s peculiar, determinedly ironic stance:

Traditionally, irony is a mode of confidence and fixation, elaborated from a stable position to which it constantly refers in its critique of deviations from that position. Joyce’s irony...lacks any centre of this kind; it knows no fixity, and its critique is not moral, derived from some sense, but self-reflexive, a perpetual displacement of sense in a play of forms without resolution.³⁵

³³ Cock and Bull story. Latin: *lanius*: butcher. Latin: *gallus*: cock. Latin: *taurus*: bull. (*Annotations*.)

“L--d! said my mother, what is all this story about?—

A COCK and a BULL, said Yorick—And one of the best of its kind, I ever heard.”

Sterne 539.

³⁴ Cixous 15.

³⁵ Heath 36.

In this sense “structured” is perhaps too rigid in its connotations to describe *Finnegans Wake* since the elements of the book are not subject to any formal hierarchy or system, but are linked by informal associations and coincidences. In this environment images become interchangeable as each image ultimately suggests every other by referring to the eternally shifting chain of ideas that forms the book’s context. But the reader is no closer to a final interpretation. Any new information or interpretation briefly illuminates a section of the fine lines that make up the network, but quickly fades away to leave the same darkness that existed before. The totality of the work has been suggested, but not proved. This indication may only have proved that the reader is no closer to the final meaning. Has there been any progression, or simply the illusion of progression? And are they perhaps the same thing?

The language of *Finnegans Wake* is both constructive and deconstructive. A conservative reading will emphasise coherence, while an anarchic reading will focus on the sections of the text that will violate that same coherence, and both of these reading strategies are accommodated by the text. The book is, in its own paradoxical word, “clearobscure” (247.34). The extended chains of associations that the text generates invite understanding, suggest distinct themes, and imply that research will be fruitful, but there is an equal concern with disruption and incomprehension. As a consequence the reader is obliged not only to accept paradox as a theme in *Finnegans Wake* but also to confront the conflict this creates for any attempt to interpret the work. Heath hints at this necessity in two comments that frame a single paragraph. The paragraph begins:

It was stressed above that a text such as *Finnegans Wake* is not to be read according to a process of unification. The text is not ~~homogenous~~ ^{homogeneous}, but ceaselessly discontinuous, a hesitation of meaning into the perpetual ‘later’.

The paragraph concludes:

What is needed, against all attempts to locate some ‘style’ of the author (traceable through the work as the area of some spiritual development), is the operation of a reading that, on the contrary, will remain attentive to the writing of each text in order to

consider them *in their totality* as a network of specific practices. [Emphasis added]³⁶

The work must be considered as a “totality”, a network of ideas that are all ultimately significant and related, but a totality whose errant use of conflicting styles and ideas will never admit to a single, unifying idea. A reading of *Finnegans Wake* must articulate the tension between the conservative and anarchic elements of Joyce’s writing that is suggested by the contradictory phrase “ceaselessly discontinuous”. While the process of interpretation is conservative—that is, it attempts to contain and finalise a stable meaning for the work and present itself as a coherent whole—it must also explain the tendency of *Finnegans Wake* to dissolve the boundaries that allow for that position, and thus undermine the concept of wholeness.

Joycean anarchy, in *Finnegans Wake*, is not a limitless freedom, but rather an awareness of the arbitrary nature of limits, and it is thus a preparedness to play with and adapt limits as required. Restriction is essential for comprehension as the infinite is by definition incomprehensible, but all forms of restriction are fluid and treated with ambivalence. Joyce’s anarchism is therefore also conservative: it is the freedom to construct individual limits; to create a system in order to avoid being enslaved by another man’s. Thus *Finnegans Wake* is a rigidly constructed system that expresses an individual sense of free play. It encourages the reader to adopt a sense of interpretative freedom, but will not admit a definitive reading. The text mocks and refuses the desire for guidance felt by the reader faced with the tangle of its strange environment so that with each reading “We are once amore as babes awondering in a wold made fresh where with the hen in the storyaboot we start from scratch” (336.16-18).³⁷

Finally, however, the division between part and whole is perhaps less important than it appears, as the *Wake* suggests:

³⁶ Heath 32-33.

³⁷ Italian: *amore*: love. Song: The Babes in the Wood (also a pantomime) John 1:14: ‘the Word was made flesh’. Story book. (*Annotations*.) Wandering / wondering. World made fresh.

When a part so ptee does duty for the holos we soon grow to use
of an allforabit. (18.36-19.2)³⁸

This sentence, like much of the *Wake*, is contradictory (part for
the whole / all for a bit) and suggests the resolution of the
contradiction may not be a progressive synthesis but the
acceptance of a confusing fusion of both suggestions, a non-
resolution; but it is also suggested that it makes little difference
which approach is used, because the ambiguous cycle will always
continue to revolve:

Somedivide and somethelot but the tally turns round the same
balifusion. (19.18-19)³⁹

³⁸ French: *petit*: small. Greek: *holos*: whole. Alphabet. (*Annotations.*) All for
a bit.

³⁹ Tally: total. Bally (colloquial): confounded: perhaps originally a
euphemism for "bloody". Ballyhoo: clamour, outcry. Fusion. Confusion.

**3. A Disgusting and Unreadable Portrait of
Shem the Penman
o r
Is *Finnegans Wake* Shit?**

(BEAUCHAMP's 'master-tape' is bubbling cauldron of squeaks, gurgles crackles and other unharmonious noises. He allows it to play for longer than one would reasonably hope.)

BEAUCHAMP: Well, what do you think of it, Donner? Take your time, choose your words carefully.

DONNER: I think it's rubbish.

BEAUCHAMP: Oh. You mean a sort of tonal debris, as it were?

DONNER: No, rubbish, general rubbish. In the sense of being worthless, without value; rot, nonsense. Rubbish, in fact.

BEAUCHAMP: Ah. The detritus of audible existence, a sort of refuse heap of sound...

DONNER: I mean, rubbish.¹

But you forget the great Lipsus, quoth Yorick, who composed a work the day he was born;—They should have wiped it up, said my uncle Toby, and said no more about it.²

James Joyce was used to adverse reactions to his fiction. As Harry Levin points out,

Hardly anything he ever wrote was published without a struggle. If the editors accepted his manuscripts, the printers refused to set them up; if the publishers brought out his books, the censors destroyed them. If the charge was not obscenity, it was blasphemy; if not blasphemy, it was treason.³

Although it was often the case, the enmity faced by Joyce was not entirely the product of nervous publishers, government censors and philistine wowsers. Joyce attracted opposition from all directions, including a great deal of negative criticism from his

¹ Tom Stoppard, *Artist Descending a Staircase* (London: Faber, 1973) 19.

² Sterne 331.

³ Levin 26.

contemporaries in the literary world. Now that *Ulysses* has been safely canonised it is easy to forget the degree of hostility that was present in the many negative reviews that greeted the book. While Joyce had his supporters in the literary world, including notables such as Sylvia Beach, T. S. Eliot, and Ezra Pound (up to a point, that point being *Finnegans Wake*) outrage, disgust and bewilderment were, initially at least, by far the more typical reactions to Joyce's most famous work.

The derision that was heaped upon *Ulysses* provides an interesting starting point for a reading of *Finnegans Wake*, focusing in particular on the portrait of Shem the Penman (1.7). In *Finnegans Wake*, Shem and his twin brother Shaun are used to dramatise a seemingly endless number of dialectical conflicts; and in Shem's chapter the primary focus is on the antagonism between Shem as the artist and intellectual, and Shaun as the self-appointed voice of society and authority. More specifically, there are numerous references to Joyce and the critics of *Ulysses*. Joyce was not averse to settling scores through his fiction, and in *Finnegans Wake* the obnoxious character of Shaun the Post is a portrait composed from sketches of many of Joyce's enemies. Shaun is also the hostile narrator of his brother's chapter. Shem, on the other hand, is associated with Joyce himself via numerous specific and transparent biographical allusions. This is not to suggest, of course, that Shem is simply an autobiographical character, but rather that this is one of many levels of association layered upon the archetypal figure of the artist. Similarly, Shaun is greater than the sum of Joyce's irritation and desire for vengeance. Shem and Shaun are, like all *Finnegans Wake* characters, both archetypes and specific people. As Shaun empties his bucket of familiar sounding abuse on his brother's head, he is able to take on the characteristics and repeat the accusations of a host of Joyce's enemies while retaining his broader identity.

Ulysses was initially faced with two main complaints: it was attacked on the one hand for being unspeakably corrupt and obscene, and on the other for being too obscure and therefore too difficult to read. (But how did they know it was obscene if they couldn't actually understand it?) It was common for both charges to be directed at Joyce's book, often within the same review, and personal attacks were also frequent amongst some early notices.

When *Ulysses* was finally published in full in 1922 some critics even questioned Joyce's sanity, as in this anonymous review from the *Sporting Times*:

[*Ulysses*] appears to have been written by a perverted lunatic who has made a speciality of the literature of the latrine.⁴

"Two thirds of it is incoherent" the reviewer then moans, repeating the other common complaint. Richard Aldington described *Ulysses* in another review as a "libel on humanity"⁵, while George Slocombe complained:

Often [Joyce] writes as if his pen were dipped in obscenity and there were a whole inkbottle of it to be exhausted before his thoughts would run clear.⁶

Apart from these general negative reviews, there was also hostility toward *Ulysses* from several well known artists. Virginia Woolf thought the work "underbred"⁷, and famously described chapters three through six as "the scratching of pimples on the body of the bootboy at Claridges".⁸ "One hopes", she wrote in her diary, "he'll grow out of it".⁹

George Bernard Shaw's reaction to the *Ulysses* prospectus sent to him by Sylvia Beach repeats the charge of obscenity, although the criticism in his letter of response expresses an unusual sentiment. Curiously, he regards the book's vulgarity as its one potentially worthwhile feature. *Ulysses* could function as a healthy, morally edifying dose of aversion therapy for the young men of Dublin:

[*Ulysses*] is a revolting record of a disgusting phase of civilisation; but it is a truthful one; and I should like to put a cordon around Dublin; round up every male person in it between the ages of 15 and 30; force them to read it; and ask them

⁴ Aramis (pseud.), "The Scandal of Ulysses", Robert Deming, ed., *James Joyce: The Critical Heritage*, 2 vols. (London: Routledge and Keegan Paul, 1970) 1: 192.

⁵ Richard Aldington, "The Influence of Mr. James Joyce", Deming, 1: 188.

⁶ George Slocombe, *Daily Herald*, 17 March 1922, in Deming, 1: 218.

⁷ Ellmann, *James Joyce* 528.

⁸ Virginia Woolf, "Letter to Lytton Strachey", 24 August 1922, *The Question of Things Happening: The Letters of Virginia Woolf. Volume II: 1912-1922*, ed. N. Nicolson (London: The Hogarth Press, 1976) 551.

⁹ Virginia Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf, Volume II: 1920-1924*, ed. A. O. Bell (London: The Hogarth Press, 1978) 199.

whether on reflection they could see anything amusing in all that foul mouthed, foul minded derision and obscenity.¹⁰

He nevertheless declined the offer to purchase a copy.

The most notorious attack, and the one that had the greatest influence on the composition of *Finnegans Wake*, took place five years after *Ulysses* was published in its completed form. Joyce was at that time working on *Finnegans Wake*. Joyce, and *Ulysses* in particular, were subject to a dismissive and occasionally nasty critique by Wyndham Lewis, published first in Lewis' journal *Blast* and then reprinted in the book *Time and Western Man*. "[Joyce's] world is a small middle-class one", was Lewis' judgement, and he continued: "There is not much reflection going on at any time inside the head of Mr. James Joyce". Lewis went so far as to compare *Ulysses* to "a ton or two of personally organised rubbish" and describe it as "a monument like a record diarrhoea":

So he collected like a cistern in his youth the last stagnant pumpings of victorian anglo-irish life. This he held steadfastly intact for fifteen years or more—then when he was ripe, as it were, he discharged it, in a dense mass to his eternal glory. That was *Ulysses*.¹¹

Lewis, who had been a drinking partner of Joyce's and who wrote an apologetic letter to Joyce signed "an everdevoted friend", later reflected: "I feel I should have been more circumspect: I warmed to my subject".¹²

Joyce reacted to these charges of obscenity and incomprehensibility in *Finnegans Wake*, a work that is even more obscene and less comprehensible than *Ulysses*. While outrage over the content and stylistic excesses of *Ulysses* was widespread, Joyce apparently felt no need to repent or reform the content of his art. Instead, in *Finnegans Wake*, he took the opposite path and exaggerated obscenity to the point of parody. As a result much of the content of *Finnegans Wake* is funny—or, if you prefer, "finny. Vary vary finny" (519.14)—but also extremely vulgar and puerile.

¹⁰ George Bernard Shaw, "Letter to Sylvia Beach", 11 June 1921, Deming 1: 189.

¹¹ Wyndham Lewis, "Extract from *Time and Western Man*". Deming 1: 260.

¹² For a full account of this incident, including a summary of Lewis' argument and Joyce's reaction, see: Ellmann, *James Joyce* 595-7.

Joyce, both defiant and sensitive to criticism, used the attacks on his work and the personal abuse that he suffered as a theme in his last work. Thus the book is full of everything that anyone had ever objected to in Joyce's writing: blasphemous, farting, shitting and rooting jokes abound, and unsurprisingly much of the book is just plain silly. Joyce's brother Stanislaus, who wrote to Joyce of *Ulysses* "I have no humour for the episodes which are deliberately farcical",¹³ would take little pleasure from a line like this, for example:

The compositor of the farce of dustiny however makes a thunpledrum mistake by letting off this pienofarte effect as his first act as that is where the juke comes in. (162.2-6)¹⁴

The tone of this line, which perhaps indirectly alludes to the title of Joyce's first book of poetry *Chamber Music*, is typical of much of *Finnegans Wake*. Joyce found occasion for rude jokes in almost everything. In *Finnegans Wake* even something as apparently innocuous as a textbook geometry question is loaded with ribald implications:

Show that the median, hce che ech, interecting at royde angles the parilegs of a given obtuse one biscuits both the arcs that are in curveachord behind. (283.32-284.4)¹⁵

And in response to the other main criticism of *Ulysses: Finnegans Wake* is very, very difficult to read.

There is a great deal of specific evidence to show that the hostile criticism of *Ulysses* was appropriated and reworked for *Finnegans Wake*. In Shem the Penman's chapter, echoing the criticism of *Ulysses*, Shem is judged by Shaun to be mad, his work is condemned as obscene, and *Ulysses* is referred to as Shem's "usylessly unreadable Blue Book of Eccles"¹⁶ Specific phrases

¹³ Stanislaus Joyce, "Letter to James Joyce", 7 August 1924, *Letters of James Joyce*, vol.III, ed. Richard Ellmann (London: Faber and Faber, 1966) 103.

¹⁴ Composer. Verdi: *La Forza del Destino*. Thunder beginning Vico's first age. Trumpet. Triple. Italian: *pieno*: full. Pianoforte. German: *Fürst*: prince. Duke. Joke. (*Annotations*.) In particular note that the composer composes both a farce and a fart.

¹⁵ HCE. Intersecting. Right angles. Royde: var. roid, rigid. Parallax. (Angle.) Bisects. (Diagram p.293.) (*Annotations*.) Erect. Rude. Pair of legs. (But:ocks.)

¹⁶ Early printings of *Ulysses* had a blue cover. [Leopold Bloom lives in] Eccles Street, Dublin. Blue Books: official reports of English parliament. (*Annotations*.) Useless.

used by Joyce's enemies are also buried in the text of *Finnegans Wake*. Lewis, the "everdevoted friend" who expressed sympathies for National Socialism, is one of the many personas of Shaun and has several of his phrases spoken by that moralising, authoritarian character. Shaun, for example, at one point inadvertently reveals his hypocritical attitude by declaring himself Shem's "everdevoted fiend" (408.18) and the following, spoken by Shaun about Shem, traces a familiar line from *Time and Western Man*:

There is not very much windy Nous blowing at the given moment through the hat of Mr Melancholy Slow. (56.28-30)¹⁷

Similarly, Stanislaus, who became increasingly critical of his brother's stylistic experiments, declared in a letter to Joyce: "I refuse to allow myself to be whirled around in the mad dance by a literary dervish", and consequently supplied Joyce with an image and a term of abuse to describe Shem.¹⁸ Seeking Shem in the cyclical chaos of literary debris that is both *Finnegans Wake*—the "whorl" (6.24) of the text—and the litter that clutters his Inkbottle House we are told that if we have the "stomach" we have "a fair chance of actually seeing the whirling dervish" (184.3-6). Stanislaus, "dear sweet Stainusless" (237.11), was also rewarded for his criticism by appearing as another of the personas of the boorish and antagonistic Shaun.¹⁹

At this point, however, as we refer to the portrait of Shem, the ambivalence of the text should be restated. The satire in *Finnegans Wake* is always double-edged, and both Shem and Shaun are mocked during Shem's portrait. The description of Shem is not simply an act of vengeance directed at Joyce's critics, although it is a significant part of the chapter and a theme in *Finnegans Wake* as a whole. Shem as the subject of the chapter and Shaun as the narrator are both treated ironically. Joyce's text refuses to take sides, even though Joyce has made himself one of the identities of

¹⁷ Wyndham Lewis. Nous: intelligence. (*Annotations*.) Goldsmith's *The Traveller* begins: "Remote, unfriended, melancholy, slow...".

¹⁸ Stanislaus Joyce, "Letter to James Joyce", 7 August 1924, *Letters of James Joyce*, vol.3 103.

¹⁹ George Bernard Shaw does not rank highly enough on Joyce's list of enemies to be cast in a prominent role. He did, however, annoy Joyce enough—for whatever reason—to be honoured with the title "his hawsehole" (323.6). Woolf was not considered worthy of inclusion at all.

Shem. So the chapter is both an insight into the hectoring, bigoted and aggressive character of the anti-artist, Shaun, and an ironic picture of Shem the artist: aloof, ineffectual, cowardly, pathetic and “self exiled in upon his ego” (184.6). The criticism of Shem is to some extent accepted as being perceptive and relevant—it is difficult to argue, for example, that Shem, who is identified as the writer of *Finnegans Wake*, does not display “a meticulousness bordering on the insane” (173.34)—but Shem’s treatment at the hands of his authoritarian brother is also exaggerated in all its cruelty and violence.

The vilification of Shem, like the attacks on Joyce and *Ulysses*, is vigorous and surprisingly nasty for a book as apparently good humoured as *Finnegans Wake*. Shem, Shaun tells us, is a “sham and a low sham” (170.25), a “mental and moral defective” who is “always blaspheming”, and has “a spoiled opinion of his own monstrous marvellousness” (177.15-23). Yet, in spite of his arrogance, Shem is also cowardly and dislikes “anything anyway approaching a plain straightforward standup or knockdown row”. When there is a hint of a disagreement Shem is forced to “agree to every word as soon as half uttered”. So Shem the individualist and anarchist spends all his time in the company of others taking orders: “command me! your servant, good, I revere you...quite truth, gratias, I’m yoush...you said it” (174.5-14). Like Joyce himself, Shem is also constantly broke and sends telegrams to his brother to borrow cash: “Here tokay, gone tomory, we’re spluched, do something” (172.24-25). He disparages his family, plagiarises, smells so bad that “no-one...dare[s] whiff the polecat at close range” (181.22-24), and his cowardice is such that in times of war he hides under his bed “moaning feebly” with “his cheeks and trousers changing colour every time a gat croak[s]” (177.1-7). Shem is, in short, a shit.

Yet, despite his character, the portrait of Shem is also a portrait of an individual persecuted by society. The rhetorical and literal violence that is directed at Shem is the violence of the mob. Shaun constantly evokes the standards, values and interests of the majority to support his case. Much is made of Shem’s anti-social behaviour, and the list of objections is indeed impressive: eavesdropping, disrespect for his family and nation, drunkenness, and reclusiveness to name but a few. Shem is persecuted in the

had been told off to shade and shoot shy Shem should the shit show his shiny shnout out. (179.2-8)²¹

The menacing of Shem that is described in this chapter has occasionally been used to suggest that Joyce, after being subject to so much antagonism, was paranoid about the possible threats he faced as an artist. Glasheen has argued that this paranoia was to some extent justified considering the political climate in Europe in the thirties.²² The main emphasis in the portrait of Shem is, however, in the satirical aspect of the violence. Shem is elevated to the status of pariah for comic effect: his importance is blown out of all proportion, as is the hostility towards him. Shem is a hapless and pathetic scribbler inadvertently made the centre of hysterical attention.

Of all Shem's crimes and moral outrages it is writing that is portrayed as the most serious. Even Shem's handwriting, as it is described in an earlier chapter, seems to be a breach of decency and ^{to} display moral shortcomings:

the fatal droopadwindle slope of the blamed scrawl, a sure sign of imperfectible moral blindness; the toomuchness, the fartoomanyness of all those fourlegged ems. (122.34-123.1)²³

Shem's writing, according to Shaun, is a result of Shem's egotism and megalomania, which "explains the litany of septuncial lettertrumpets honorific, highpitched, erudite, neoclassical, which he so love[s] as patricianly to manuscrite after his name" (179.21-24). Writing is not only, as we shall see, the foul end-product of Shem's defecation—"obscene matter not protected by copright in the United States" (185.30-31)²⁴—but the act of writing itself is also equated with various antisocial, criminal activities. In particular, Shem is accused of the writing crimes of plagiarism and forgery. The charge of forgery is supported by one of Shem's personas

²¹ Anti-treaty forces of the Irish Civil War, 1922-3, were called Irregulars. Unknown Warrior (grave, Paris). Snout. (*Annotations.*)

²² Glasheen xlii.

²³ Four Masters. Letter: M. Em: unit for measuring amount of printed matter in line, page etc. (*Annotations.*)

²⁴ *Ulysses* was not protected by copyright in the U.S. and pirated editions appeared. (*Annotations.*)

being Jim the Penman, the master forger,²⁵ and to argue this charge Shaun claims that Shem

did but study with stolen fruit how cutely to copy all their various styles of signature so as one day to utter an epical forged cheque on the public for his own private profit. (181.14-17)

Further suggesting that writing is a selfish, indulgent pastime, writing is depicted as masturbation, as Jaun describes while he introduces Dave, another version of Shem:

yunker doodler wanked to wall awriting off his phoney.
(464.21-22)²⁶

As in the Heliopolitan creation myth of Re—also known as Atun, as in “Ope, Jack, and atem!” (459.27)—living creation is the result of Shem’s onanism and Shem’s writing has a life of its own. Words in *Finnegans Wake* are brought to life and are undisciplined, disorderly and “run, march, halt, walk, stumble at doubtful points, stumble up again” (114.8-9). This “antechristian” (114.11) writing that is produced by Shem (both ante- and anti-christian: Shem’s life-giving powers are perhaps pagan, perhaps satanic and both, seemingly, in Shaun’s opinion), as it is described in I.5, is sinister and seductive: a serpent tempting the reader to sin with its hypnotic swirls:

that strange exotic serpent, since so properly banished from our scripture...seems to uncoil spirally and swell lacertinelazily before our eyes under pressure of the writer’s hand.
(121.20-25)²⁷

In Shem’s writing creation myths become jumbled and confused so that the Christian creation myth, which progresses from the creation to the original sin and the fall, has its separate elements presented as being synonymous and simultaneous. They exist in a

²⁵ “Jim the Penman—James Townsend Seward (fl. 1831-56) was so known. This respectable English barrister forged £100,000 worth of cheques. *Jim the Penman* (I have not seen it) is a 19th-century play by Sir Charles Young”. Glasheen 145.

²⁶ Slang: *doodle*: penis. Song: ‘Yankee Doodle went to London, riding on his pony’. German: *wanken*: stagger. (*Annotations*.) Slang: *phoney*: fake, a faker.

²⁷ Sir Edward Sullivan’s introduction to *The Book of Kells*: ‘The frequently recurring presence of serpentine forms all through the decorations of the manuscript has given rise the suggestion that these forms are in some way connected with the worship of ophidian reptiles’. St Patrick banished serpents from Ireland. Lacertine: lizardlike. (*Annotations*.)

circular logical relationship: Shem, fallen, studies with “stolen fruit” from the tree of knowledge in order to commit his crimes; he sins in order to create; but his creation is itself the sin—it is obscene and blasphemous—and also the serpentine temptation to sin.

So even as Shem creates with his writing, he is accused of destruction by Shaun in the role of Justius:

seeker of the nest of evil in the bosom of a good word...you with your dislocated reason, have cutely foretold...death with every disaster, the dynamitisation of colleagues, the reducing of records to ashes, the levelling of all customs by blazes.

(189.28-36)²⁸

Shem's actions in writing are thus paradoxical: he is at once a creator and a destroyer; he is both a god and a sinner. Even though he is able to gain revenge on his enemies, recreate the world in his own image and destroy social coherence and moral decency through his writing, he is still victimised and powerless. His writing has, according to Shaun, made Shem into an obscene, heretical, god-like figure, a powerful and self-obsessed dictator:

condemned fool, anarch, egoarch, heresiarch, you have reared your disunited kingdom on the vacuum of your own most intensely doubtful soul. Do you hold yourself then for some god in the manger, Shehohem, that you will neither serve nor let serve, pray nor let pray? (188.15-19)²⁹

But, as we have seen, this does not in any way protect Shem from persecution. He remains a perennial victim and, as Shaun points out, needs to learn that “silence gives consent” and that he should on occasion “Cease to be civil [and] learn to say nay!” (193.11-12). Even his own creation turns against him in the Nightlessons chapter (II.2) and in the midst of a mathematics lesson some books and algebraic letters have their turn at assaulting Shem:

²⁸ Welsh phrase: seek the nest of evil in the bosom of a good word. Accurately. *Dublin Annals* note public records were burned in 1304. *Dublin Annals*, 1833: fire in Custom House. Record Office in Four Courts; and Custom House burned, 1922. (*Annotations*.)

²⁹ Heresiarch. Tiresias (bisexual seer). United Kingdom. *Ulysses*.207: ‘founded, like the world...upon the void’. Aesop’s fable: dog in the manger. *A Portrait.V*: ‘I will not serve, answered Stephen’. Phrase: live and let live. (*Annotations*.)

O them doddhunters and allanights, aabs and baas for agnomes,
yees and zees for incognits, bate him up jerrybly! (283.26-29)³⁰

The transcendental power that is attributed to Shem is thus mocked by the material reality of his creation. Although he creates a universe, he is also forced to exist within this universe and is subject to its physical laws. What appears to be a mystical, sublime creative power is in fact Shem wanking. His morally corrupt stance, at which Shaun would like us to recoil in horror, is completely and self-consciously ridiculous.

Apart from the extreme hostility that is directed towards the figure of the artist, the most noticeable feature of *Finnegans Wake* that seems to have been taken from the negative reviews of *Ulysses* is in the way Shem's process of artistic creation is described. Shem is identified as the writer of the letter which is also the text of *Finnegans Wake*, and while many reviews described *Ulysses* as shit, metaphorically speaking, *Finnegans Wake* expands on this accusation and describes itself as shit, literally. Apparently accepting the criticism of Lewis *et al.* the book refers to itself as a mound of rubbish and shit in which everything has become blended, decomposed and distorted. Somebody has "dumptied the wholeborrow of rubbages", Jute observes as he wades into the first chapter, "Load Allmarshy!" (17.4-8). The book is "the muddiest thick that was ever heard dump" (296.20-21) and a "middenhide hoard" (19.8) from which fragments of literate litter can be extracted. This conceit is even exaggerated to the point that the act of defecation is exalted as a creative act that is a parody of both the divine creation of the world and the creative powers of the artist. The passage describing how Shem produces his ink, for example, takes the form of a mock religious ceremony, while at the same time it seems to have taken George Slocombe's and Wyndham Lewis' judgements very literally. Roland McHugh translates the relevant section (185.14-26: it appears in the text as Latin):

First the artist, the eminent writer, without any shame or apology, pulled up his raincoat and undid his trousers and then drew himself close to the lifegiving and allpowerful earth, with

³⁰ Hall and Knight: mathematics textbooks. Todhunter: mathematics textbooks. Dutch: *aap*: ape. Dutch: *baas*: boss, master. Agnomen, (30.3). Symbols a, b, y, z in algebra. Italian: *incognita*: unknown. Beat. Terribly. (*Annotations.*)

paragraph. Similarly, most of *Finnegans Wake*, although it is often initially incomprehensible, begins to make sense only if the reader applies his or herself to the laborious task of interpreting the text. If, then, a reader becomes offended by the content of the work it is, in a sense, their own fault for looking and the result of their own hard labour. This is an irony aimed squarely at anyone who would read Joyce judgementally. Joyce has gone to great lengths to obscure the obscene material that *Finnegans Wake* contains. The text is like a Freudian dream that is trying to express fundamental, instinctive desires, but is simultaneously censoring and distorting the material with an equally strong repressive function. So if a reader is to assume a moral stance toward the content of *Finnegans Wake* then that person ~~is~~^{is} forced to examine in detail and interpret something that is not self-evidently obscene. With *Finnegans Wake* wowers are placed in the absurd situation of being forced to seek out obscenity in order to be offended, but beyond that they are also exposed as members of an elite (as Shaun likes to think of himself) dictating standards to the majority rather than upholding values drawn from the people they are trying to protect. Shaun, therefore, does not suppress the passage describing Shem's ink production but wishes it accessible only to the few. To this is added the irony that instead of protecting the sensitive from obscenity, Shem's most obnoxious qualities are, as a result of Shaun's strident moral condemnation, pointed out and emphasised.

So the role of Shaun as a censor is actually an inversion of his stated function. Shaun speaks in the name of the majority, but acts in the interests of the few. Despite his claims to be holy and moral, he is actually a selfish busybody who pokes his nose into Shem's private life in order to discredit him. He gives himself away in Freudian slips: "Let us pry. We thought would and did" (188.8), he declares piously. While he states an interest in protecting the values of his community from Shem's immorality, he is actually uncovering and drawing attention to the supposedly subversive activities of his brother. He always speaks to and about Shem from an assumed position of authority—"You let me tell you, with utmost politeness, were very ordinarily designed" (190.9-10)—but he nevertheless claims his standards are community standards and therefore he feels justified in his judgemental role, even though

he is representing a religious elite. Late in the chapter he even becomes “Justius”—Justice personified—and accuses Shem directly. After spending the previous twenty pages exposing, describing in detail and vilifying his reclusive brother’s activities he states, with no apparent sense of irony: “I advise you to conceal yourself, my little friend” (188.1-2).

There is something of a recurring joke in *Finnegans Wake* based on the obscurity that is created by the extreme complexity of the text. A constant tension exists between the conflicting impulses of concealment and revelation, and this is exploited for comic effect. Later in the book Dolph, a version of Shem, gives Kev, one of Shaun’s incarnations, a guided tour of their mother’s pudendum. Kev does not at first realise what it is he is being shown, and he examines the curious object before him with interest. Eventually, to his horror, he discovers what his brother is showing him and promptly knocks Dolph over. The act of closely examining something strange and unfamiliar only to discover that, despite its unusual appearance, it is actually something quite common (and perhaps obscene) is one of the premises for the act of reading *Finnegans Wake*. The reader is meant to double-take at phrases such as “pennis in the sluts maschine” (495.23),³³ for example, and the book is littered with jokes that rely upon close attention to the text for the *double entendre* to be effective.

Oscar Wilde (“the sublime Oscar Wilde, who was right about everything”³⁴) claimed “The public has always, and in every age, been badly brought up”:

A fresh mode of Beauty is absolutely distasteful to them, and whenever it appears they get so angry and bewildered that they always use two stupid expressions—one is that the work of art is grossly unintelligible; the other, that the work of art is grossly immoral. What they mean by these words seems to me to be this. When they say a work is grossly unintelligible, they mean that the artist has said or made a beautiful thing that is new; when

³³ Penny in the slot machine. Penis. German: *Maschine*: machine. (*Annotations*.)

³⁴ Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon: The Books and Schools of the Ages* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1994) 16.

they describe a work as grossly immoral, they mean that the artist has said or made a beautiful thing that is true.³⁵

This contempt for the masses based on their incompatibility with the lofty concerns of true artistry finds an echo in the young Joyce's first published work, "The Day of the Rabblement":

No man, said the Nolan, can be a lover of the true or the good unless he abhors the multitude...If an artist courts the favour of the multitude he cannot escape the contagion of its fetichism and deliberate self-deception...Until he has freed himself from the mean influences about him—sodden enthusiam and clever insinuation and every flattering influence of vanity and low ambition—no man is an artist at all.³⁶

But in Joyce's final book it is also this attitude that is satirised, along with the attitudes of those philistines who would criticise the the artist's production. The artist, in the form of Shem, is portrayed as a self-deluded, harmless plodder who deserves neither excessive condemnation nor lionisation, but Shaun self-righteously provides the former while Shem feels the latter would be more appropriate. Shem the Penman is Joyce's parody of himself as a pompous, ineffectual aesthete and of pompous ineffectual aesthetes everywhere. But while the mature Joyce is scathing to both his critics and himself, he is ultimately uncondemnatory and good-humoured.

It is not surprising that the early reviews of *Finnegans Wake* spoke of the book's content only in the most general terms and that accusations of obscenity were also absent from the initial critical reaction. So blinding are the excesses of *Finnegans Wake*'s technique that the reviewers failed to recognise the coarse and humourous content that characterises so much of the book. *Finnegans Wake*, though sexually and scatologically explicit to a far greater extent than Joyce's earlier work, was not banned or burned. The debate over Joyce's work became almost entirely concerned with the merits of the book's style. This may have been a refreshing change after the deranged response to *Ulysses*, but it

³⁵ Oscar Wilde, "The Soul of Man Under Socialism", *De Profundis and Other Writings* (London: Penguin, 1986) 35, 37.

³⁶ James Joyce, "Day of the Rabblement", *The Critical Writings of James Joyce*, eds. Richard Ellmann and Ellsworth Mason (London: Faber, 1959) 69-72.

is also a reflection on the final irony of *Finnegans Wake*: its inevitable inaccessibility. Joyce wrote a book full of satirical attacks on snobbery, overflowing with broad, cynicism-free humour, laden with jokes undercutting judgemental moralism; but no-one can read the bloody thing.