

Self-Reflexivity of Joyce's *Finnegans Wake**

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I

While *Finnegans Wake* draws on themes and techniques adumbrated in Joyce's earlier works, it is more chaotic and less patterned than anything he had ever written in its abandonment of realistic form. Its strange language, its neologisms, its generic ambiguity, the obscurity of its allusions, and the absence of narrative consistency, prompted Stanislaus Joyce to characterize the book as "literary bolshevism."¹⁾ Eugene Jolas, editor of *transition*, similarly evokes a political context by regarding it as "the principal text for [Joyce's] revolution of the word."²⁾ Much critical attention has been given to describing the organic patterns to *Finnegans Wake*, in terms of Viconian, ecclesiastical, cyclic, spatial, merological, and other structures and orders. However, these

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1. James Joyce, *Letters of James Joyce*, vol. 1, ed. Stuart Gilbert (New York: Viking, 1957), p. 235.

2. Richard Ellmann, *James Joyce*, rev. ed. (New York: Oxford UP, 1982), p. 589

patterns somehow never coalesce into a neat, easily summarized order. Attempts to impose a generalizing chema inevitably lead back into a proliferating, multidimensional, and inassimilable network of connections. *Finnegans Wake* constantly frustrates the move toward reductive interpretation. The obscure narrative situation might be enough to convince us that the book is as "usylessly unreadable"³⁾ as Shem's letter. What Harriet Shaw Weaver described as Joyce's "deliberately entangled language system"⁴⁾ is, in fact, clearly an attempt by Joyce to go beyond one-dimensional language, to create the kind of writerly text that Barthes celebrates.

Finnegans Wake fails to support most of the traditional premises of the novel as a literary form. Its narrative technique challenges the primacy of subjective individual experience in several ways. Joyce replaces the causal relationship of events in novelistic narration with a chaos of free association in *Finnegans Wake*. He refuses to anchor the formal elements of the work—plot, character, point of view, and language—to a single point of reference. Spatial and temporal settings completely disintegrate. Characters dissolve into fluid and interchangeable identities, melting easily into their landscapes to become river, hill, earth, tree and stone, Howth Castle and Environs. Attempts to construct story lines and plots for *Finnegans Wake* have had to resort to the intricate layering of hallucinations within dreams within dreams.⁵⁾ All these conditions produce the annoying restlessness and flux of the text. *Finnegans Wake* itself describes its own form:

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3. James Joyce, *Finnegans Wake* (New York: Viking, 1972), 179.26-27. All references are hereafter indicated in the text by page and line numbers only.
 4. James Joyce, *Letters of James Joyce*, vol. 2, ed. Richard Ellmann (New York: Viking, 1966), p. 590.
 5. Clive Hart even argues that "the dream is continuous from start to finish" in *Finnegans Wake*. See his *Structure and Motif in "Finnegans Wake"* (Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1962), p. 83..

. . . every person, place and thing in the chaosmos of Alle anyway connected with the gobblydumped turkery was moving and changing every part of the time: the travelling inkhor (possibly pot), the hare and turtle pen and paper, the continually more and less intermis- understanding minds of the variously inflected, differently pronounced, otherwise spelled, chnageably meaning vocable scriptsigns. (118.21-28)

In a departure from more conventional fiction, form and content in *Finnegans Wake* function to disrupt rather than to establish a dominant interpretation of a single text. Thematic and structural elements thwart a linear progression of images by denying the primacy of a single signification for specific words. The variability and the uncertainty of the work's structural and thematic elements represent, in Margot Norris's words, a "decentered universe."⁶ This world lacks the center that defines, designates, and holds the structure together. The resulting discontinuity produces multiplicity without stratification and cultivates a sense of ambiguity throughout the work.

As a consequence, any reading of *Finnegans Wake* demands an approach differing from the cause-and-effect logic governing orthodox representation and analysis. Reading *Finnegans Wake* is, to use Hugh Kenner's phrase, one of "so many trial alignments"⁷ or, to use Fritz Senn's terms, a "polytrophic endeavor" based upon any variety of "serial approaches."⁸ With its stylistic and contextual structures arranged to subvert any single system for deriving meaning, Joyce's work actuates our involvement in the creation of a range

6. Margot Norris, *The Decentered Universe of "Finnegans Wake": A Structuralist Analysis* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1974), p. 8.

7. Hugh Kenner, *Joyce's Voices* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1978), p. 60.

8. Fritz Senn, *Joyce's Dislocutions: Essays on Reading as Translation*, ed. John Paul Riquelme (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1984), p. 208.

of readings. Both author and reader, in turn, adopt various perspectives to suit the demands of a particular passage, yet its prose inevitably prohibits the emergence of a single, hegemonic text.

The text forces the reader to find his own way around, provoking questions to which he must supply his own answers. To a large extent, *Finnegans Wake* is a running commentary on itself--how it came to be written, what its implications are about the nature of time, space, history and dream psychology, and what problems the reader faces in grappling with Joyce's "wholemole millwheeling vicociclometer (614.26). "His writing is not about something; it is that something itself," Samuel Beckett remarks in an early essay on "Work in Progress."⁹) The subject of *Finnegans Wake* is not the content of the work; its content is indivisible from its form, from the language in which it is told. In *Finnegans Wake* Joyce seeks to examine the two activities of writing and reading, to turn away from the project of representing an imaginary world and to turn inward to examine its own mechanisms.¹⁰) By focusing on the pure act of writing and on the question of the ontological status of language, the work allows or encourages the reader to become writer, that is, to become involved in the text as text. The reader becomes co-creator of a text that is not a product but a production.

9. Samuel Beckett, et al., *Our Exagmination Round His Factification for the Incamination of Work in Progress* (London: Faber and Faber, 1961), p. 14.

10. Many Joycean critics have focused their studies on the process of artistic creation in *Finnegans Wake*. For example, John Paul Riquelme stresses Joyce's attempt to subsume his own earlier texts and the texts of other authors within *Finnegans Wake*: "We encounter implicitly again and again in Joyce's tales the image of the artist actively engaged in reading and reusing the literary tradition," *Teller and Tale in Joyce's Fiction: Oscillating Perspectives* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1983), p. 2.

II

In *Finnegans Wake* the self-consciousness, or reflexivity, of the book is apparent in every page, but it is perhaps most pervasive and most important in discussions of the mysterious letter--Anna Livia's "mamafesta" retrieved from the filth of a midden heap. The letter is dug out of a dungheap by Biddy the Hen: the text of the letter is variously described as blurred, stained, punctured, incomplete, unsigned, indecipherable, untitled, and contradictory, while the envelope is apparently addressed to a nonexistent person and was "Opened by Miss Take" (420.26). Thus, the failure to deliver the letter provides us with one more image of fragmentation or incompleteness, the unsuccessful odyssey of the letter being a metaphor for the reader's inability ever to reach a point where all the book's mysteries are revealed to him.

The famous letter appears or is referred to in virtually every chapter of *Finnegans Wake*, although there are several major descriptions of, or texts of, the letter given in the book. We can only know anything about this mysterious document when all these references are taken together, even though various versions conflict with each other. As we read through the book consecutively, we are finally aware that "the" letter does not exist in *Finnegans Wake*. Like the hen who finds one version of a letter in a dung heap, we have only a tea-stained, torn, incomplete document. The best we can do is pick up all the pieces and realize that they cannot really be put back together again into a unified, "true" version. And what is true of the letter is true of the entire book: *Finnegans Wake* denies the reader any certainty--the essence of the book is uncertainty, ambiguity, and constant transmutation.

The first brief reference undoubtedly come in the opening word--"riverrun"--which, as Hart notes, suggests the "Reverend" to whom the final

draft of the letter is addressed: "Dear. And we go on to Dirtydump. Reverend. May we add majesty?" (615.12-13).¹¹) Rather than forcing us to wade through six hundred pages before revealing that we have been reading the letter itself, Joyce summarizes the contents of the letter dug up by the "gnarlybird," Biddy the Hen (10.34-11.28).

the hen who scratches the letter up from the midden heap becomes the wife as author of a letter in defense of her erring husband. The text of this early version of the letter is largely about the wife-mother's role as preserver and restorer. That the hen is on some level identified with the mother-wife figure, Anna Livia, becomes particularly evident in the fifth chapter, where Joyce devotes himself to an apparently exhaustive analysis of the letter from every possible angle. After the Phoenix Park incident, signified by the reference to the two girls and three soldiers as "our pigeons pair" and the "three of crows" (10.36-11.1), the mother picks up the pieces of Earwicker's reputation--"all spoiled goods" (11.18-19)--and puts them in her knapsack, the sack from which she will later take gifts for all her children (209-12). Since the hen is the mother herself, and since the scraps of the letter that Biddy digs up are identified with the body of the fallen hero Finnegan, it is apparent that the action described in this version of the letter is reproduced in the process of finding and preserving the letter itself, so that to a large extent, the subject of *Finnegans Wake* is the letter itself.

Af first, the document becomes an ancient scroll containing "blotty words for Dublin" (14.14-15), our first clear sign that the letter or scroll is somewhat identified with the works fo James Joyce; but we fail to get a closer look at the document because ages ago it was stolen, lost, or destroyed (14.16-21). In I.2 the letter takes on a new form, becoming identified as the text of a satirical ballad--"The Ballad of Persse O'Reilly"

11. Hart, p. 222.

(45-47)—which in turn is based upon the rumors that started when Earwicker made his superfluous but incriminating denial to the Cad.

In the chapter of "ALP's Letter" (I.5), we are fully plunged into the maelstrom of insinuations and speculations about that puzzling letter as a potential means of unraveling the tangled web of rumors surrounding Earwicker's mysterious crime in the Phoenix Park. Here and elsewhere in the novel we are directly or indirectly presented with fragments from, and pieces of information about, this "untitled mamafesta" (104.4). The presumable intention of the letter is to defend HCE against his detractors. The chapter opens, after a short apostrophe to ALP, with a long catalogue of diverse alternative titles for the manifesto.

The catalogue is immediately followed by pertinent introductory remarks of general import. These remarks unmistakably characterize the document as a specimen case of all the problems and cruxes that jeopardize the interpretation of written words: "The proteiform graph itself is a polyedron of scripture" (107.8). "Naif alphabetters" (107.9) will have their troubles with it; on closer inspection they will at best recognize that information seems to be given about "a multiplicity of personalities on the documents or document" (107.24-25). In view of the document's palimpsest-like character the question arises: "who in hallhagal wrote the durn thing anyhow?" (107.36-108.1). Inevitably, further questions suggest themselves: who is the addressee of this letter, and what kind of message is it supposed to convey?

As a result of such efforts a few vague insights into the origin, type, and content of the letter gradually begin to take shape after several careful readings. The "original hen" (110.22), "Belinda of the Dorans" (111.5), has scratched up some scraps of paper from a midden in the battlefield of Waterloo. Details like these already reveal Joyce's implication that literature grows out of the dungfield of history; as a creative process, it is closely

linked to the central law of the universe. The finding looks "like a goodish-sized sheet of letterpaper originating by transhipment from Boston (Mass.) of the last of the first" (111.8-10); a tea stain takes the place of the signature. The first lucid version of the massive letter is described as

Dear whom it proceeded to mention Maggy well & allathome's health well only the hate turned the mild on the van Houtens and the general's elections with a lovely face of some born gentleman with a beautiful present of wedding cakes for dear thankyou Chriesty and with grand funderall of poor Father Michael don't forget unto life's & Muggy well how are you Maggy & hopes soon to hear well & must now close it with fondest to the twoinnis with four crosskisses for holy paul holey corner holipoli whollyisland pee ess from (locust may eat all but this sign shall they never) affectionate largelooking tache of tch. (111.10-20)

Although the style is somewhat confusing, its subject matter is clear on at least one level: this is family gossip, with references to everyone's state of health ("Allathome's health well"), the nice weather ("the hate [heat] turned the mild"), a wedding ("a beautiful present of wedding cakes"), and a funeral ("grand funderall"). A partial date for the letter, 31 January, is "the last of the first," but the phrase also has biblical overtones (Matthew 19:30) and perhaps more significantly, suggests the circularity of *Finnegans Wake*, in which the first sentence is indeed the last.

Within the complex of references to this primary letter, however, there are apparently two competing versions of the letter throughout *Finnegans Wake*, corresponding to two views of the park incident. One version of the letter, written by "Shem the Penman" (125.23), appears to be something like a blackmail note or a public expose of the father. In any case, it accuses

Earwicker of virtually every crime imaginable. Shem's version of the letter in I. 7 crops up again in II.1 and dominates discussion of the park incident in II.3 and throughout Book III.

The secondary form of the letter is written by Anna Livia or at least dictated by her: "Letter, carried by Shaun, son of Hek, written of Shem, brother of Shaun, uttered for Alp, mother of Shem, for Hek, father Shaun" (420.17-19). This version purports to vindicate Earwicker ("Hek" = HEC = HCE) of all responsibility for the episode in the park, placing the blame, instead, on the girls or, occasionally, the soldiers. The irony of Anna Livia's defense, like Earwicker's own defense when confronted by the Cad, is that in order to deny the charges, she must articulate them, and in so doing, she raises more charges than originally existed. Thus, the sympathetic missive authored by a loyal wife changes into an accusatory manifesto, in another instance of the typically Wakean pattern of reversal. In I.8, the "Anna Livia Plurabelle" chapter, the ALP version of the letter reappears, forgiving Earwicker as the river flows into night. The eight chapters of Book I are a miniature version of *Finnegans Wake* itself, so we expect to find the same pattern carried out on the larger scale. Predictably, Shem's version of the letter is replaced by Anna Livia's final draft of her letter in Book IV (615-19).

After the narrator devotes the entire fifth chapter of the work to an analysis of the letter, the letter resurfaces in a variety of forms: as telegram, newspaper story, movie script, radio show, last will and testament, or even Punic admiralty report. Even when it is clearly a letter, it may appear as a personal missive full of gossip, a blackmail note, a form letter, a love letter, an anonymous letter to the editor, or even a pastoral letter to be read at Sunday mass.

At his point, we can realize two significant factors about the letter. First, its metamorphoses reflect the universality of the letter and its themes. Based

upon such models as *The Book of Kells*, Swift's *Drapier's Letters*, Parnell's letters (both his love letters to Kitty O'Shea and the phony letters forged by Richard Pigott), the forged bordereau used to convict Dreyfus, and Documents No. 1 and No. 2 (the 1922 treaty of Irish partition and Eamon de Valera's proposed alternatives), the letter is, like *Finnegans Wake*, all documents, and its subject matter is human life on all its levels: "'Tis as human a little story as paper could well carry" (115.36).

Secondly, the reappearance of the letter several times in *Finnegans Wake*, each time in somewhat different form, gives rise to the supposition that we are dealing, not with one letter, but with several distinct documents, each authored by a different character and concerned with a different subject. Whatever the letter may be, it is consequently not a document that clarifies anything, proves anything, renders any verdict, or pardons anyone. Atherton goes so far as to consider the letter as something "crooked and depraved."¹² Tindall calls it "trivial, illiterate, and repetitious,"¹³ not unlike ALP herself, who sings, babbles, fiddles, whistles, and crows throughout most of the chapter devoted to her. We are no more certain about its origin, name, or meaning than we are of any other character or event in the work. If anything, its own slovenly condition and confusing content affirm and manifest the chaos of the fall.

In discussing the content of the letter, the narrator constantly diverts his attention from the epistolary text to the envelope, the handwriting, and other aspects of the letter's existence as a physical artifact. The condition of the manuscript is an outward sign of its contents. For example, the "teastain" on the letter (111.20) symbolizes the stain of sin that attaches itself to

12. James S. Atherton, *The Books at the Wake: A Study of Literary Allusions in James Joyce's "Finnegans Wake"* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1959), p. 63.

13. William York Tindall, *A Reader's Guide to "Finnegans Wake"* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1969), p. 103.

Earwicker. And the fact that the letter is composed out of waste products also suggests its sinful contents. The letter is a product of the fall itself, a tea-stained bit of litter from the dump.

The legend of the letter, however, suggests that it not only affirms the condition of the fall but also celebrates it. Paradoxically, it is said to be "sealed with crime" (94.8) yet "made ma make merry" (94.10-11). As Norris points out, this paradoxical situation of the fall informs the "felix culpa motif."¹⁴ A fortunate fall results in a creation like birth. The redemptive act in *Finnegans Wake* appears to be the acceptance and celebration of the fall. The letter's value is not its message or its meaning, but its function as a token of peace and reconciliation.

Accordingly, although hints of impropriety on Earwicker's part can be found, the last and fullest statement of the letter shifts the blame to the girls, Earwicker's detractors, and the snakes that ALP plans to expel from Ireland or Eden (616.16-18). Anna Livia calls attention to the reconciliation of opposites in the dream (617.12-14) and pronounces herself thankful for the Fall that brought about a world of wonderful variety:

while for woever likes that urogynal pan of cakes one apiece it
is thanks, beloved, to Adam . . . for his beautiful crossmess
parzel. (619.2-5)

ALP thanks Adams for the "urogynal pan of cakes"--Original Sin--that leads to the "beautiful crossmess parzel," a Christmas parcel in the form of Christ as redeemer. Patrick McCarthy's interpretation on this sentence is more revealing:

14. Norris, p. 71.

Here, the sin is specifically associated with women's urine ("urogynal"), which connects the passage to the teastain on the earlier letter and also to the suggestive "P.S" of this version. . . . As urine is a fertility symbol in the Wake, the "urogynal pan of cakes" leads to the birth of the Christmas baby; on another level, the sin in the park generates the letter, a "crossmess parzel" whose apparently chaotic form defies our attempts to decipher it by providing the sort of exact equivalents called for by a crossword puzzle.¹⁵⁾

Typically all allusions to Earwicker's crime in the final statement of the letter are essentially favorable, a matter either of shifting the blame to someone else or of suggesting a compensating factor.

Yet the ending is somewhat suspicious:

The herewaker of our hamefame is his real namesame who will get himself up and erect, confident and heroic when but, young as of old, for my daily comfreshenall, a wee one woos. (619.12-15)

While this passage might suggest the innocent domestic situation of the father getting up at night with the baby, in the context of Earwicker's adventures in the park, it also implies that his erection will be caused by a urinating temptress. And the reference to "deckhuman amber too" in the postscript (619.19) reminds us that there is another version of the letter circulating, a "Document no. 2" in which all the events are interpreted in a more sinister fashion. Thus, it is appropriate that, as Bernard Benstock puts it, "no sooner is the letter finished than the spoken monologue of farewell

15. Patrick A. McCarthy, "The Last Epistle of *Finnegans Wake*," *James Joyce Quarterly* 27 (1990): 731.

follows, and . . . all the dirt is dredged up again for re-use in the new guilty dream that recourses into the opening pages of *Finnegans Wake*."¹⁶ The cyclic form of *Finnegans Wake*, Joyce's great nightletter, guarantees that we will return to the beginning, begin anew the search for ultimate truths. It is only the start of an endless series of new beginnings.

In claiming to disclose the truth about HCE, ALP's letter necessarily serves to indicate the futility of the search for absolute truth. Indeed, after repeated readings, this "letteracettera" (339.36-340.1) reveals itself as a symbolic image of the world and of life from alpha to omega. In short, as an archetypal and universal letter, its content embraces downright everything: "every person, place and thing in the chaosmos of Alle" (118.21).

In *Finnegans Wake*, we have seen, the letter is both the disremembered body of the hero and *Finnegans Wake* itself. The letter also raises the problem of reading itself. The difficulty of finding all the parts of the letter is reflected in the reader's difficulty in reconciling conflicting accounts of the various events of the book. The reappearances of the letter continually give us new hope that we will decode its meaning this time around, then frustrate that hope with new complexities or uncertainties. The meanings associated with particular words or images vary greatly, leaving the text open to radical changes which the reader must accept and incorporate into any effort at comprehension. Certainly the process of reading the hen's letter represents a primitive sort of reading: not the rapid, automatic decoding to which we are accustomed, but a slow, patient, bringing together, putting one thing with another, looking for similarities and contrasts rather than intrinsic meanings.

Nevertheless, the continuous challenge to strive for clearer insights cannot be ignored, any more than "our irremovable doubts as to the whole sense of

16. Bernard Benstock, "Every Telling Has a Taling: A Reading of the Narrative of *Finnegans Wake*," *Modern Fiction Studies* 15 (1969): 24.

the lot, the interpretation of any phrase in the whole, the meaning of every word of a phrase so far deciphered out of it" (117.35-118.2). What is at issue here is, of course, the central problem of reading, namely the unavoidable hermeneutic interpretation.

Right from the beginning of the fifth chapter of *Finnegans Wake*, Joyce introduces an anonymous expert in exegesis, who contributes textual observations, hermeneutic considerations, and various conjectures about the possible intentions of the bizarre document. This narrated reader with his problems of understanding can be regarded as a representative of the actual reader of *Finnegans Wake*. The wording of the letter and the search for its meaning thus merge into one another throughout the book, to the extent of becoming all but indistinguishable.

However, the procedures and limits of the methods of interpretation are satirically laid bare by this intervening expert. He is convinced that, despite all difficulties, some kind of fixable sense will prevail after all. He never tires of assuring us that we are not expected to capitulate to the text's cryptic nature: "we must vaunt no idle dubiousity as to its genuine authorship and holusbolus authoritativeness" (118.3-4). Thus, the entire machinery of conventional critical methods is summoned. This commentator presents himself as a sort of all-round mock-scholar who successively practices all possible approaches in order to make senes of this puzzling epistle ("epizzles": 411.15). He unites erudition with criticism, employs paleographical, biographical, textual, contextual, psychological, and sociological methods of interpretation. He closely examines the handwriting, the material condition of the paper, and the punctuation, scrutinizing every word, letter, and sign.

As might be expected, there is no shortage of satire of the advocates of all these disciplines. Mocking fun is poked at the "grisly old Sykos" (115.21) as well as the adepts of Marxist criticism (116.7ff), or the pedantic endeavors of

"Brotfressor Prendergast" (124.15) who represents historical linguistics. The entire burlesque procedure thus becomes a parody of literary criticism. Joyce's intention is, of course, to make his readers aware of the crucial problems connected with the understanding of a text and of literature in general.

From this display of pseudo-scholarship we can draw the indirect exposition of Joyce's narrative intent concerning the literary text. Tindall, for instance, interprets the expert's foundering as follows: "His failure may mean that scholarship and criticism, unable to deal with life and art, must content themselves with externals."¹⁷ Such a conception need not, however, be equated with a complete rejection of all critical efforts; for Joyce expressly encourages his readers to submerge themselves in his text. Rather it should be understood as an expression of warning towards the expectancies of naive readers; as a means of calling in doubt the illusory hope for an unequivocal and definitive explication.

Joyce no longer believes in the possibility of fixing definite meanings by aid of interpretation. He radically calls into question the idea of an interpretation that presumes to explain a text whose shaping principle is equivalent to that of the universe. What we are offered here is no longer the disclosure of a hidden sense by way of objective analysis, but rather a spontaneous establishing of sense by the creative forces of language. The letter, as a subject of a *felix culpa* motif, has thereby been accorded the status of a life-giving power: the artist "lifts the lifewand and dumb speak" (195.50)

Not only does ALP's letter openly discuss and analyze its own legibility, origin, and conditions of existence, but by doing this it also elucidates the dominating principles of Joyce's narrative intent as well as the quintessence of literature. The processes of writing and reading are both fully integrated into the text. In short, the letter and the novel comment on themselves and

17. Tindall, p. 83.

on one another. It is above all in respect to this self-conscious reflexivity that the letter corresponds to *Finnegans Wake* as a whole. ALP's letter thus becomes an incarnation of *Finnegans Wake* itself, a nucleus of the novel, as it were, or "the microcosm of a macrocosm,"¹⁸ as Tindall remarks. At one point in the text the narrator states this in a surprisingly unequivocal way: "so why, pray, sign anything as long as every word, letter, penstroke, paperspace is a perfect signature of its own?" (115.6-8).

III

Joyce's texts specifically act to deconstruct authorial modes of reading, consistently refusing to sustain any determination of meaning as authorial intention. Vicki Mahaffey suggests that Joyce's works teach us "that a reading guided solely by the desire to uncover the author's meaning relies upon the same assumptions about authority--here authorship--that support monotheistic religions and centralized governments, those licensed by representation as well as those established by fiat."¹⁹

One of the most important assumptions about authoriety that Joyce's writings undermine is the traditional liberal-humanist notion of the autonomous self. To modernist, selves are autonomous, well-defined entities independent of social interaction, and Joyce attacks the notion that any essence, any "pure" selfhood exists beyond and above the scriptings of culture. With this anti-essentialist gesture, Joyce's texts move toward postmodern literary practice. This subversive action forms one of the most distinctively revolutionary features of Joyce's writing, and has strong ideological

18. Tindall, p. 100.

19. Vicki Mahaffey, *Reauthorizing Joyce* (Cambridge UP, 1988), p. 1.

implications. His problematization of the traditional patriarchal view of the autonomous subject is central to the radical force of his writing practice.

Jean-Michel Rabate notes the many self-reflexive passages in *Finnegans Wake* and also relates them to the performative aspects of its language, which "perhaps stem less from strong, locatable subjects of enunciation than from the constant self-referentiality of the book."²⁰ These performatives are not uttered by specific speaking subjects, but by the book itself, which has the effect of transferring them to the reader. "*Finnegans Wake* would be the 'writable' text par excellence, constituted by the reader in his reading, since the performative is displaced from the subject of the enunciation of the novel to the subject reading/listening to the book."

Joyce's radical challenge to signification has ideological consequences. Joyce's writing concentrates on the relations of language and power, of discourse and politics. These relations produce the incessant repetitions of *Finnegans Wake*, the inevitable return to a network of significations. His text is organized to deny an identity to the reader through the subversion of the authorial meaning.

Rather than engaging in the direct espousal of political positions, Joyce's work poses new questions about the relation between reader and text in ways that deconstruct hierarchical systems. The crucial difference for the reader of Joyce lies in the position allocated him or her by the text. Instead of a traditional organization of discourses which confer an imaginary unity on the reader, there is a disruption of any such position of unity. The reader is thrust into a set of contradictory discourses, engaged in the investigation of his or her own symbolic constructions. What is subverted in the writing is the full subject because it emphasizes the impossibility of representing the

20. Jean-Michel Rabate, "Lapsus ex machina," *Post-Structuralist Joyce: Essays from the French*, ed. Derek Attridge and Daniel Ferrer (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1984), p. 92.

unitary subject, the absence of authority in authorship. Instead one is confronted by a plurality of contradictory subjects. What we find in his most radical writing, *Finnegans Wake*, is just the subversion of any authoritative subject, producing more radical contradictory one, and thus subverting authority itself.

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