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The Hoax That Joke Bilked: Sense, Nonsense, and *Finnegans Wake*

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Table of Contents

Abstract

The remarkable challenges *Finnegans Wake* offers to its readers and to the very process of reading are the results of an evolution of Nonsense literature. Despite the unduly "serious" framework of criticism which has been built up around it, Joyce's anomalous last work is a radical "hoax" upon interpretation. The regular confluences of linguistic deconstruction (via word association as well as recurring word and phrase matrices) and ontological metaphor, developed from authors such as Rabelais, Sterne, and Lewis Carroll, are offered by the *Wake* as tests to the reader's (*qua* reader) sensibilities. As Nonsense, *Finnegans Wake* departs from typified modernist *modus operandi* (metonymic allusion) and instead explores the limits of metaphor. The stakes of Joyce's hoax are of vital interest to the contemporary student of literature and culture, since the *Wake* dares the reader to find new meanings rather than to project old ones; to exult its eccentricities and its difference; and all the while to call into question (as the text itself does), its authenticity and authority.

Abrégé

Les défis remarquables que *Finnegans Wake* offre aux lecteurs/lectrices et aussi au processus de la lecture sont dû à l'évolution de la littérature "Sans-sens". En dépit de la structure critique trop sérieuse qui l'entoure, le travail le plus anormal de Joyce est un "canular" à l'interprétation. Les croisements de la déconstruction linguistique (par l'association des mots et des matrices de mots et de phrases périodiques) et la métaphore ontologique, développés par des auteurs comme Rabelais, Sterne, et Lewis Carroll, sont avancés par *Finnegans Wake* en une interrogation aux sensibilités du lecteur/de la lectrice. En tant que "Sans-sens", *Finnegans Wake* s'écarte de la technique caractéristique de l'écriture moderniste (l'allusion metonymique); au lieu de cela, ce livre explore les limites de métaphore. Les enjeux du canular de Joyce sont intéressants pour le/la étudiant(e) contemporain(e) de la littérature et la culture, parce que *Finnegans Wake* met le lecteur/la lectrice au défi de trouver des nouveaux sens au lieu de projeter les vieux; d'exulter ses excentricités et sa différence; et, pendant tout ce temps-là, de douter (comme le texte fait lui-même) son authenticité et authorité.

Acknowledgements

I have prais'd Folly, but not altogether foolishly.
— Erasmus

The good literary essayist, hoping for clarity, seeks to refrain from repetition, solipsism, and an excess of notes. This is probably impossible when dealing with a book like *Finnegans Wake*, which itself thrives on repetition, solipsism, and an excess of notes. One simply cannot walk a straight path in a labyrinth, but I hope I have left a tangible enough thread to follow. I fall back upon an ancient excuse, from a garbled line of Horace epigraphically reproduced by Sterne: "Dixero si quid forte jocosius, hoc mihi juris / Cum venia dabis" (335: translated well in a note by Graham Petrie as "If I say anything too facetious, you will judge me indulgently").

Debts incurred in the process of this writing cannot be paid off here in print, but they deserve at least acknowledgement. I want to thank several people for (each in their own fashion) putting up with my nonsense. These include professors kind enough to encourage the work (Janet Lewis at York University, Ron Reichertz and Robert Lecker at McGill), a patient family unwilling to see their son starve, and those fellow students who offered genuine moral support (who will forgive me for not listing names, for fear of careless omissions). Thanks to Sonnet L'Abbé, Catherine Skeen, Mike Johnstone, and Chris Lockett for their individual attempts to appease my admittedly esoteric research requests, and to Linda Figsby for guiding me, time after

time, through the bureaucratic hopscotch at which I am clumsy, if not wholly incompetent.

A heap of thanks to Karin Cope, who did not pale and show me to her office door when I mentioned the title of the book I intended to study, and who, in the course of this project, reassured me by her example that some scholars still like a good laugh.

These individuals, for their inspiration and assistance, are due credit but not criticism. Errors may or may not be "the portals of discovery" which Stephen Dedalus proclaims them to be; but in this work I am solely responsible for any which appear.

Fritz Senn has said to me that he suspects Joyce's devoted readers are essentially lonely people, and I have had some time to consider this assessment. To say he is right (as I do) is to pay the highest compliment to Joyce: in the laughter of *Finnegans Wake* as in his other works, he has connected us to him and, perhaps more importantly, to each other.

I. "Making sense" of *Finnegans Wake*

> he's been failing of that kink in his arts over sense. (*FW* 490.05)

i. Introduction: Who's Afraid of *Finnegans Wake*?

> there was not a snoozer among them but was utterly undeceived in the heel of the reel by the recital of the rigmarole. (*FW* 174.03-4)

Readers enjoy the offer of relaxed authority a text offers them: they are the gods omnipotent but for any culpability for the drama of creation they may comfortably observe (from "within or behind or beyond or above" [*P* 215] the universe of narrative), perhaps paring their fingernails all the while. Radical freedoms of approach (when to read, what to read, where to stop reading) and judgement (the right to believe a character in a fiction or history cruel, sympathetic, hilarious, or all of these) may be fully exercised. However, the power or authority of reading is naturally matched with a correspondingly extreme responsibility, and that lies in the effort of conscientious critical interpretation.

The usual excuse given for not engaging *Finnegans Wake*, besides the temporal confines of a mortal existence, is that it "makes no sense": the text is alternately (or sometimes simultaneously) celebrated and condemned for its exuberant strangeness and is indeed "usually banished to the very edges of the literary canon as an unassimilable freak" (Attridge 1988,

10). Certainly the *Wake* (as Joyceans enjoy abbreviating it in discussion) represents an extreme, spoken of even by established literary academics as as alien (and by virtue of this, often object to hostility) a challenge as *Beowulf*, for instance, is archaic. Despite Joyce's famous response to Mary Colum's opinion of the *Wake* ("it is outside literature") that its "future is inside literature" (Ellmann 635), it has sustained novelty primarily through its consideration as anomaly for over half a century. For its glorious madness, unfortunately, the *Wake* has been institutionalized. There is probably no other literary work of the twentieth century so confined to academic experience, and, as consequence, to academic commentary. Patrick Kavanagh effectively mourns this fact in a poem entitled "Who Killed James Joyce?"

> Who killed Finnegan?
> I, said a Yale-man,
> I was the man who made
> The corpse for the wake man.
>
> And did you get high marks,
> The Ph.D.?
> I got the B.Litt.
> And my master's degree. (Kavanagh 13)

There are, several critics have noted, at least two different modes of inquiry about the *Wake*. The obvious and important one which Fritz Senn calls "preliminary, humble,

philological, spade work" (227) is the analysis of textual minutiae, which serves as a happy objective for so many communal *Wake* reading groups. At best, these assays produce a terrific creative energy of involvement and co-operation unlike anything any close reading exercise can offer (see the "exceptional" group imagined by Attridge [1990, 11-20]); at worst, an endless and exclusive linguistic version of "Where's Waldo?" may keep scholars distracted from their critical responsibilities (not to mention, maybe, the world at large). The other approach is, probably necessarily, a more individualist effort: proposing theoretical frameworks within which to place or discuss the text. Certainly the latter has often seemed more inviting, because of its demand for greater speculation and (perhaps) less note-chasing, but it cannot be said to be any less daunting (and is probably more prone to failure). After all, in its position as (perhaps *the*) subversive extreme, *Finnegans Wake* serves as a sort of acid test for literary theories and critical approaches.[1] The separation of these modes, the privileging of one at the expense of the other, may well be a significant factor behind what I cannot help but think of as the general hitherto failure of *Wake* criticism. In the arguments which follow, I will be pursuing the second mode but, I hope, with careful attention to the vitality and necessity of the first.

If "reading" the *Wake* appears difficult, no less so is the attempt to discuss it. My own preference, evidenced above, for a verb like "engage" over the more obvious choice of "read" has to

do with the nature of a text like *Finnegans Wake*. I am in full agreement with Derrida in that

> the utterances 'I am reading Joyce', 'read Joyce', 'have you read Joyce?' produce an irresistible effect of naivety, irresistibly comical. What exactly do you mean by 'read Joyce'? Who can pride himself on having 'read' Joyce? (Derrida 148)

Those who have dared to delve, however slightly, into Joyce's "prepronomial *funferal*" (*FW* 120.10) usually know better than to claim to "have read" it, because the structure of the text is designed as a continuous reading, or may be said to be "sentenced to be nuzzled over a full trillion times for ever and a night" (120.12-3).[2] The anxiety of the reader --the desire to be receptive to the fullest enlightenment a text may offer-- is magnificently exploited by the *Wake*, which demands an "ideal reader suffering from an ideal insomnia" (120.13-4). This invocation is only one half, however, of an elaborate teasing game learned from Rabelais and Sterne: the alter-ego of the "ideal reader" appears as the "abcedminded" one, "with that large big nonobli head, and that blanko berbecked fischial ekksprezzion" (64.31). Between these two polarized roles the real reader is dizzied with both encouragement and chastisement, a situation readily reminiscent of the admission that the reader of *Tristram Shandy* will have to endure

VEXATION

upon

(Sterne 44). In a much more elliptical fashion Joyce parenthetically assures his reader that his text is

> readable to int from and, is from tubb to buttom all falsetissues, anitlibellous and nonactionable and this applies to its whole wholume (*FW* 48.17-9)

Maybe talk of *Finnegans Wake* as a singularity is a trifle overblown. Derek Attridge contemplates whether it might be

> one of those works (other examples might be *Gargantua and Pantagruel* and *Tristram Shandy*) which seem to satisfy neither of the contradictory demands made by the literary tradition --or, to put it more positively, that build the contradiction into their fabric and derive from it some of the enjoyment they transmit to the reader. (Attridge 1988, 10-11)

Ultimately, *Finnegans Wake* wants to know: "Can you rede (since We and Thou had it out already) its world?" (18.18-9). The transformation of familiar "read" reflects the depth of defamiliarization the reader, or would-be "reder" (249.14) will encounter: no one, upon opening this book, can be completely sure of their ability to "rede" (not necessarily as *opposed* to "read": the Heideggerian opposition of "*Gerede*" and "*Rede*" [Lecercle 109] will be briefly considered in the third chapter). In this sense ("sens", "sinse", "sends", etc.: it is already evident that this word is going to be trouble), Joyce is having a lengthy laugh at his reader's expense; but also, I believe, he is offering a

chance for the reader to laugh, too: at notions of readers, authors, texts, and interpretation. According to Aristotle's terms, the *Wake* represents a "riddle or a barbarism" (1458a), the type of faulty literature which the philosopher could presumably only imagine. As will become clear in the following chapters, this is also quite literally my assessment of the text, but with distinct exception to the pejorative tone. Oliver St. John Gogarty was the first to suggest this possibility, calling Joyce's completed volume a "colossal legpull" (4) in a 1939 review for *The Observer* (and according to Ellmann, this review "unexpectedly pleased" Joyce [Ellmann 1982, 722]); but not much has been made of this suggestion.[3]

We want to "read" Joyce, and what is more, we want to read him "right." The sense of "read" (from the Old English) as "to interpret" is also found in the word "riddle": an important relation to bear in mind when discussion comes to focus upon the *Wake* as a carefully constructed "joke" -- upon, of, and for literature and those who participate in it. Joyce has reminded us that, in reading, we are all amateurs; and always laughable for that.

ii. Serious Criticism

> Be vacillant over those vigilant who would leave you to belave black on white. (*FW* 439.31-2)

Ruling one's life by common sense

How can one fail to be intense?
But I must not accounted be
One of that mumming company--

("The Holy Office", lines 21-4)

In his piece for *Our Exagmination* Victor Llona expresses a suspicion "that the commentaries of future critics of [*Finnegans Wake*] will not lack in amusing elements" (101); but, generally speaking, so far this has proved a rather poor prophecy, and the better part of this wake's attendants have preferred solemnity for the occasion.

Apart from some noteworthy exceptions, critical *Wake* discourse has adopted a very serious tone indeed. In *Joyce-Again's Wake* Bernard Benstock admits that it is "not surprising that many readers and critics of serious mien have been unable to swallow 'the hoax that joke bilked'" (162-3); making reference to the telling *Wake* phrase I have employed as a title and will turn attention to later. In the (disappointingly, but understandably) slow evolution from initial (post-*Exagmination*), trepidatious excursions to fanatically bibliographical exegeses and intertextual comparative readings, there is not a great deal of progress through what ought to be a most creative debate. Like Llona, Stuart Gilbert foresaw the range for play which Joyce offered his critics, remarking that the "boisterous joviality" of the *Wake* "will certainly offend those who hold that gravity should exclude buoyancy" and concluding very plainly that "exclusive seriousness, indeed, is a colour-blindness of the

intellect" (62). This "exclusive seriousness" is witnessed as the ideology behind criticism which purposefully overlooks or even dismisses as simply a structural pretence the *Wake*'s abundant and inevitable ridiculousness.

It is always disappointing (at least, for me) to see critics ignore the chance to be as complementarily innovative in their approach(es) and style(s) when they at least try to embrace the *Wake*, and seem to end up fumbling with it in a rush of clumsy and inapplicable tools. It's no use pretending that *Finnegans Wake* is *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, and can be treated in the same manner. Individual texts clearly demand new and idiosyncratic attentions.

Probably the greatest critical error is to (foolhardily attempt to!) wholly and deterministically interpret a given text, to say that "this" *means* "that" for the benefit of bewildered and unprofessional readers everywhere; and yet this is a common practice in *Wake* discourse, with the important underlying assumption that the books like it "cannot be read; they can only be studied" (Booth 456). What kind of hypothetical books are these to be found in such an unfortunate grouping? Unenjoyable ones, presumably, and for book-specialists only.

In the significant body of work surrounding the *Wake* there are naturally some exceptions to this phenomenon of seriousness. Writers such as Julia Kristeva, Umberto Eco, and Derek Attridge stress the vitality of "play" within the book which itself promises "patpun fun for all" (*FW* 301.13).[4] Marshall McLuhan goes so far as to call the book "a great intellectual effort

aimed at rinsing the Augean [sic] stables of speech and society with geysers of laughter" (28).

It would seem obvious --indeed, maybe the very first principle of aesthetic thought-- that asking what a work is "about" is in so many ways a trap, a question which will never yield (at least, not from any sort of interesting text) an adequate answer. *Wake* critics on the whole agree that there is a central truth to Samuel Beckett's statement that the *Wake* "is not *about* something; *it is that something itself*" (14), but inasmuch as this remark is an answer, it is no less impenetrable than the (six hundred and twenty-eight page) question. Yet, despite the bewildered championing of Beckett's phrase and "continual intimations that nothing really does happen" (McHugh 1974, 18) by and within the *Wake*, many critics hold to a framework of a discerned "plotch" (*FW* 364.26): that is to say (though without saying it), the *Wake* is "about" something. Attridge names Anthony Burgess as the original (read: culpable) critic to promote the so-called "acceptable narrative" (1988, 214) of the Porter family's trials and tribulations in Chapelizod in Dublin as the "central core" of what allegedly only seems a decentralized text.[5] The legacy of Burgess's reading is evident in its incorporation into and subsequently virtual *sine qua non* presence within general *Wake* discourse. Deviations from this assumption of a "plotty existence" (*FW* 76.18) are all too rare: repeated talk of a character "Buckley" and his action of "shooting" another character "the Russian general" (the "meaning" of "beschotten by

a buckeley" [*FW* 138.113-4]?), for instance, or the "death" of an "ALP" in the book's final pages, assumes within Joyce scholarship the level of a truism and the air of an irreproachable fact. Even the structuralists and post-structuralists, who enjoy the distinction of being the most revolutionary of the book's commentators (beginning with Margot Norris, there was at last the recognition of a "decentered universe"), love to conjure theories upon the reading of a *Wake* "plot" as a great paper-chase, a scrambling for a mysterious "*re*'furloined" (419.29) letter which postmaster Derrida promised would always and never arrive.[6]

To my mind, a good deal of *Wake* criticism can prove more frustrating than the *Wake* itself. The usual analytical apparatus is as well applied to the text as square pegs to a black hole, and general commentary ranges from the dry understatement --like Roland McHugh's "[b]y now you are probably finding the personages emerging from the text a problem" (McHugh 1981, 7)-- to banal universalisms. Hugh B. Staples claims, for example, that "like all the rest of the Joyce canon", *Finnegans Wake* is "a fundamentally autobiographical document" (197). I have no idea what this means, but I suspect Joyce has already laughed away these "abcedminded" statements of explanation before they were made. A mock-professorial voice is sometimes heard within the *Wake*:

> As my explanations here are probably above your understandings, lattlebrattons, though as augmentatively uncomparisoned as Cadwan, Cadwallon and

> Cadwalloner, I shall revert to a more expletive method which I frequently use when I have to sermo with muddlecrass pupils. Imagine for my purpose that you are a squad of urchins, snifflynosed, goslingnecked, clothyheaded, tangled in your lacings, tingled in your pants, etsitaraw etcicero. (*FW* 152.04-10)

(The *Wake* pivots upon this recurring, central caveat lector.[7] So many times the reader is warned to pay attention, take notice, stay awake.)

The critical pronouncement I obviously take most issue with is Campbell's and Robinson's ever-emphatic "*there are no nonsense syllables in Joyce!*" (360, italics patently their own).[8] Glibly I can begin to respond by suggesting it will be a frabjous day in hell before these keymasters can explicate and annotate away the preposterous nature of a "word" like "Bothallchoractorschumm-inaroundgansumuminarumdrumstrumtruminahumptadumpwaultopoofooloode ramaunsturnup!" (*FW* 314.08-9); but of course, the next two chapters of this discussion constitute a lengthier, though perhaps only somewhat less irreverent rebuttal to such an absolute; so I may, for the moment, put this complaint aside.

It should be stated explicitly here that I deem discussion of authorial intention entirely speculative, and as such impractical (not to mention unhelpfully restrictive) for purposes of aesthetic critical analysis. (Admittedly, this places me in what Roland McHugh calls the "lunatic fringe" of *Wake* studies [1981, 74] and Margot Norris the "radical" position [1], but it

is certainly not an aesthetic perspective limited to the orbit of one text.) This theoretical standpoint explains why, for example, I feel entirely at liberty to selectively ignore often-quoted (extratextual) remarks by Joyce himself concerning the structure of his final work, regardless of whether such comments may reveal some sought-after "key" to his work, like the key given Stuart Gilbert for *Ulysses*, which has been forever reprinted in introductions to subsequent editions of the book, irrespective of --or even more likely and insidiously, in some alleged respect for-- the author's purpose in forging it. Even if there were some Joycean "hidden rule" to the text, to slavishly devote central critical focus to it would result in having the *Wake*

> reduced to an application of the hidden rule, and yet [the text] is both more and less than this rule. The discovery of the secret principle underlying the text does not close down the interpretation of the text. (Stewart 184)

I am against this process of "reduction" and want to celebrate the great paradox of simultaneous "more or less" and "more *and* less": *Finnegans Wake* may be read to be "greater THaN or less tHaN" (298.13) the sum of its parts.[9] Susan Stewart says of Nonsense literature --of which literary family, I propose to argue, *Finnegans Wake* is the happy prodigal-- that

> purpose becomes a continual and pleasurable movement away from itself, a reflexive gesture that spirals away

> from any point of privileged signification or direction. Both "author" and "audience" are continually fractured and rearranged. (209)

Consider the fallacy of the phrase "making sense", as in the phrase, "to make sense of Joyce." This phrase could be synonymically transformed to reveal a deeper meaning: "to manufacture meaning within the works of Joyce" or, more modestly, "to produce an interpretation of Joyce." These two senses of "making sense" are worlds apart in their notions of text, reader and author. The first could be seen to suggest that there is no meaning in the text as it is, or at least not a meaning everyone can understand (this, I take it, is the precept behind the many skeleton keys). The second grants an individual reader independence of thought, a concession some pedagogues have yet to entertain, and constitutes an admission of subjective perspective and thus at least allows room for inadequacy, if not outright error.

In the conclusion to his essay "Protean Inglossabilities: 'To No End Gathered'", Fritz Senn admits with a formidably grim sense of humour the inadequacies, and inevitable failures, of annotations.

> All Notes are liars -- useful, incomplete, overdone, misconceived, partly irrelevant, and unseasonable liars. The previous sentence is a note. So is the whole of this essay. (153)

I am no less (and no more noteworthy) a liar for noting here

Senn's note on notes, but his observation articulates the redundancy of the guides and keys. Reading in the "plotsome to getsome" (*FW* 312.18) manner cannot in itself be called incorrect or invalid, and I do not mean to dismiss or ignore completely these basically allegorical (or "epistlemadethemological": cf. *FW* 374.17) readings, but rather to call into question their favoured status within Joyce scholarship.[10]

John Bishop concludes his study of the *Wake*, *Joyce's Book of the Dark*, by calling for more people to "join in" the "fun" (385) of the *Wake*, and I think critics ought to heed this call as attentively, if not moreso, as prospective explorers of this "clearobscure" (*FW* 247.34) text. "For what injustice is it," Erasmus justly demanded in 1509,

> that when we allow every course of life its Recreation, that Study only should have none? especially when such toyes are not without their serious matter, and foolery is so handled that the Reader that is not altogether thick-skull'd may reap more benefit from't than from some men's crabbish and specious Arguments. (Erasmus 4)

iii. The Problem of Context

> Lo, improving ages wait ye! In the orchard of the bones. Some time very presently now when yon clouds are dissipated after their forty years shower, the odds are, we shall all be hooked and happy, communionistically, among the fieldnights eliceam,

> *élite* of the elect, in the land of lost of time.
> (*FW* 453.27)

Joyce's indignation at the upstaging of his most experimental work by the political turmoil of 1930s Europe is generally regarded as a characteristic pose of a ridiculously egocentric writer. However, tumultuous 1939 displaced works as various as Flann O'Brien's novel *At Swim-Two-Birds* and the film *The Wizard of Oz*, either postponing the attention due such works or else virtually exiling them to obscurity. *Finnegans Wake* is, in this sense, a text out of time: World War II ably squelched its chances for a contemporary appreciative audience and left it, a complex time capsule, for later examination by a civilization still trembling from Auschwitz and Hiroshima. How could they -- how can we-- understand a book of such tremendous humour to have come from such a world as that (this)? How do we "wake" from this nightmare of a history?[11]

One possible direction of thought lies in the consideration of the *Wake* as a raucous example of laughter in the dark (more on this phrase later). In the years of the text's production ("progression" may be the more suitable word) a swell of comic invention appeared to rise all the while fascism began to darken the skies: vaudeville, slapstick and parody blossomed in popular culture. That the *Wake* reader's attempts at interpretation are confused by the overlaying grids of media represented within (radio, television, film, letters, gossip, journalism, etc.) is a signal of Joyce's recognition of the expansions and, more

importantly, of their mood. "Chorney Choplain" (*FW* 351.13) can be spotted "jiggilyjugging about" (351.10) in his pages, and a like devotion to irreverence flows through the films of the Marx Brothers, Preston Sturges's 1941 justification of comedy, *Sullivan's Travels*, and in the songs of Spike Jones. The latter, with his clanging, honking and whistling impressions of renowned orchestral compositions and popular sentimental songs, often demonstrates a recognizably Joycean awareness:

> If you know how puns are made
> then you know how this is played:
> On your mark, get set to go
> Knock knock knock, that's the phrase!
>
> ("Knock knock")[12]

Compare these lines from a Jones chorus with *Finnegans Wake*'s "jokable" (454.16) wargames:

> Knock knock. War's there. Which war? The Twwins. Knock knock. Woos without! Without what? An apple. Knock knock. (330.30-2)

The repeating joke, a microcosmic recurrence of the Prankquean's quizzing, reflects a definite, however sardonic, recognition of the flux of war, from the first murder (twins Cain and Abel) to the fall of Troy (the golden apple of Paris) to World War (the double-W; but "[w]hich war?").[13] There have been interesting readings of parodies of Nazism within the *Wake* (drawn from passages such as the eighth question of the "nightly quisquiquock" [*FW* 126.06]: "How war yore maggies?" [142.30]; see

also "the Nazi Priers" [375.18]), and even more amusing ones declaring the text a coded prophecy of the atomic bomb; but as much as I enjoy and admire *Finnegans Wake*, I feel unqualified to bequeath it or sanction it with such a status. The confluence of wars in a representation of a puerile game denies them value, and is consequently as satirically effective a thrust as Groucho Marx's absurd habit of changing style and era of military uniform with each scene of battle in the 1933 film *Duck Soup*. In the *Wake*, the so-called thought processes behind war are laughable -- a spat between pantomime puppets, insects, Tweedledum and Tweedledee ("Them boys is so contrairy" [620.12])-- and thus of no threat to the spirit and dignity of those who laugh with Joyce. For him and us, the world (cruel and ridiculous) may be depended upon to "heap miseries upon us yet entwine our arts with laughters low!" (259.07-8).

The very difficulty of contextualizing the *Wake* (in this case, historically) says something about its form. *Tristram Shandy* does not upon first reading --if ever!-- strike one as an eighteenth century creation, and Dr. Johnson infamously misjudged it too "odd" to endure. My proposal that the *Wake* represents the culmination of Nonsense literature (of which uneven tradition I consider Sterne's wayward narrative a major contribution) may help to explain the "anomaly" stigma attached to such works. To be odd is in this sense to resist assimilation, and from some reviewers of literature this yields enmity; but even as somber a figure as Freud notes with some regret that the pleasure to be

found in nonsense "is concealed in serious life to a vanishing point" (125). The banishment of folly from "serious life" and even from "serious literature", the demand for literal meaning and language of limited definitions: these are the gestures of certainty which commissars practice. *Finnegans Wake* flies in the face of such cruel initiatives.

Susan Stewart's contention that "nonsense is humor without a context as well as metaphor without a context" (Stewart 38) -- while worth further examination later on-- serves as an initially agreeable correlative to this argument. *Finnegans Wake*, it seems, rejects no contexts --though it significantly resists the framework of a literalist and authoritarian "translation"-- but also refuses to lay claim to any, except perhaps by mnemonic nudge-nudging, "hides and hints and misses in prints" (*FW* 20.11).

What "hints", then, are we prepared to take?

Notes Chapter I

1. Cf. Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1983) 82. Senn similarly calls the *Wake* "the superlative" (227).

2. Cf. *Tristram Shandy*: "For my own part, I am resolved never to read any book but my own, as long as I live" (519).

3. In as early into the evolution of *Work of Progress* as 1924, Stanislaus Joyce pooh-poohed a similar suggestion made by Ford Madox Ford: "he is talking through his half a tall hat" (Ellmann 1982, 577; cf. *Finnegans Wake*'s "*Aranman ingperwhis through the hole of his hat*" [121.12]).

4. Joyce (perhaps in the voice of the "Issy", or daughter figure) directly notes that this is, for some, a "nastilow disigraible game" (*FW* 301F4). In this echolaliac word --"fun," found throughout the *Wake*, besides in many mutated and compounded forms of itself ("funn" or "fum")-- is the significant play with the playful lines of folk song "Finnegan's Wake": "Isn't it the truth I'm telling ye? / Lots of fun at Finnegan's Wake".

5. See Attridge, *Peculiar Language* 210-8. Burgess is also the editor of *A Shorter Finnegans Wake* (1966), the purpose of which has always eluded me.

6. This is to say nothing of searches for other kinds of novelistic apparatus. Discussion of symbols, for example, is such a shaky business that Fritz Senn "takes care to avoid any use of the word 'symbol' in his Joycean writings"; and Clive Hart once told Roland McHugh that it was bad enough real life should

contain "fucking symbols: we don't need them in our reading matter as well" (McHugh 1981, 46).

7. Joyce's very text thus offers a greater caveat than the meagre one Phillip F. Herring rightly complains of in his own analysis of the tradition of Joyce criticism and pedagogy: "that Joyce was a tease" (80). See Chapter III for a further discussion of Joyce's self-deprecation as author/authority.

8. This pronouncement is echoed in statements from Herring (185).

9. Cf. Stewart 184.

10. I am far less certain about any similar friendly ambivalence concerning the production of plot summaries *based* upon these "plotsome" readings, but this is a prejudice of mine which extends beyond *Finnegans Wake* study alone.

11. George Steiner has sadly noted that "there have been few attempts to relate the dominant phenomenon of twentieth-century barbarism to a more general theory of culture" in *In Bluebeard's Castle: Some Notes Towards the Redefinition of Culture* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1971) 29.

12. Spike and his City Slickers, remarks Thomas Pynchon in his liner notes to *Spiked! The Music of Spike Jones* (compact disc), stepped

> into the sudden worldwide lull that followed the years of destruction, from whose audio vernacular of course would be drawn the tuned gunshots, and Slickers screaming and running around, destroying sets, appearing to thrust various props into or through their

heads, acting out the most lowbrow of musical impulses.

13. Joyce makes several tongue-in-cheek references to the early optimism of World War I, such as the phrase "war-to-end war" (*FW* 178.25).

II. Marbled Pages: A General Theory of Nonsense

Wear anartful of outer nocense! (*FW* 378.33)

Nonsense is, I think, a mode of writing rather than a genre; but it bears separation from other comic forms, though they may be related and/or complementary. Before I set about the business of outlining the poetics of Nonsense some general distinctions should be made.

The comic modes probably most confused with Nonsense are Absurdism, Farce, and perhaps Carnival. M. H. Abrams very loosely defines Absurdism as the name

> applied to a number of works in drama and prose fiction which have in common the sense that the human condition is essentially and ineradicably absurd, and that this condition can be adequately represented in works of literature that are themselves absurd. (1)[1]

This definition seems to me unfit for such works as *Finnegans Wake* or *Tristram Shandy*, since the principal element of ridicule in Absurdism is thematic, or a matter of subject. The subjects and themes within the *Wake* are mutative, self-effacing, and not entirely substantial: if anything, Joyce's level of Nonsense easily envelopes the quality of "absurdity" with room to spare.

Likewise, there are farcical elements in the works I submit as Nonsensical, but these works suggest a more radical re-interpretation of not only *what* they present but *how* and *why*. It is this intersection of "how and why" into which these other modes cannot extend. Marnie Parsons offers a similar separation

between Nonsense and Carnival: the latter mode,

> despite its participants' tendency to engage in self-parody, lacks Nonsense's rigorous self-awareness. Nonsensical self-reflexivity lends itself as much to infinitely repressive questioning and threats of stagnation as to dancing in the street. (26)

Finally, there is the strange claim made by Elizabeth Sewell in her famous work *The Field of Nonsense* that Nonsense verse (she is referring primarily to Lewis Carroll and Edward Lear) is a separate entity from poetry proper (she is using Coleridge's definition). In Sewell's view poetry ought to be ambiguous in meaning, but Nonsense "is concrete, clear and wholly comprehensible" (23). These definitions seem a little baffling to me, and ultimately contradictory when she suggests (only two pages later) that Nonsense could be "an attempt at reorganizing language, not according to the rules of prose or poetry in the first place but according to those of Play" (25). I think any poet would quickly reject the notion that "Play" (with its alleged "rules") is removed from poetry (and its own unexplained, ephemeral "rules").

It comes fairly easy to a critic to say what *Finnegans Wake* is "not"; but I want to suggest a form in which it can be said to belong or participate. Nonsense, the literary joke upon writing itself, is that unruly form which shall be examined here. Literature --prose and poetry and whatnot-- is a big place. There is room for Nonsense.

i. Poetics of Nonsense

> this comes, as all the world knows, from having half a dozen words for one thing; and so long. as what in this vessel of the human frame, is *Love*--may be *Hatred*, in that--*Sentiment* half a yard higher--and *Nonsense*----no, Madam,--not there-- I mean at the part I am now pointing to with my forefinger--how can we help ourselves? (Sterne 518)

Of the myriad literary traditions that Joyce deftly plunders (novel, epic, *Kunstlerroman*, catalogue, etc.) I think that that of Nonsense has received the most scant attention, probably because of the general indeterminacy surrounding this kind of writing. The general but cautious recognition of Nonsense's English Victorian origins, and perhaps also of Lewis Carroll or Edward Lear as representative craftsman, stems from what is mostly a neologocentric definition: if a written work employed enough fanciful words (slithy, vorpal, boojum), or if it flaunted sufficiently the inadequacies of logic and decorum, it could safely be labelled as Nonsense.

The problem with this notion of Nonsense --that the March Hare's offer of wine to Alice despite his lack of it can be construed as a Nonsensical one-- is its uncomfortable indistinctness from a comedy of manners: by this tradition, *The Importance of Being Earnest* might be defined as a Nonsense drama by merit of scenes such as that of Algernon Moncrieff reprimanding Lane for not preparing the cucumber sandwiches which

they both know the former has already eaten. These sorts of gestures, I would argue, are merely epiphanies of satire, or (well-rendered but still token) flourishes of irreverence. While these qualities may certainly occur within Nonsense, they are not indicative. To find a more acute working definition, as well as a truer (though not absolute nor exclusive) genealogy, readers need to look further into the past than Carroll and Lear.

In its most common usage, "nonsense" is a pejorative dismissal, brutally effective as both discrediting noun and adjective. This usage emerges from the very basic and apparently well-fortified supposition that "sense" is a good thing, and "to be sensible" or "to make sense" a noble characteristic (but, like all "good" things, one wonders: is it an inherent quality or an act? Are people sensible by nature or only in deed?). *Non*-sense, in this trite Manichean perspective, could be little else but "bad." This correspondence is illustrated in *The Oxford English Dictionary*'s definition(s).

> 1. a. That which is not sense; spoken or written words which make no sense or convey absurd ideas; also absurd or senseless action.
>
> [Ergo:]
>
> 3. Unsubstantial or worthless stuff or things.

Alice, who finds many of Wonderland's inhabitants and activities "perfectly idiotic" (Carroll 59) and "[s]tupid things" (105), makes a habit of stoutly denouncing strange things as "nonsense" (see 80, 108, 117, etc.).[2]

Naturally, Nonsense as a narrative form depends upon the co-existence of sensical narrative --Stewart refers to this state as "the paradox of all nonsense" (172)-- but the limits of their (in-)dependencies is a more difficult issue. In *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, Freud claims that "only playing with *thoughts*", rather than simply words, "leads to nonsense" (138n); but this is an unjustifiable statement. Unexpressed thoughts will not, cannot suffer judgement. Thoughts themselves are not "read" (in the riddle-connected sense of interpretation), and the distinction(s) between the spheres of sense and nonsense, however tenuous, are made in the course of reading. In the discussion that follows, I want to connect a series of works and styles which idiosyncratically narrow and/or blur these distinctions and so consider a general Nonsense aesthetic.

In the five books of *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, Rabelais dramatizes various kinds of discourse, debate and exchange, some of them rather prolonged, in which the reader likely recognizes only the structure. The substance of an ordeal such as the Baisceul-Humevesne controversy in *Pantagruel* is remarkably intangible.

> Toute la nuit l'on ne fit, la main sur le pot, que dépêcher bulles des postes à pied et laquais à cheval pour retenir les bateaux, car les courturiers voulaient faire des retaillons dérobés une sarbataine pour couvrir la mer océane, qui pour lors étaient grosse d'une potée de choux, selon l'opinion des boteleurs de

foin. Mais les physiciens disaient, que à son urine ils ne connaissaient signe évident au pas d'ostarde de manger besagues à la moutarde, sinon que messieurs de la cour fissent par bémol commandement à la vérole, de non plus alleboter après les maignans, et ainsi se pourmener durant le service divin: car les marroufles avaient jà bon commencement à danser l'estrindore au diapason, un pied au feu et la tête au milieu, comme disait le bon Ragot. (Rabelais 369-71)

All night they did nothing but keep their hands on the pot, and dispatch bulls on foot and bulls on horse-back to hold back the boats. For the tailors wanted to make out of the stolen shreds a blow-pipe to cover the Ocean sea, which was pregnant at the time with a potful of cabbage, according to the opinion of the hay-trussers. But the physicians said that from her urine they could detect no evident sign, in the pace of the bustard, of axes eaten with mustard, except that the gentlemen of the court were giving the pox an order in B flat to stop going about gathering silk-worms, because the clods had already made a good beginning at dancing a jig to a diapason, with one foot in the fire and their head in the middle, as good old Ragot used to say. (Cohen 205-6)

The strategy for the satirical element of Nonsense in the works

of both Rabelais and Carroll is that simultaneity of the persistence of form and the general obliteration of content: the more radical the opposition, the more the form loses its credibility despite itself. To look at a more contemporary example, consider how the disparity operates in the following parody of a television interview, broadcast on Britain's *Rutland Weekend Television*:

> [ERIC] IDLE: Foreskin, mousetrap view Mount Everest tin tray lobotomy in England?
>
> [HENRY] WOOLF: Saddleback, saddleback. Lechery billboard kettle bum simpering, snuff masticated boss-eyed hand-set, lemonade enterprisingly apartheid rubberized plum joint curvaciously mucking squirrels.
>
> IDLE: I see. Rapidly piddle pot strumming Hanover peace pudding mouse rumpling cuddly corridor cabinets.
>
> WOOLF: Sick in a cup. Door jamb whisper tap Sunderland shower curtain iced wallpaper cups graunchingly rubbed king-rap buttock kissing feathers, definitely pheasantry daughter successfully douche dinner bottom.
>
> IDLE: Machine rapped with butter?
>
> WOOLF (*nodding*): Machine rapped with butter.
>
> (Wilmut 237)

Both of these examples specifically employ recognizable language, if only in components and not in regulation (Rabelais has proper grammar and syntax, while the *Rutland* interview appears to be -- at least from the Queen's point of view upon English-- a random

gathering of incongruous words). The next progression in this scheme has a famous enough example:

'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe:
All mimsy were the borogroves,
And the mome raths outgrabe. (Carroll 140)

"Jabberwocky" is a formidable beast not for its "eyes of flame" but for its prescience of Chomskyan linguistics (see Lecercle 51, among others). "Colorless green ideas sleep furiously" (Chomsky 15), like "Machine rapped with butter", is nonsensical primarily because of juxtaposition, but, in mingling imaginary words with the most common English ones, Carroll's poem not only flaunts the inadequcies of syntax but posits that words in themselves have no intrinsic meaning (Sutherland 155).[3] In *The Books at the Wake*, James Atherton calls Carroll Joyce's "unforeseen precursor" (but unforeseen by whom, exactly?) and devotes an entire chapter to developing this theme (124-36).[4]

Syntax is perhaps the last form to be dissolved as unintelligible content rages against its frame, but it *can* be dissolved. Jean-Jacques Lecercle finds it "striking that [1] syntactic incoherence is extremely rare in nonsense texts and [2] that, when it is present, it is clearly indicated, through irony or explicit disapproval" (51). What I have labelled point 1 is true if one ignores works of the twentieth century: consider, for example, a sentence from Gertrude Stein's (preposterously, hilariously titled) *How To Write*:

> I was astonished to learn that she was led by her head and her head was not with her head her head was leading when her head stood still. (14)

A run-on sentence like this one is nonsensical business as usual for an artist like Stein. The syntax of a statement like "It with in diminish. It with in diminish" (156) is coherent only within the framework of *How To Write*, or within Stein's particular anti-syntax.[5]

Point 2 in Lecercle's argument approaches tautology: how could a rare syntactical deviation *not* be explicit? If *Through the Looking Glass* ended with something like "Which you think was?" instead of "Which do you think it was?" it would be impossible to ignore the egregious phrasing.

What is conceivably the ultimate evolution of this developing series of semantic distortion (I will return to this expression in a moment) can be found, ready and waiting for the befuddled reader, elsewhere in Rabelais. Who is to say whether Panurge's discourse in the "langage des Antipodes"[6] (353) is grammatically correct, since the words do not appear in any dictionary?

There are two methodical schemes at work in Rabelais' madness, and they are as inseparable as the form of the Silenus Box from what it (perhaps) contains. The dross, the obvious scheme, is the comedy of appetite (thirst): the scatological snorts and ribald asides, punctutated with instructions to readers and characters alike to drink, drink, and drink yet

again. The second scheme is the more complex comedy of interpretation (digestion). When in his introduction to *Gargantua* Rabelais dares his reader to follow the example of the dog he is directly challenging any "sense" (quelque "substantificque mouelle") a reader may find within a reading (i.e., he simultaneously challenges the authority of the author, the text and --most undiplomatically of all-- the reader).

> [à] l'exemple [du chien], vous convient être sages, pour fleurer, sentir & estimer ces beaux livres de haulte gresse, legiers au prochas, & hardis à la rencontre. Puis, par curieuse leçon, & meditation frequente, rompre l'os, & sucer la substantificque mouelle --c'est à dire ce que j'entends par ces symboles Pythagoriques--, avec espoir certain d'être fait escors et preux à la dite lecture. (9)

> you are invited to observe the example of [this dog] to sniff, taste and appraise these fine books of juicy bits, easy to approach and difficult to meet. Then, by keen reading and frequent meditation, break the bone and suck out the substantial marrow --that is to explain what I intend by these Pythagorean symbols-- with hope the reading makes you wiser and braver.[7]

Rabelais himself chooses to tease: is his own Silenus box empty? Has he bamboozled (is he bamboozling) ages of readers to play in excrement and call it gold? Rabelais is here recognized as the

sly progenitor of the Nonsense writing which

> invites so much interpretation that it calls attention to the activity of reading as a special skill, while it mocks us in our attempts to reveal its sense. (Rieke 19)

To what degree is this "special skill" taught, and to what degree cannot it not be? Students of the Latin school of Selestat were taught to read a text in stages of interpretation:

> First came the *lectio*, a grammatical analysis in which the syntactic elements of each sentence would be identified; this would lead to the *littera* or literal sense of the text. Through the *littera* the student acquired the *sensus*, the meaning of the text according to different established interpretations. The process ended with an exegesis --the *sententia*-- in which the opinions of approved commentators were discussed. (Manguel 77)

This sort of pedagogical framework I have already criticized in the previous chapter, but I present it here as an example of what Rabelais writes directly against.

How does one read? In *The Limits of Interpretation*, Umberto Eco distinguishes between two kinds of textual interpretation: semantic interpretation, "a natural semiosic phenomeon" in which process "an addressee, facing a Linear Text Manifestation, fills it up with a given meaning"; and critical interpretation, "a metalinguistic activity" which, undeniably creative in itself,

seeks to recognize an adequate context (Eco 54-5). (For the cantankerous critic, it seems, the text itself is not enough.) The distinction, however overstated, nevertheless lends a useful terminology for discussing a subject so often resistant to a critical vocabulary as Nonsense.

The so-called Age of Reason and its sober hegemonies likely necessitated some extreme creations of Nonsense. Despite the many vituperative and anti-Swiftian claims to the contrary, there are more than mere "superficial resemblances" (Cohen 20), such as the presence of giants in their fictions, between the writings of Rabelais and Swift. Maureen Quilligan notes that *A Tale of a Tub* challenges its reader to "become involved as an active participant in the making of the narrative's meaning" (143): in that wonderful work's deconstruction (and that is definitely the word) of allegory, teasing between secular and religious contexts, Swift is entirely indebted to Rabelais and his habit -- pardon the pun-- of

> lifting the most awesome of scriptural sayings out of their contexts, as he places them in unexpected settings dominated by comedy and laughter. (Screech 86)

Humpty Dumpty's alleged definitions for the words of "Jabberwocky", though far-fetched (Robert D. Sutherland suggests that Humpty Dumpty makes up his definitions as Carroll "satirize[s] the amateur philological spectators" [149]), are very plausible indeed compared with the Kinbotean footnotes of Swift's ersatz 1697 treatise. Such notes cite mention of a cow as

an allusion to the Virgin Mary (305) and puzzle over "the author's meaning" of "a passage", "because it seems to be of importance" (343).

In *Tristram Shandy* Laurence Sterne is most explicit about his own debt to Rabelais, invoking him directly within the text (201). Sterne answers "Pantagruelism", the merry spirit of the ideal Rabelaisian reader (Erich Auerbach calls Pantagruelism "an intellectual attitude" [281]: "c'est certaine gayeté d' esprit conficte en mespris des choses fortuites" [Rabelais 887]), with "a careless kind of civil, nonsensical, good-humoured Shandean book" (422). The texts of both Swift and Sterne enjoy digressing about everything including digressions themselves, but where Swift's Silenus box purports to be full (e.g., "*Terra Australis Incognita*" [298] refers to Australia only literally; *allegorically*, purgatory is the reference), Sterne's absentminded narrator repeatedly down-plays almost any allegorical meaning to his book.

> For by the word *Nose*, throughout all this long chapter of noses, and in every other part of my work, where the word *Nose* occurs, --I declare, by that word I mean a Nose, and nothing more, or less. (Sterne 225)

This is clearly a nominalist statement precursive to the famous one uttered by smug Humpty Dumpty in *Through the Looking Glass*: "'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'" (Carroll 196).

Swift and Sterne together postulate the Nonsense problem as textual, whereby the still novel Gutenberg ontology was in many ways in opposition to that of speech. *A Tale of a Tub*'s so-called "*Hiatus in MS*" is no more serviceable for adequate oral reproduction than is the footnote in which Swift's meta-narrator, offering several amusing reasons for the blank, vaguely admits the "defect" may have "some satirical intention" (275). Sterne, just as fond of filling inappropriate spaces with unpronounceable asterisks, cannot be said to improve the situation when he dots his chapters with symbols, pointing fingers, and even a famous "marbled page (motley emblem of my work!)", the "moral" of which Sterne's reader will be unable to find "without *much reading*, by which your reverence knows, I mean *much knowledge*" (232). Sterne is flaunting, in consummate style, the Emperor's New Text *qua* text when he diagrammatically reviews the "tolerable straight line" (453) of his narrative (see Fig. 1, below), to which Joyce directly replied with his own "Turnpike under the Great Ulm" (*FW* 293.13-4; see Fig. 2).

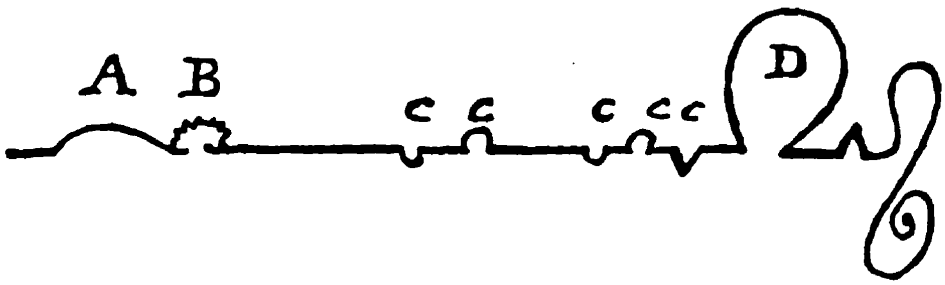

Fig. 1. Sterne 454.

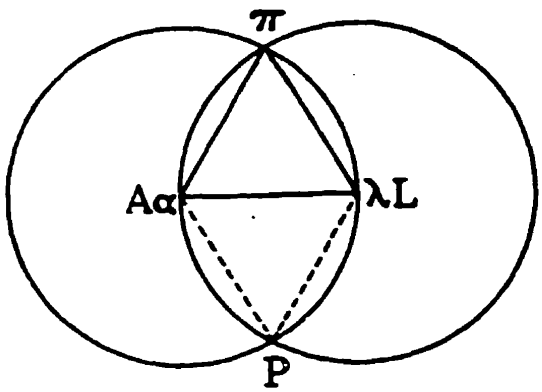

Fig. 2. *Finnegans Wake* 293.

The dour nineteenth century had the authority of manners to deal with, and it is not too surprising to find that the climax of nonsense in Lewis Carroll occurs in the *Adventures in Wonderland* "trial": a criminal proceeding ostensibly concerning the Knave's alleged tart-pinching (despite the explicit presence of the tarts in question). Like the oracular consultations in Rabelais, the trial is actually a dramatic debate concerning interpretation(s) and its (their) legitimacy. (Carroll has, in a way, secularized the Rabelaisian gambit.) In the course of the proceedings a strange page of verse mysteriously appears as the central evidence, which begins

They told me you had been to her,
And mentioned me to him:
She gave me a good character,
But said I could not swim.

He sent them word I had not gone
(We know it to be true)
If she should push the matter on,
What would become of you?

(Carroll 1865, 115)

The mysterious "letter" (hello again, Derrida) is unsigned, unaddressed, and seemingly produced from nowhere: "this paper has just been picked up" (114). The letter, a hermeneutical monkey-wrench thrown into the works of the court, serves as a volatile arena for the recurring conflicts of interpretation, of which Alice all too often finds herself positioned as arbitrator. Like the golden apple tossed between the goddesses, the text of the poem is de- and re-contextualized in each turn, to satisfy the agenda of the interpreter (in this case, to qualify as testimonial evidence against the knave).

In *The Field of Nonsense*, Elizabeth Sewell suggests that there are three ways in which the so-called "ordinary mind" can come to terms with Nonsense.

> If the mind is of the extreme type of dogmatic realist, it can dismiss Nonsense as skimble-skamble stuff along with dreams, magic, poetry, religion and other such sets of mental relations which do not correspond with what this mind calls "reality", a set of postulated relations assumed to be absolute, deviation from which can neither be tolerated nor enjoyed. A second possible attitude is to regard Nonsense as an annihilation of relations, either of language or experience, and to enjoy it as a delectable and infinite anarchy knowing no rules, liberating the mind from any form of order or system. The third possibility is to regard Nonsense as

> a structure held together by valid mental relations. (Sewell 4)

Doubtless these are reductive, caricatured "minds", and Sewell's (favoured) third approach is disturbingly wishy-washy, but the two extreme positions are in many ways descriptive of the dichotomy in Carroll's trial scene. The "[begin at the beginning... and go on till you come to the end: then stop" (1865, 114)[8] mentality of the King and his court is a caricature of literal practices of nineteenth century reading, like Virginia Woolf's alphabetically challenged Mr. Ramsay ("if he could reach R it would be something... Q he was sure of. Q he could demonstrate" [39]). Contrary, radical approaches to reading -- embodied in the anarchic semiotics of characters like the Mad Hatter, for whom saying what one means is "not the same thing a bit" as meaning what one says (Carroll 1865, 69)-- suffer from the oppression such authoritative regulation of meaning invariably generates.

Alice declares her belief that there is not "an atom of meaning" within the "evidence" poem; an expression which reveals the standpoint that meaning comes in indivisible units ("atoms").[9] The King, however, does choose to "push the matter on" (115), probably because the impeccable grammatical sense of the rhyme lends the possibility of other sensical readings viability (Kristeva 215), and "*faire violence au texte*" (Lecercle 100), a violence within ordained interpretation otherwise expressed earlier in the trial in the use of the "hard" word,

"suppressed" (109). The royal critical interpretation of the "evidence" poem says more about the King than the text, since the poem, as effective Nonsense, yields to no one context but also resists no offering.

The poem's ambiguity lies specifically in its lack of a point of reference for so many pronouns and teasing details ("gone" and "the matter"). The text employs distinct language and simple syntax, but it is the reader, "you", whom the unknown author suggests as "*An obstacle that came between / Him, and ourselves, and it*" and the strange, undetailed secret of the last verse is "*A secret, kept from all the rest, / Between yourself and me*" (115). I think the interesting word here is "between", as it is the text (as an object) and the reading (as a process) which divides ("an obstacle") but is also shared ("a secret") by a reader and an author.

Clearly, Carroll's "Jabberwocky" in the next Alice volume represents a greater nonsensical bent, but to appreciate the relation of the poems we need to discuss technique a little: I return again to the pattern of evolution of a statement's sensibility outlined earlier, in which syntactic and semantic sense(s) is (are) gradually disintegrated. The mathematical analogy of a "series" I made earlier is made clearer if a standardized example is thus "evolved." (The numbers before each statement represent a different attack upon the semantic sense of the whole.)

And the whole earth was of one language, and of one

speech. (Genesis 11:1, "unevolved" example.)

1. And the whale earth was of one language, and of one speech. (Possible pun; multisemy suggested. The gentlest mode of Nonsense in *Finnegans Wake*.)

2. And the whole towel was of one language, and in one container. (After Rabelais and the "evidence" poem in Carroll: statement of unfathomable context.)

3. And the whole fruzzbitten was of spung language, and hey nonny nonny. ("Jabberwocky" technique.)

4. Ogg mogg suchy fruzzbitten ing ogg degog hoorihooli, ya spatten jass ffffffth. (Total cryptography. Panurge's speaking in tongues; the greatest depths of the *Wake*.)

This exercise illustrates how easily nonsense is produced from sense, which may likely be taken for granted; but an experiment by the evolutionist Richard Dawkins serves to show how easily -- indeed, with what *inhuman* ability-- sense may be drawn out of its opposite.[10]

Perhaps more than anyone else, writers have taken the greatest comfort in the postulation that even a monkey, given eternity and a reliable typewriter, can manage to reproduce the works of Shakespeare. Yet what is to be made of the rest of the

proverbial monkey's oeuvre, the likely innumerable manuscripts of unstudied, random simian key-punching? Dawkins (46-50) had this problem in mind when he set a computer to arbitrarily mutating a given series of letters (and spaces counted as letters) until it produced the arrangement "METHINKS IT IS LIKE A WEASEL" (*Hamlet* III, ii, 388: in terms of contextual allusion, a masterful choice). Until the sensical mutation is achieved (by which is meant officially recognized Shakespeare)[11] the reader is left with "imperfect" texts of Shakespeare of a fantastic variety, such as the possible series arrangements "SKELE ITESMA WSA NILETHIK" and even the perfectly comprehensible "IT IS LIKE A WEASEL METHINKS" (or any other semantically acceptable anagram thereof). Whether these texts are Nonsensical parodies of Shakespeare is a question for a study of parody; for this discussion of Nonsense, the experiment reveals how rigidly hegemonic is linguistic/textual "sense", and at the same time almost pathetically arbitrary. This series-operated mode of textual Nonsense (seen in a different scheme of generational mutation in Carroll's word games, sensically changing BLACK to WHITE one letter at a time) I will refer to as the Uncollected Monkey Series, with four general variations postulated above.[12] The Series signifies the untapped vein of "serious" and sensical writing, a sort of literary junkyard. Nonsense as a mode of writing employs the variation rather than the authentic (sensical text), but does so in a unique fashion. Susan Stewart's two-part formula (introduced sympathetically in the last chapter as a way

to wade through the typologies of Joyce criticism) that "nonsense is humor [sic] without a context as well as metaphor without a context" (38) can now be grappled with critically.

Humour without context: is it even possible? The suggestion implies that (at least some) things can be funny for no reason, an idea both repulsive and fascinating to the reader who enjoys laughter but who also likes to know why s/he is laughing. While it seems pleasant to believe that the comic nature (of a person, of a text), mutative and irrepressible, is inscrutable through the clinical microscope of Reason, there are some significant ideas which bear out the opposite. There are, it seems to me, at least three general criteria by which one does not find a joke funny, and these are differences of knowledge (failure to connect with either allusion or language), of ideology (inability to sympathize with that of the joke) and of taste (the great mystery). This last is a minefield for critics who would do the generalization dance, but as such I think I can say of it that since its limits escape ordination, it is itself (theoretically speaking) an inevitable context.

It might be more prudent, then (Stewart's account notwithstanding), to propose that Nonsense (I capitalize for the literary form) displays the limits of context, or at least the reader's limits to forming a context. To characterize something so blankly as "funny for no reason" is to acknowledge the failure of one's reasoning: "funny for no explicable reason" seems truer. The reader cannot fathom (or is it simply *cannot express*?) a

context in which the humourous statement can be taken seriously (for example, the entirely credulous reader of Swift's allegorical meta-narrative must be rare, and certainly odd).

To consider next the problem of "metaphor without context": Stewart also writes that "nonsense results from a radical shift towards the metaphorical pole accompanied by a decontextualization of the utterance" (35). The detachment from plausible context(s) leaves the reader "not presented with a text that is rooted metonymically to the everyday lifeworld" (74), but instead somewhat stranded at a geographical "metaphorical pole" whose signposts all claim to point in the same direction.

> "What's the good of Mercator's North Poles and Equators,
>
> Tropics, Zones, and Meridian Lines?"
>
> So the Bellman would cry: and the crew would reply
>
> "They are merely conventional signs!"
>
> "Other maps are such shapes, with their islands and capes!
>
> But we've got our brave Captain to thank"
>
> (So the crew would protest) "that he's bought *us* the best--
>
> A perfect and absolute blank!"
>
> (Carroll 1876, 683)[13]

The intrinsic metaphor of the texts discussed here (which constitute the kind of metanarrative Lecercle is always looking

for) form the Rabelaisian gambit, the power of which game is the very power of belief. Chesterton, God's canny apologist, acknowledged this troubling problem in his *In Defence of Nonsense*:

> Nonsense and faith (strange as the conjunction may seem) are the two supreme symbolic assertions of the truth that to draw out the soul of things with a syllogism is as impossible as to draw out Leviathan with a hook. (Chesterton 8)

The blank map is the "best" map for the voyager certain of his or her location; only the lost see nothing on the page. In the final analysis, the sum of difference between Nonsense and gibberish is this claim of authority (specifically, as art: more on Joyce's contribution to this problem in the next chapter). The poetics of the Nonsense text, then, are measured by the range and balance of attributes the reader may lend it.

ii. Politics of Nonsense

> "If there's no meaning in it," said the King, "that saves a world of trouble, you know, as we needn't try to find any. And yet I don't know," he went on, spreading the verses on his knee and looking at them with one eye; "I seem to see some meaning in them, after all." (Carroll 1865, 115-6)

A master piece of strategy. An argument of their

> deliberation. The forensics of abuse which has not been written. No thought of their search. (Stein 390)

Now I am indeed in a area requiring caution; to dare to speculate upon the general pragmatics of decidedly unpragmatic, and perhaps even anti-pragmatic, texts. It is significant that the King of Hearts, with his handy judicial contextualization of the "evidence" poem of pronouns, is said "to see some meaning" with the use of "one eye". His is a cyclopean gaze (like that of the citizen in *Ulysses*): so bent upon relating meanings to a prestructured ideological framework that his interpretive focus is narrowed ("suspensive exanimation, accorded, throughout the eye of a noodle" [*FW* 143.08-9]) to admit only narrowminded ideas. Remember also the King's other bounding leaps of logic in which all deviations from acceptable answers produce a conclusion of illicit or seditious activity ("knavery").

> "Take off your hat," the King said to the Hatter.
>
> "It isn't mine," said the Hatter.
>
> "Stolen!" the King exclaimed, turning to the jury, who instantly made a memorandum of the fact. (Carroll 107)

These parodies of authorized (mis-)readings are warnings to the reader, not to be overlooked.

Freud unhelpfully suggests "it must not be forgotten that the nonsense in a joke is an end in itself" (176). This point is rather strangely compatible with the notion of "art for art's sake", and is likewise an exclusive, oppositional stance: to be for the sake of art is to be *not* for the sake of something or

someone else, be it society's, Christ's, Pete's, etc. (Sterne says he writes "against the spleen" [299].) In fact, Freud himself elsewhere recognizes humour in general as the "highest of... [human] defensive processes" (233); by which term "highest" he seems to mean either the most powerful or most dignified, or both. This defensive position occurs as the "exaltation of [the humourist's] ego" (Freud 234) supercedes worldly quibbles and problems. It is a position as personally interested as socially, since Nonsense's "constitutive strategy is one of last-ditch defence against the contagion of madness" (Lecercle 204: Hamlet's "weasel" echoes again here, a madness contra madness). As I suggested in the end of the first chapter, comic writing (especially, though by no means exclusively, of this century) can be regarded as a form of philosophical resistance --to authority and its constructs of tradition, status quo, etc., and finally, via sanctified interpretation, the dictation of reality-- and Nonsense occurs as the "highest" of the form, the most outrageous, the *in extremis* option against the most rigidly controlled ontologies of the twentieth century.

"Let us be realistic," Umberto Eco writes in *The Limits of Interpretation*; "there is nothing more meaningful than a text which asserts that there is no meaning" (7). Nonsense texts foreground the fragility of comprehension and thus reflect, in a funhouse looking-glass, the fallacy and weakness of criticism itself. George Steiner gravely rephrases the above comment from Eco when he says that as readers "[w]e must read as if the text

before us had meaning" (34). Is it true, is it inevitable that we "must" be "realistic" in this fashion; and if so, why?

"Realistic" is a clumsy word for as usually astute a critic and thinker as Eco to employ, and to employ so blithely. The insistence that "revelation" lies "in realism is like a trigger that sets off a metonymic sequence of assumed-to-be-shared values" (Stewart 87). Ontological puzzles weave in and out of so many fictions and particularly in these writings which I have described as challenging comprehension as an activity (Rabelais, for example, is a study in himself in this matter, as Auerbach has discussed). So then, let us forget about the text being "realistic", though we may take some comfort in treating the text as "real", an object with a measure of Aquinan *quidditas*. Richard A. Hilbert, in considering the sociological ramifications of nonsense, has noted that

> to invoke the notion of meaninglessness a primal, "real" reality... [is] itself but one more example of... interpretive activity, i.e., making sense of the world, which necessarily presupposes the objective and independent status of that "real" reality. (26)

This is certainly a bias of this study for which I can make no apology: perhaps to be found in the "independent status" I reluctantly grant to the text of the *Wake* (for Stanley Fish's question about the presence of the text "in this class" strikes me as merely rhetorical).[14] However, Hilbert's observation demonstrates the implausibility of a facile meaningful-or-

meaningless opposition: the reality, or unreality, of an object is not an absolute, but a dimension which can be explored in its variety of functions (the function of an object like a hat, for instance, as a head covering is a more tenable one than a proposed function as an explosive; but the "realities" of the hat are always relative to those of the hatter). Nonsense literature proceeds from this point of function to gesture to the more immeasurable, ludicrous and dangerous depths of meaning.

So Steiner's observation on the need for meaning is an acceptable one, but only as a preliminary to the understanding that it is not whether meaning "is" or "isn't" (within a text), but "how" it is/isn't. Eco is also right, but Nonsense texts balance their claim to a lack of meaning with promises (at least in their size and structure) of superlative meaning.

This powerful effect --the Archimedean notice of the fluid meaning's level change when the reader bathes in the text-- is won by a powerful cause, though because of the nature of these texts discerning cause from effect is problematic, to say the least.[15] If the act of writing can be seen to be political, even if only in the most benign fashion, the act of writing Nonsense is thus a particular political act. One obvious facet of this quality can be found in the language. From neologisms (Carroll's "slithy toves") to the variations on ready-made tropes and phrases (Joyce's "O Evol, kool in the salg and ees how Dozi pits what a drows her" [*FW* 262F2]), the writing is with a difference: the employment of elements from the Uncollected Monkey Series

represents a radical separation from officiated and pre-affiliated words and grammar. *Finnegans Wake* says truly of itself, in a statement which serves as a final decision for Joyce against the imperialist connotations of one language as well as the petulant nationalism of Gaelic revivals: "You will say it is most unenglish and I shall hope to hear that you will not be wrong about it" (160.22-3). To engage in nonsense (and Nonsense) is thus "to engage in an exploration of the nature of transition" (Stewart 88) and to seek the most individual form of textual expression. Nonsense is an anarchic struggle for alterity, and this is the reason for the difficulty a reader experiences in entering a dialogue with the text.

Contemplating the morality of Nonsense (or of the writing of it) is an even more complicated affair. It is amusing to note that, in mock-defending himself from the heinous "charge of writing nonsense", Carroll teasingly makes suggestion of "the strong moral purpose" of his poem "The Hunting of the Snark" (1876), and "the arithmetical principles so cautiously inculcated in it" (Carroll 677). (Intriguingly, Joyce also insisted that the structure of *Finnegans Wake* was mathematical [Ellmann 1982, 614].) If such a mathematical framework exists within "Snark", it is to this reader's discredit that he cannot find it; but if it does not, time --so precious to the Victorian White Rabbit with his watch, and casual friend to the anti-Victorian Hatter with his stopped one-- has been arguably misspent.[16]

A political action implies (in fact, probably connotes) a

moral standpoint. However, the texts discussed above thematically flout common morality and its rhetoric: Sterne defers ad absurdum to his good intentions to justify any waywardness; Rabelais' jolly writings are as tainted with anticlerical and antifeminist (see Screech 53) sentiments as they are enthusiastic about learning; Stein's *How To Write* wryly confuses "how to write" with "how not to write" in its defamiliarization of argument; the Duchess in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, a Menippean stand-up target (Frye 309-10) for the abuses Victorian rectitude inflicted upon the sensibilities of children and literature, enjoys "moral" as "her favourite word" (Carroll 89).

To question the moral element of Nonsense not only demands scrutiny of the thematic framework, but necessarily involves the consideration of whether language itself has a moral measurement. Lecercle seems to think it does, as he calls language "an immoral universe" (112). From this point of view, words are not to be trusted, wont as they are to entertain "perversions" (Lecercle's word): they are shifty slaves to a morally upright Humpty Dumpty.[17] This is a matter of projection, however, and language is to my mind too large --in Lecercle's own appropriate term, a "universe"-- and so prone to transformation (expansion, appropriation, bastardization, etc.) to be so judged. Joyce, Stein, and Carroll have dared their readers to explore their foreign yet sometimes familiar universes, and it is these hardy explorers who declare each map given them a "perfect and absolute blank!"

Nonsense literature inverts morality, refuses to accept or endorse a stance (though it clearly does not endorse rectitude and its retinues), and in accordance with the poetical position I have outlined, lets the reader choose one (or more) instead. When absolutes are presented in Nonsense, they are given in excess and often chosen for their contradictions, as in this early poem of Carroll's, "Rules and Regulations", unnecessarily equipped with an emphatic, rude and to all appearances unconnected "moral":

> Lose not a button.
> Refuse cold mutton.
> Starve your canaries.
> Believe in fairies.
> If you are able,
> Don't have a stable
> With any mangers.
> Be rude to strangers.
>
> *Moral:* Behave.
> (Carroll 1845, 705)

Finnegans Wake and its "murmurable loose carollaries" (*FW* 294.07) revel in "the fatal droopadwindle slope of the blamed scrawl, a sure sign of imperfectible moral blindness" (122.34-6). Stewart writes that such writing "must of necessity be a kind of taboo behaviour" (Stewart 88). This is in many ways an awkward statement ("must...be...taboo"?), but relevant in that it supports Nonsense's tradition of deconstructing the act of

reading for moral purpose (just as it does the whole of the act of reading). Ironically enough, the most convoluted of the Duchess's moralizings to Alice works as a general moral to Nonsense literature:

> "'Be what you would seem to be' --or, if you'd like it put more simply-- 'Never imagine yourself not to be otherwise than what it might appear to others that what you were or might have been was not otherwise than what you had been would have appeared to them to be otherwise.'" (Carroll 1865, 89)

Notes Chapter II

1. Presumably the determination of what constitutes a work that is itself absurd is fairly easy for Abrams; but by this definition alone I think a good argument could find comparable the "unstable ironies" in the "human condition" presented in *Waiting for Godot* with those of a text like, for instance, Austen's *Emma*.

2. Cf. Ambrose Bierce's definition in *The Devil's Dictionary* (New York: Dell, 1911): "**Nonsense**, *n.* The objections that are urged against this excellent dictionary" (121).

3. "Nonsense," Lecercle strangely claims, "does not invent words at random" (33). Does anyone know why a known thing, such as a dog, should be called a "dog" any more than why something unknown should be called a "bandersnatch"? Despite his interesting reading of Carroll, Lecercle has missed the relevance and wonder of "Jabberwocky."

I should stress, however that neologizing alone is not a recipe for Nonsense as I have discussed it: the linguistic play complements the ontological challenges to the reader. The writings of Dr. Seuss, for example, while bristling with unexplained words like "Lorax", do not demonstrate any critical "rigorous self-awareness" (Parsons 26) beyond an allegorical framework.

4. Atherton was not, however, the first to propose the connection, though many have said as much: Oliver St. John Gogarty was probably the first (Gogarty 4).

For further discussion of Carroll's presence within the *Wake*, see Atherton's 1952 article "Lewis Carroll and *Finnegans Wake*" (*English Studies* 33: 1-15) and Ann McGarrity Buki's "Lewis Carroll in *Finnegans Wake*" in *Lewis Carroll: A Celebration* (Ed. Edward Guiliano. New York: Clarkson Potters, 1982), 154-66.

5. By "anti-syntax" I do not mean "non-syntax", or that Stein's writing lacks syntax. Rather, as anti-epic is to epic, this innovative style employs syntax against itself.

6. *Terra Australis*, the world down under, etc. as a place "upside-down" or "unexplored" has often served as a metaphorical location for the realm of Nonsense within a sensible (i.e., comprehensively mapped) world. Alice, descending into Wonderland, conjectures whether she will arrive in the "antipathies", where people "walk with their heads downwards" (Carroll 17; see also Ronald Reichertz's "Carroll's Alice in Wonderland" in *The Explicator* [Winter 1985], 21-22). Joyce's Australian is a similarly "perpendicular person" (*FW* 60.25) from "the antipathies of austrasia" (489.10).

7. My translation.

8. Reading in this fashion, the King would never appreciate any of Carroll's acrostics, which style of poem requires alternative perspectives on the text.

9. Note that in "Sentences, Syntax, and Parts of Speech" Bertrand Russell distinguishes between "molecular" and "atomic" sentences; the non-relative existence of the latter is "an open question" (118).

10. The experiment by Dawkins actually relates to the subject of human genetics: in "higher organisms many long sequences [of DNA code] seem to be *genetic nonsense*" (Sagan and Druyan 82, emphasis added). The possible correlation of sequencing (of genetic and linguistic building blocks) offers intriguing ideas concerning the human value of nonsense construction (discussed further in relation to the *Wake* in the next chapter).

11. In this context, it is interesting that it is the works of Shakespeare which serve as the sensical accomplishment of the typing monkey, rather than those of another, less frivolous author, who would not think of using words like "fishified" (*Romeo and Juliet* II, iv, 39).

12. This is the only context in which I can appreciate Stewart's suggestion that Nonsense "can be seen as an equation" (35).

13. Eager misreaders hasten to fill in such blanks as fully as possible. Lecercle claims that the ship's crew in "The Hunting of the Snark" "have been chosen... because their names begin with B" (226) and goes on from this point (conjectural at best) to suggest the Baker's lack of a useful function (everyone else aboard has one? The Beaver would not say so of the Butcher) and even a name make him an outsider, a suitable sacrifice to the B-named Boojum Snark. The ambiguity of the Boojum's threat, or why the B-beastie Bandersnatch attacks the B-boy Banker are not details which enter the imposed logic of Lecercle's reading.

14. I should add that Fish's placing, or possibility of placing, the text within a "class" reveals unbeaten assumptions of

academic privilege in matters of textual interpretation.

15. "Nonsense does not undermine the idea of causality so much as it undermines the sense of contingency and necessariness underlying the everyday sense of causality. In nonsense, anything can cause anything else and everything causes everything else" (Stewart 138).

16. *Finnegans Wake*, the book of forever, is itself constantly asking the time: "By the watch, what is the time, pace?" (154.16); or "could he tell him how much a clock it was that the clock struck had he any idea by cock's luck as his watch was bradys" (35.18-9). John Ayto, in the *Dictionary of Word Origins* (New York: Arcade, 1990), writes that "[u]ltimately, *watch* and *wake* are the same word": the timepiece watch-association "is probably so called not because you look at it to see what time it is, but because originally it woke you up" (568).

As to the matter of arithmetical structure in "Snark", I observe the poem has eight fits, each fit ranging in length from nine stanzas to 29 to produce 141 stanzas; each stanza four lines in length, thus giving a total of 564 lines. The poem offers a great many numbers to chew on: the ship has a crew of ten, the Baker has forty-two boxes, and there are "five unmistakable marks" to the elusive Snark. The central number (inasmuch as there is one) is three, the number of times by which something repeated is true, and the cause and result of the Beaver's befuddled lesson:

$$3 = [((3+7+10) \times (1000-8))/992]-17 = 3$$

What these numbers have to do with each other structurally is, I happily admit, quite beyond me.

17. Patrick A. McCarthy notes that Humpty Dumpty "is a convenient symbol" (22) for one who falls from pride; his hubris may be characterized by his presumption of control over his language. This reading posits language not as a separate entity, but as a moral test for those who engage it.

III. Nonsense Apocalypse

Oh me none onsens! (*FW* 162.18)

What is *Finnegans Wake*? It is not a novel; or at least, it follows none of the traditions of the novel, makes no claims to be a novel, and its author did not refer to it as such. Although Benstock rejects "mock-epic" as too reductive a classification for the *Wake* (214-5), Margot Norris finds in Joyce's book an anti-novelistic tendency, as "a critique of the novel itself and, consequently, a critique of the literary and intellectual traditions that have sustained it" (15). In terms of style, Joyce had arguably "out-novelled" himself with the montage of *Ulysses*, "his usylessly unreadable Blue Book of Eccles" (*FW* 179.26-7); though this common suggestion does not support the numerous tired tirades about the so-called death of the novel as a valuable form. It is significant to recall that as *Work in Progress* the *Wake* appeared in serial volumes (e.g., *The Mookse and the Gripes* [1929], *The Mime of Mick, Nick, and the Maggies* [1934], etc.), like *Gargantua and Pantagruel* and *Tristram Shandy* did in their respective times. It is, in a way, remarkable that Joyce ever "finished" the book, the "last word in stolentelling!" (*FW* 424.35), and in so doing had to abandon his apt working title; but it might be truer to say that *Finnegans Wake* finished *him*. It will probably likewise always finish off its readers (or "reders").

Some sympathy is due the critics who have struggled to discover recognizable literary forms in the *Wake*, and sometimes

tentatively placed it within a given tradition or lineage of writing. In the first chapter I discussed the marginalization of the *Wake*, the "anomaly" stigma attached to it: if *Ulysses* struck its contemporary readers as a literary Trojan horse (Ellmann 1977, 43), those devastated by it must have glared with considerably mixed feelings at the new offering.

Such a distrustful atmosphere may explain why the jolly reading of the *Wake* which I am proposing --to wit, reading it as "the most daring monument to comic literary [N]onsense to appear in the history of writing" (Rieke 21)-- has been lightly suggested by less specialized critics and writers but has not been warmly embraced by Joyce scholarship itself. In the new Troy (to exhaust Ellmann's metaphor), everybody is a Cassandra.

In *Our Exagmination Round His Factification for the Incamnation of* Work in Progress, Beckett wrote in wonder of Joyce's book that "form *is* content, content *is* form" (14): Nonsense literature, as a collective body of work, seeks to achieve this balance, in its coincidence of decontextualized language and subversive ontological (inasmuch as reality is dictated by intepretation) metaphor. None of the chief exemplars discussed in the previous chapter aspire to the degree of nonsense *Finnegans Wake* represents, though the *Wake* stands on their shoulders in its achievement. In its self-conscious "meticulosity bordering on the insane" (*FW* 173.34) Joyce's "farced epistol" (228.33) is the grand modernist joke ("Mark Time's Finist Joke" [455.29]) upon the act of creation. After

all, from Joyce's point of view as a comic writer, creation itself is "the rash invention of a progressive Olympian with a penchant for practical jokes" (Gilbert 57).

i. A Portrait of a Confidence Artist as a Low Sham

> If I am laughing with you? No, lovingest, I'm not so dying to take my rise out of you, adored. Not in the very least. (*FW* 146.02-04)

> But how transparingly nontrue, gentlewriter! (*FW* 63.09-10)

There is an entire gallery of portraits of the artist constructed by readers, critics, and their respectively favoured contexts, including the medieval Joyce, Joyce the anticolonial, the Parisian Joyce, the Viconian Joyce, the feminist Joyce, the antifeminist Joyce, and so on; but probably the least regarded and respected (and often as not the most diminished) of these multiple Joyces is that of Joyce the Trickster. Who is this Joyce? This is not a biographical inquiry; but through readings of his texts outlines may be traced of "the event 'Joyce', the name of Joyce, the signed work, the Joyce software today, joyceware" (Derrida 148), the "sense of humour" (a tremulous phrase!) behind *Finnegans Wake,* his "final apostatic guffaw" (Benstock 107).[1]

Robert M. Adams reports, rather mildly, that the term *artist* "in Dublin argot is a trickster, a deceiver, a workman in

flimflam" (73). (Adams, however, thereafter dismisses this definition in connection with Joyce, whose artistic intentions he presumes to identify and analytically privilege.) Joyce shows constant awareness of this connotation, an awareness made manifest in the unsavoury quality attached to the presences of "*artistes*" in three of the stories in *Dubliners*, and the ribald connotations in the description of Leopold Bloom as having "a touch of the artist" about him (*U* 302).[2] Among HCE's nicknames/incarnations is "*Artist*" (*FW* 71.21), and the word recurs in the *Wake* (with mutations) in often sardonic contexts.

Joyce's knack for self-parody, occasionally witnessed in the ironies of Stephen's autobiographical characterization (e.g., the bold young intellectual who displays his snot upon the Strand's rocks, immune to public opinion, worries in the next moment someone might have seen [*U* 64]), operates at full force in *Finnegans Wake*, and is arguably more persistent than all of the other, simultaneous forms of mimetic parody within the text. The titles of Joyce's previous works win occasional mention, but as derogatory misnomers: his early poetry volume *Chamber Music* blushingly becomes "shamebred music" (164.15-6) and the already very scatological verse "Gas from a Burner" gets slushed out, "now we're geshing it like gush gash from a burner" (93.11). There are several "rewritings" of the famous beginning of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*,[3] such as that in the telling of the fable of "The Mookse and The Gripes": "Eins within a space and a wearywide space it wast ere wohned a Mookse"

(152.18-9), and there are some deprecating references to the structure of a certain "ulykkhean" (123.16) writing, "the littleknown periplic bestteller popularly associated with the names of the wretched mariner" (123.22-4) and its use of "the steady monologuy of the interiors" (119.32-3). *Dubliners*, as a title, appears more times than can be patiently counted. Janet E. Lewis (805-14) has noted that even the fable "The Cat of Beaugency" which Joyce wrote in a letter to his grandson --later published, in at least two editions, as a children's book entitled *The Cat and the Devil* (sadly, out of print)-- echoes within the *Wake*. The postscript to the original story gives a curious linguistic description of its villain:

> P.S. The devil mostly speaks a language of his own called Bellysbabble which he makes up himself as he goes along but when he is very angry he can speak quite bad French very well though some who have heard him say that he has a strong Dublin accent. (Ellmann 1982, 692n)

Not too surprisingly, the illustrations to the book edition give the devil a suspicious resemblance to the author.

César Abin's original concept for his portrait of Joyce was of the traditional learned-author-in-the-library, but the final 1932 caricature of Joyce as question mark (Fig. 3), so pensive as to accumulate cobwebs, came at his subject's own suggestion (Ellmann 1982, 645).

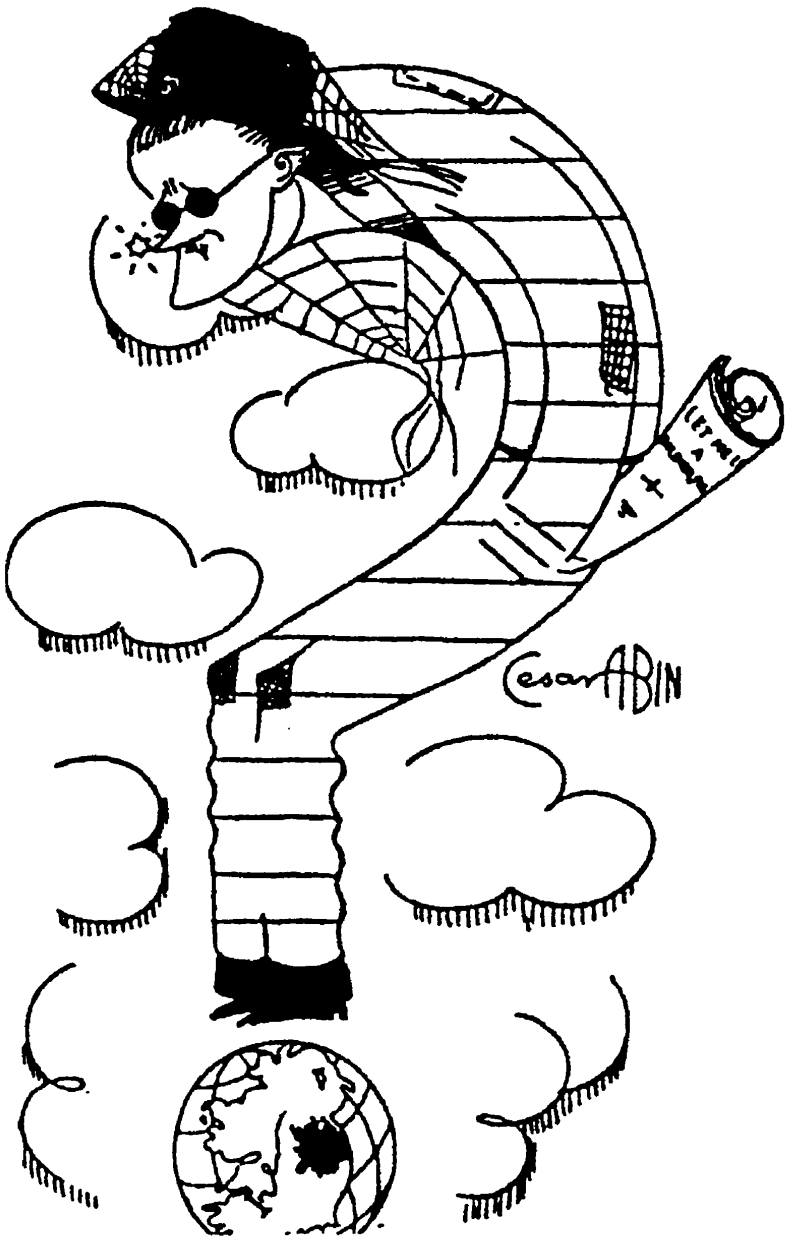

Fig. 3. César Abin's portrait of Joyce;
rpt. in Ellmann (1982, XLIX).

Joyce as an artist is thus a "jocosus inkerman" (*FW* 433.08-9),

"The Great Cackler" (237.34), the frail human architect of a bold tower of Babel, but also, simultaneously, the derisive God who knocks it down. Joyce assumes a heady job indeed "as a builder in man's progress" (202), to borrow Benstock's grandiose phrase, though he does not assume the Ibsenian title "master builder" but rather that of "the masterbilker" given to "signing the page away" (*FW* 111.21). Patrick McCarthy notes:

> Joyce's concept of the creative artist seems always to involve some form of riddle: the riddler is the equivalent of the Daedalian artificer, for the riddler is a form of verbal labyrinth whose purpose is to puzzle or mislead. (30)

The "masterbilker" (elsewhere "monsterbilker" [296.07] and animus-counterpart to the mythical "prankquean" [21.15], whose questions recur in alike groups of three) is this riddler. This Joyce-aspect is also a liar, cheat and thief, whose desire to write is equated with a connivance "to utter an epical forged cheque on the public for his own private profit" (181.16-7; see the "bilk"/"prophet" discussion, as well as that of the currency of thought, which follow). He is a "sham" like "Shem", a name which "is as short for Shemus as Jem is joky for Jacob" (169.01): a comparison worth remembering since Jacob is described in Genesis as "a smooth man" (27:11). Gogarty, who cites the hoax of MacPherson's *Ossian* in direct comparison to the *Wake* ("*MacPerson's Oshean*" [*FW* 123.25]), portrays Joyce as a sinister and rebellious jokester (the joke who bilked the hoax):

> This arch-mocker in his rage would extract the Logos, the Divine word or Reason from its tabernacle, and turn it muttering and maudlin into the street. (Gogarty 4)

The *Wake*, with its alleged "excellent inkbottle authority" (263.23-4) promises to "plant them a poser for their nomanclatter" (147.20-1: the "them" in this context may be readers, or would-be administrators of language).

Hélène Cixous attributes Joyce's manner to a "writing governed by ruse" which she finds is

> 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 extraordinarily free game... (19)[4]

Whereas Derrida uses as both focus and frame for a discussion of Joyce two words ("he war"), I am continually struck by one alone which marks the Nonsense-Joyce of *Finnegans Wake*: "awethorrorty" (516.19). Joyce understood and embraced Wilde's epigrammatic dissociation of the value of an idea from the quality of

sincerity in its expression (1890, 1048), as well as his notion of the artist as "the only person who is never serious" ("A Few Maxims" 1203).[5] This philosophy is perhaps most clearly expressed in his writing, for example, in Stephen Dedalus' anti-authoritarian lack of committal to his "algebraic" theory of *Hamlet* outlined in the "Scylla and Charybdis" episode of *Ulysses* (274-5). The tremendous self-reflexive doubt towards creative "awethorrorty" in the *Wake* had been evolving through the course of his writing. The young, Joyce-like Stephen Dedalus, for example, "recalled his own equivocal position in Belvedere, a free boy, a leader afraid of his own authority" (*P* 91). Joyce's "awethorrorty" is the anxiety which drives the *Wake* to attempt, in a strange and unique way, an autonomous existence apart from its writer: "I thought ye knew all and more, ye aucthor, to explique to ones the significat of their exsystems with your nieu nivulon lead" (*FW* 148.16-8). Note the Latinate "auct" root shared by "author" and "authority", as well as "authentic".

We as readers of the *Wake* are ironically told that we

> may have our irremovable doubts as to the whole sense of the lot, the interpretation of any phrase in the whole, the meaning of every word of a phrase so far deciphered out of it, however unfettered our Irish daily independence, we must vaunt no idle dubiosity as to its genuine authorship and holusbolus authoritativeness. (*FW* 117.35-118.04)

"Idle dubiosity" is in fact the order of the day for any sincere

reader of this ever-disarming book. "Can't you understand? O bother, I must tell the trouth!" (459.22-3). Honest Jim Joyce tells no lies, but tells "the trouth"; the reader should recognize the centrality of satire against "holusbolus authoritativeness" --here associated with the brutality and longevity of imperialism and domination, the "however unfettered" a truly sardonic phrase-- to the *Wake* as a whole. Joyce the trickster is not merely laughing in the dark, but laughing at the sensibility which dictates that nothing can be seen in that darkness.

ii. *Finnegans Wake*: A Theory of Pure Nonsense

> Your machelar's mutton leg's getting musclebound from being too pulled. (*FW* 64.32-3)

> A question of pull. (*FW* 266F4)

Between *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake* Joyce's idea of stylized language expanded to a recognition of language itself as a (the) narrative. "Oxen of the Sun" in *Ulysses* was likely the most radical example of this method before "Work in Progress" began, as the embryonic development of the English language greatly overshadows the almost incidental representation of a maternity ward birth. The indeterminacy of a "plot" within the *Wake* is not any sort of "flaw" in the work, but rather, the result of the indeterminacy of its expression (its events are "umdescribables" [*FW* 298.32]).

The shift from leitmotif (metonymy) to word association (metaphor) shakes up what were, by the 1930s, becoming almost commonplace and stagnant guidelines of modernist writing. The range of associations for, say, the advertising jingle for "Plumtree's Potted Meat" as it recurs in *Ulysses*, or the Tolstoy-inspired thought of a dying Napoleon's leg twitching as it reappears in Lowry's *Under the Volcano*, may be argued to be numerous, but they are limited. By contrast, *Finnegans Wake* may re-present a word or phrase, but it is never the same "meaning" twice, let alone the same situational context within the narrative (I cannot help but feel an insidious Heraclitan reference operating in the introductory "riverrun"). In fact, in the *Wake*'s ever-regenerative grammar, semantically the word may not be the exact same word again.

For instance, there is a great amount of "Fall stuff" (*FW* 366.30: note, besides the Falstaff pun, the use of "stuff", the usual counterpart to the pejorative "nonsense") tossed around in the *Wake*. *Skeleton Key* and plot summary critics persist upon the "fall" of mankind as the dominant thematic context for the vast number of fall-incidents in the text: a reductive and canonically-minded assessment. This "fall" is thus the critically privileged interpretation of a passage such as this one:

> she who shuttered him after his fall and waked him widowt sparing and gave him keen and made him able and held adazillahs to each arche of his noes (102.01-3)

As fallen as Christ/Adam/"Man" may be, has he fallen any faster

or further than the "fallen woman" (Mary Magdalene, etc.), or is it a more serious or important condition than having similarly fallen "arches"? The "sense" of a fall in the *Wake* may be in any given instance a figure of speech ("fallen into the custom" [122.29-30]) or a defeat by slapstick ("Gricks may rise and Troysirs fall" [11.35-6]). Consider the "fall" associations which open up when the linguistic context is widened beyond English alone. The unusual sentence "*Le hélos tombaut soul sur la jambe de marche*" (280L09-11), for example, introduces the makeshift root "tomb" (or even "tom", which itself appears nineteen times in the text) from which can be seen to originate a host of interesting word structures relevant to the *Wake* ("tomber": to fall; "tombe": tomb; "tombée": nightfall; "tombée sur la tête": crazy; and so on).[6]

Joyce's associations are freed from the strictures of etymology alone, and his recontextualizing (better to say the *Wake*'s recontextualizing, since the "meanings" will always stretch past any scope of individual intention) seem practically random. In fact, Attridge points out,

> the systematic networks of meaning could probably provide contexts for most of the associations that individual words might evoke -- though an individual reader could not be expected to grasp them all... Every item in a text functions simultaneously as a sign whose meaning is limited (but not wholly limited) by its context and as a context limiting (but not wholly

> limiting) the meaning of other signs... The enormous difference between *Finnegans Wake* and other literary works is, perhaps, a difference in degree, not in kind. (Attridge 1988, 203)

Talk of "polysemy" within the language of the *Wake* is thus --for all practical purposes-- redundant. The question which plagues the student of literature when facing (or "faced by"?) the *Wake* is one of limits of interpretation, a problem here often encompassed by a single word. Recurring matrices made up of changing variables of "a potentially infinite series" (McHugh 1981, 47) govern Joyce's nonsensical word associations (and by extension, ours). At the same time that sensical meaning is made less apparent, the "deficiency of signification is rapidly turned into a surplus of signification" (Stewart 127). Consider the relatively mild precursive example from the "Ithaca" chapter of *Ulysses*, in which "the catechism fades off into nonsense gabble" (Adams 165).

> Sinbad the Sailor and Tinbad the Tailor and Jinbad the Jailer and Whinbad the Whaler and Ninbad the Nailer and Finbad the Failer and Binbad the Bailer and Pinbad the Pailer and Minbad the Mailer and Hinbad the Hailer and Rinbad the Railer and Dinbad the Kailer and Vinbad the Quailer and Linbad the Yailer and Xinbad the Phthailer. (*U* 871)

This systematic regression of semantic sense (or, evolution of semantic nonsense) is easily recognizable as a conservative

strain of the metamorphosing language-virus earlier termed The Uncollected Monkey Series. As this rather verbless sentence from *Ulysses* continues the reader can be said to encounter the monkey's more deviant typings; or to put it another way, the guidelines for acceptable variation open up.

This is only to speak of Joyce's Nonsense as a written document: there is also the much discussed (but still, to be honest, only very slightly grasped) extratextual quality to *Finnegans Wake*, or the "soundsense and sensesound" (121.15) of it. Is "Earwicker" pronounced *eerwikker* or *airwikker*? (For all this reader knows, it might be pronounced "Napoleon Bonaparte" or even --with a humble nod to the frequently nonsensical Monty Python-- "Throatwobbler Mangrove.")[7] The *Wake* has no phonetic language: or are what McHugh calls its "sigla" --the geometric "Doodles family" (299F4)-- just that? Is there a spoken dialect or particular accent for the read-aloud language(s) of the book? The assumption of an Irish accent does not make clear what magnificent "soundsense and sensesound" tricks the text is playing in the sentence "Gee each owe tea eye smells fish" (299F3).

The waywardness of these variations transgress the customs of mere allusion, much to the dismay of many critics: Strother B. Purdy, for example, confesses that the thought of innumerable interpretations "upsets" him (60) and appeals that "Common sense generally prevents" the radical or distasteful misreadings he colourfully calls "aberrations" (61). The droll idiom of "Common

sense" aside, the sentiment is understandable as any reader may very likely balk at the idea of omnisemy.[8]

The *Wake*'s hilarious lament, "Oh me none onsens!" (162.18), offers an effective deconstruction of the term "nonsense" itself: to wit, to be "nonsense" is to have "no one sense". Here in the very word "nonsense" the convergence of all-meaning or no-meaning occurs: the Rabelaisian gambit has taken on cosmic proportions in Joyce's technique of "Putting Allspace in a Notshall" (455.29).[9]

To comprehend how one "makes sense" involves an understanding (or, at least a working theory) of narrative thought. The contention that human beings think in signs, though a simple and easily quipped formula, is hard to take seriously. Just as currency not in exchange has no true value, so signs must be always in process of interpretation. Knowledge, in my opinion a highly overvalued commodity, is not much more than a static collection of signs, an album of ideas pinned like butterflies in an album. Thought, on the other hand, is a process which involves the moving exchange, comparison, and alteration of signs. (Thus, "riverrun" and not merely "river".) Thought is probably better expressed as *narrative*, a connective play between signs and values.

A comparative reading experiment might yield some observations about the nature of narrative (and/or narrativization) and its relation to the question of Nonsense.[10] Consider the following pair of passages, drawn from completely different sources and selected from the whole text more or less

at random.[11]

> — Are you of my meaning that would be going on to about half noon, click o'clock, pip emma, Grinwicker time, by your quercut quadrant?
>
> — You will be asking me and I wish to higgins you wouldn't. Would it?
>
> — Let it be twelve thirty after a somersautch of the tardest!
>
> — And it was eleven thirsty too befour in soandsuch, reloy on it!
>
> — Tick up on time. Howday you doom? That rising day sinks rosing in a night of nine week's wonder.
>
> — Amties, marcy buckup! The uneven day of the unleventh month of the unevented year. At mart in mass. (*FW* 517.24-34)

Langlois M C 1208 StJosephE.....**596-1476**

Langlois M C 1652 SherbrookeE.....**598-8152**

Langlois M-C 5333 SherbrookeE.....**256-6015**

Langlois M-E 5350 Cadillac.....**257-6778**

Langlois M E 4145 Parthenais.....**525-1502**

Langlois M-H 8044 Casgrain.....**388-7178**

Langlois M J 4654 deLorimier.....**521-2063**

Langlois M-J 3433 Durocher.....**845-3892**

Langlois M J 5674 Gatineau.....**341-0444**

Langlois M J 6299-A Villanelle.....**259-4285**

(Bell Canada 892)

The first passage, at least, seems to offer some grammatical coherence, though no such lexical reassurances are evident (what, for instance, is a "somersautch"?). Readers' expectations are toyed with in the reconfiguration of entirely recognizable phrases: "wish to higgins" and "it was eleven thirsty" seem to be defamiliarized common English ("wish to heavens"; "eleven thirty"), and "marcy buckup!" a mutilated French ("merci beaucoup").

In their *Skeleton Key* Campbell and Robinson explain that this particular passage from the *Wake* constitutes a scene of name-calling, "Box and Cox, huing and crying at each other, about 11:32 o'clock" (315): a pretty sparse "translation", I think, by anyone's measure. Seizing upon the most concrete (and deceptively simple) detail, the time of 11:32, and looking back to the passage, we do not find the Arabic numerals anywhere in the text, and the closest written English has an extra "s" and an "o" where a "w" ought to be: "eleven thirsty too." To read "eleven thirsty too" as "11:32" involves conscious decisions *to omit* and *to replace*. Where does "a process of mnemonic linking" (Bishop 9) end and revision begin? A substitute text has been imagined between the "paraphrase" (*Skeleton Key*) and what might be called the "paraphasic" (*Finnegans Wake*). This fabricated middle text is necessary for this anti-nonsensical, or simply "sensical" reading. In Part II of this essay two kinds of sense were postulated, semantic and critical: for a sensical reading like

that of Campbell and Robinson, a semantically sensible middle text has been imagined in which "eleven thirty" appears.

The second passage, if we imagine for a moment as a literary rather than a functional text limited by the definition of that function, makes even less syntactic sense (or discernible approaches to it) than the first; but after Gertrude Stein (for example) the reader cannot eliminate the other possibilities of literary "sense." The meaning(s) of these lines might be "determined by the *series* of words, not the *class*" (Russell 124); which is to suggest that the repetition of "Langlois" unites each of these lines or phrases as a series, that this extract as a whole says something about "Langlois," whatever "Langlois" represents. If we, for a moment, consider "Langlois" as a Joycean sort of portmanteau, it might be read as "language laws" (*langue* [Fr.] + *loi* [Fr.]): a possible pun on the immediacy of grammar that this text's author has managed to dodge, or an oblique reference to Saussure, or even (sagely noting the point of publication) a political jibe at Québec separatist language policy. All of these possibilities come from only one language, and a more polylinguistic approach naturally complicates things exponentially: the similarity to German "Langlauf," for instance, can introduce the puzzling context of cross-country skiing.

The numerals complicate things. Perhaps this passage is a mathematical statement (the hyphens between numbers and letters suggest the operation of subtraction), or a computer language command. Either case lets the philologist off the hook, but for

the sake of argument these possibilities will be forsaken as we rest assured that this passage does in fact constitute a (literary) narrative.

To catch even a glimpse of this decontextualized narrative, as basic or as convoluted as it may be, an initial, arguable connection must be determined between the signs. Suppose a reader notes, with a little hurrah, that "Casgrain", "Durocher" and "Gatineau" are street names in the city of Montreal. A theory develops; the reader checks a map and finds that in each line of the passage the word after the first set of numbers fits this pattern; the numbers appearing before the streets correspond to residence addresses, in which addresses live --the acute reader, too modest to leap from the tub with a "Eureka!", now smiles quietly-- people surnamed Langlois.

My geographically conscious reader of the second passage, surmising that the text constitutes a directory of some kind, makes what is probably the best arguable interpretation, and to do so has to rely upon narrativistic instincts. The important qualification is "arguable". For instance, the above passage from *Finnegans Wake* may strike a reader as a distorted representation of a dialogue (Joyce always preferred the French *tirez* over inverted commas) about the inexact time (hour or date), like so many other considerations of the problem in the *Wake* (see note 16 to the last chapter) and maybe reminiscent of the Mad Tea Party's argument ("always six o'clock now" [Carroll 1865, 72]). The recorded reading history of the *Wake* offers a case of another,

rather inventive interpretation, however; but one no more ridiculous, perhaps --though in a different register-- than taking to the phone book for literature. In a series of forty letters, a young man named George Johnson claimed in 1954 to have "solved the riddle" of the *Wake* in his discovery within this very passage of the exact date of imminent atomic war: the eleventh of November (Fitch 394).

The Johnson reading (or misreading) damages the hope for a metanarrative as life-raft in Nonsense's whirlpool, a hope expressed by Lecercle when he notes that Carroll's Alice "is dimly aware" that "narrative coherence *somehow compensates* for semantic incoherence" (22, italics mine) when she reads "Jabberwocky". Lecercle ignores the fact that Alice has manipulated the text already, in turning it to the mirror so that the characters appear as intelligible (recognizable) to her. In the previous chapter, Elizabeth Sewell's limited idea of three approaches to Nonsense were outlined. Both the reading by the authors of *A Skeleton Key* and that of Johnson lean to the "dogmatic realist" side ("reality", of course, being a relative measurement) and shun the idea of "an annihilation of relations". They cannot view nonsense, except through a glass darkly, and can only trace sensical outlines. Like Alice, they have had to alter the appearance of the text to read it to their satisfaction: the reflection is treated as object (vrai objet) rather than image.

"Bilking" in the *Wake* is not only the gesture of the writer, but of the reader: "So read we in must book. It tells. He

prophets most who bilks the best" (*FW* 304.31-305.02). When the twelfth of November dawned in 1954, George Johnson must have felt bilked, for he propheted nothing. Campbell and Robinson bilk in the crudest sense, I think, by way of the word's "evading payment" connotation, but they have been duped themselves for investing so much in a text which admits itself to be a hoax. A nonsensical reading, though, operates on a faithfully literal level but stays aware of ironies. "It tells" what, this "must book"?

The Nonsensical essence of *Finnegans Wake* can be said to thrive in the simple sentence construction, "isn't it the truath I'm tallin ye?" (15.24-5): semantic distortion and ontological challenge, however basic, effectively complement each other in a general attack against literal meaning(s). The likeliest sensical reading reconfigures "truath" as "truth" (maybe denying the Lacanian petit-a "autre" in the process), but a nonsensical reading may wonder whether a text can only tell (or "tall" like a "tall tale") the "truath"; that is, truth transmogrified, truth embellished, truth unrecognizable; truth not, strictly speaking, itself.

There is no one comprehensive "reason" for the metalanguage (distortions of modern language, or precursor to modern language: pick your own poison) of *Finnegans Wake* because of its Nonsensical, unreasonable, antireasonable nature. Joyce may be seen to connect within the *Wake*-language the words "reason" and "treason", in constructed phrases like "beyond doubt of treuson"

(575.34), and, contextually, in the appearance of "theirs not to reason why" (87.10) in remembering "the filth of November" (87.04).[12] In reflecting upon the juxtaposition of the order of reason with the Fawkesian pseudo-anarchy of treason (the reader bearing in mind earlier discussion of the "Politics of Nonsense"), the text can be seen to itself thwart such a process of rationalization.

> This battering babel allower the door and sideposts, he always said, was not in the very remotest like the belzey babble of a bottle of boose which would not rouse him out o' slumber deep but reminded him loads more of the martiallawsey marses of foreign musikants' instrumongs. (*FW* 64.09-14)

Within this one sentence the four most popular reasonings for the state of the language ("this is nat language at any sinse of the world" [83.12]) are being played off against one another: the intersection of "foreign" tongues which composed the central speech of "babel"; the merry but slurring *bierschwefel* of Ireland at the bar; the hypothetical dream-langauge drawn "out o' slumber deep"; and the subversion of semantics to musical rhythm. We are back again at the "greater than and less than" axiom, according to which Joyce typically admits all and none of these readings.[13]

Values and signs, which comes first in nonsense reading? Is a rose a red rose because the Queen of Hearts has a given rose painted red, or is a rose is a rose a rose? "In the buginning is

the woid, in the muddle is the sound-dance and thereinofter you're in the unbewised again, vund vulsyvolsy" (*FW* 378.29-31). The rule of the King of Hearts, to "begin at the beginning" in reading is laughably inapplicable if the text has only a "buginning" and seemingly no end ("Finn, again!" [628.14]). The direction of reading is not straightforward to this "meandertale" (18.22), a word whose incorporation of "meander" is probably

> indicating that the words which follow may be taken in any order desired, hole of Aran man the hat through the whispering his ho (here keen again and begin again to make soundsense and sensesound kin again)
> (*FW* 121.12-16)

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the expression "to talk through one's hat" as "to talk nonsense"; but to those who have been listening "for ever and a night" (120.12-3) to Joyce's whispering, this is old news. The structural reason one does not talk of "having read" *Finnegans Wake* (see Chapter I) is in fact the same reason one does not talk of "having read" the Bell telephone directory. Just as the reader of *Tristram Shandy* "is obliged continually to be going backwards and forwards all tight together in the reader's fancy" (Sterne 444), so the *Wake* "reder" learns to maneuver haphazardly through the encyclopedia, taking the words which follow in any order desired, happily (or unhappily, as the case may be) getting lost --"I've lost the place, where was I?" (*FW* 307F4)-- as often as "sense" itself falls away.

The possibility of an authentic or otherwise "authorized" meaning is most threatened by the inauthentic, "epical forged cheque" posture of the text itself. Turning attention once more to the issue of the polymorphous reflex of "falling" in the *Wake*: the matter of so grand a mythological trope as the Fall is not one, as Stuart Gilbert notes, of "exclusive seriousness" (62). Heidegger, in his often complicated terminology, may be seen to connect the "fallen" with the inauthentic.

> "Fallenness" into the 'world' means an absorption in Being-with-one-another, in so far as the latter is guided by idle talk, curiosity, and ambiguity. Through the Interpretation of falling, what we have called the "inauthenticity" of Dasein... "Inauthenticity" does not mean anything like Being-no-longer-in-the-world, but amounts rather to a quite distinctive kind of Being-in-the-world -- the kind which is completely fascinated by the 'world' and by the Dasein-with of Others in the "they". (Heidegger 220)

The mode of Joyce's telling of the fall (or Fall) is itself "fallen": distinctive as an anomaly, inauthentic ("epical forged cheque" [181.16] that it is) as an unrecognized style of literary discourse. In Heidegger's restrictive terminology, to "Rede" is to engage in an act of authentic discourse, whereas "Gerede" is only the negligible exchange of allegedly idle talk: one can consider the apocalyptic question the Nonsensical *Wake* asks ("can you rede") as a challenge to such a separation.

iii. *Finnegans Wake*: A Theory of Applied Nonsense

> Ask yourself the answer, I'm not giving you a short question. (*FW* 515.19-20)

> Answers, (for teasers only). (*FW* 284.16)

In the final sections of the previous two chapters, a general sketch of the pragmatics of Nonsense has been formulated. Now *Finnegans Wake* occupies discussion as a specific example in which to further engage the possibilities, and ask what value lies in reading this text as Nonsense, a "hoax" or "joke".

The *Wake* has prompted John Updike to wonder, "has any book ever had so many exclamation points?" (137); while this definite excess of punctuation highlights the exuberance of the book, there is also a startling number of interrogation points to be found in its pages. By my possibly faulty count ("And now, upright and add them!" [*FW* 396.04]), there are one thousand, four hundred and sixty (1460) question marks within the text of the *Wake*: that averages to just over two question marks per page.[14] The number and pace of this stunning Irish Inquisition (as the act of counting has led me to think of the book) indicate, at the very least, that the text wants to know something about its reader (and perhaps too its "gentlewriter").

There are several purposes and thematic relations to this repeated questioning. A "question" posed as *the* question is a determinist device Joyce mimics ad absurdum ("the tonsure question" [*FW* 43.12-3]; "the space question" [160.36]; "Zot is

the Quiztune" [110.14]; etc.). Joyce is ever-aware of its employment in the rhetoric of xenophobia (e.g., "the Irish Question" or "the Jewish Question": the whole question of which might be expressed as "what to do about *them*?") and intrusion (e.g., judicial interrogation, inquisition by imposed and accusative authority). The trial motif found in earlier Nonsense literature (Pantagruel's judgement, the Barrister's dream in "The Hunting of the Snark", the trial of the Knave of Hearts, and so on) also permeates *Finnegans Wake*. Here is a dialogue --if we accept the use of the tirez in this case as an indicator-- of a dispute over the meaning "behind" the laugh-sound "hah"; or, read with what I have suggested is Nonsense's motivation towards radically individual expression firmly in mind, an adroit parody of a judicial attempt to discourage the suspiciously subversive tendencies of humour.

> — What do you mean, sir, behind your hah! You don't hah to do thah, you know, snapograph.
>
> — Nothing, sir. Only a bone moving into place. Blotogaff. Hahah!
>
> — Whahat?
>
> — Are you to have all the pleasure quizzing on me? I didn't say it aloud, sir. I have something inside of me talking to myself.
>
> — You're a nice third degree witness, faith! But this is no laughing matter. (*FW* 522.20-8)

The "nice third degree witness" with the unruly bone structure (a

funny bone?) continues to be interrogated --and even ordered: "Get yourself psychoanolised!" (522.32)-- as the institution and individual artist clash due to conflicts of "awethorrorty". Trial proceedings are clearly a perfect target for Nonsense parody, because the court seeks to find an authoritative truth (verdict) by means of a rigidly maintained mode of discourse (interrogation related to tangible evidence) to suit a pre-established context (a given charge). Even moreso than the civil action in *Pantagruel* (or even the trial of Kafka's K.), the trial-like dialogues of *Finnegans Wake* lack a sensical basis for their enactments.[15] The charges, as well as the very identities of the accused and accuser, are polymorphous and interchangeable.

Nonsensical answers to sensical questions are clearly disruptive, but what is the function of a nonsensical question, perhaps addressed to a presumably sensical reader, and how can such a reader respond?

The most casually encountered (and explained) situation like this is a meeting of different languages, the sort which are often mimicked in the *Wake* (one nonsense dialect speaking to another).

> Scuse us, chorley guy! You tollerday donsk? N. You tolkatiff scowegian? Nn. You spigotty anglease? Nnn. You phonio saxo? Nnnn. (*FW* 16.05-07)

Communication between peoples of different linguistic backgrounds can sometimes make for some gentle pieces of nonsense.

However, for more complex intentions there is the riddle.

Margot Norris makes reference to the appearance of the riddles in Joyce's earler works, such as Athy's Rumplestiltskin-like riddle upon his name (which can mysteriously be asked "another way") to young Stephen, who admits he is "[n]ot very good" at riddles (*P* 25), and a more mature Stephen's "hard" riddle about the fox given to his eager students in "Nestor" (*U* 32). (Lenehan's spleen-poking "rows of cast steel" riddle [*U* 170]--with the unique Aeolian headline "? ? ?" [167]-- can also be included in this collection.) Norris points out how these riddles are not answered correctly (92), except after the fact by the riddler himself. Probably the most intriguing riddle in *Ulysses* does not appear fully in the text, and is not voiced by Stephen so much as it is simply thought:

> *Riddle me, riddle me, randy ro.*
>
> *My father gave me seeds to sow.* (*U* 31)

These, Patrick McCarthy observes, are the opening lines to a traditional riddle to which the answer is "writing" (36-7). For this discussion of *Finnegans Wake* as Nonsense literature, a riddle about writing is a fascinating occurrence, since the counterpart operation to writing is naturally reading, which word, as noted earlier, shares the same root as the word "riddle". In *Ulysses* writing is a riddling gesture; in the *Wake* reading involves interpreting so many riddles (recall that Joyce kept the *Wake*'s title a secret and riddled his friends about it: "Tell your title?" [*FW* 501.02]).

Note that I say "interpret" rather than "answer". "[D]efined

in terms of its subject and meaning", McCarthy admits that *Finnegans Wake* "cannot be 'answered'" (154); attempts for absolute meanings, like that of George Johnson and even, I think, those of the producers of *Wake* summaries, end in an often ridiculously unsatisfactory way (think of Stephen's consternation over his inability to find "the right answer to the question" of whether or not he kisses his mother every night before bed [*P* 14]). The riddle-without-answer is an even more pervasive motif in Nonsense than that of the mismanaged trial. Examples range from the Mad Hatter's famous unexplained riddle of the raven and writing desk (Carroll 1865, 68-71) to this Marx Brothers dialogue:

> GROUCHO: Now what is it that has four pairs of pants, lives in Philadelphia, and it never rains but it pours?
>
> CHICO: 'At's a good one. I give you three guesses.
>
> GROUCHO: Now let me see... has four pairs of pants, lives in Philadelphia... is it male or female?
>
> CHICO: No, I no think so.
>
> GROUCHO: Is he dead?
>
> CHICO: Who?
>
> GROUCHO: I don't know. I give up!
>
> CHICO: I give up, too.

Finnegans Wake takes its cue from this habit of absurd riddling, of pointedly meaningful meaninglessness. One means by which answers become irrelevant is that of tautology:

> — O, is that the way with you, you craythur? In the

> becoming was the weared, wontnat! Hood maketh not frere. The voice is the voice of jokeup, I fear. Are you imitation Roma now or Amor now. You have all our empathies, eh, Mr Trickpat, if you don't mind, that is, aside from sings and mush, answering to my straight question?
>
> — God save the monk! I won't mind this is, answering to your strict crossqueets, whereas it would be unethical for me now to answer as it would have been nonsensical for you then not to have asked.
>
> (*FW* 487.20-9)[16]

For this same purpose there is also the use of indelicate non-answers, like the aforementioned "N" (16.06) and the more lively example, "Bum!" (102.36). Sometimes the non-answer paradoxically acts *as* the answer; witnessed, for example, in one of the replies to "the first riddle of the universe" (170.04), namely, "when is a man not a man?" (170.05) riddle: "WHEN THE ANSWERER IS A LEMAN" (302R01-3). This answer is neither "when the answerer is a man" (which might render the question moot), nor the sour "when the answer is a lemon" (McCarthy 98), but an uncategorizable hybrid ("Miscegenations on miscegenations" [*FW* 18.20], indeed). "No answer" appears repeatedly in the *Wake*, though only as distortions, such as "Noanswa" (23.20), "Nuancee", and "Noahnsy" (105.14). "Ni ansa" in Gaelic, McCarthy reports, means "not hard (to say)" (30), while *Learner's Irish-English Dictionary* defines "ansa" as "preferred: more (most) loved" and "nì" as "thing". The

sensical reader would prefer an answer, and like Alice at the Mad Tea Party, cannot fathom the value(s) of "asking riddles that have no answers" (Carroll 1865, 71).

Such values exist, however, and are extremely important. A practical example of an operation which employs the madcap method of nonsensical catechism is the Turing Test, the sustained interrogation process by which claims of artificial intelligence are put to task. In the test, a human interrogator submits questions to a pair of unseen test subjects: one is a human, and the other the computer allegedly programmed to think like a human being. The subjects must answer each question promptly, one after the other.

> For whatever question one might first suggest, it would be an easy matter, subsequently, to think of a way to make the computer answer that *particular* question as a person might. But any lack of real understanding on the part of the computer would be likely to become evident with *sustained* questioning, and especially with questions of an original nature and requiring some real understanding. The skill of the interrogator would partly lie in being able to devise such original forms of question, to see if the computer could detect the difference, or she might add one or two which sounded superficially like nonsense, but really did make some kind of sense: for example she might say, 'I hear that a rhinoceros flew along the Mississippi in a pink

balloon, this morning. What do you make of that?'

(Penrose 9-10)

Within the parameters of the Turing Test principles, the ability to judge or determine or self-consciously create "nonsense" (in this case, critical nonsense) is a significantly (read: particularly and perhaps exclusively) human attribute.

The necessity of a "*sustained* questioning", stressed by Roger Penrose in his description of the test, is likewise an integral part of the nonsense of *Finnegans Wake*. The ideal Nonsense text, like that hypothetical Uncollected Monkey Series, is definitively "uncollected": like the combinations of genetic nonsense which form different human beings (and of course, all living organisms), the possible differential mutations upon sensical languages and texts are innumerable, and reading them would take "for ever and a night", as the *Wake* claims to require. Beckett notes that "every word expands with psychological inevitability", and studies the root to Joyce's "legpull"("*to pull... a person's leg*, to impose upon, 'get at', befool him (colloq.)" [OED]): "Legere = To gather together letters into a word, to read" (Beckett 11). The *Wake*'s impossible attempt to gather an uncollectable series is dramatized by Joyce's endless rebuilding of "The House That Jack Built", an example of "concatenation or chain verse" which "obviously present[s] a crisis of closure" (Stewart 139: see also the rhythmic reply to "How war yore maggies?" [*FW* 142.30-143.02]). Simple variations like "the house that juke built" (*FW* 375.04) can be seen to

progress exponentially:

> That legged in the hoax that joke bilked. (511.34)
>
> the ward of the wind that lightened the fire that lay in the wood that Jove bolt (80.27-8)
>
> adding the tout that pumped the stout that linked the lank that cold the sandy that nextdoored the rotter that rooked the rhymer that lapped at the hoose that Joax pilled. (369.13-5)
>
> the slave of the ring that worries the hand that sways the lamp that shadows the walk that bends to his bane the busynext man that came on the cop with the fenian's bark that pickled his widow that primed the pope that passed it round on the volunteers' plate till it croppied the ears of Purses Relle that kneed O'Connell up out of his doss that shouldered Burke that butted O'Hara that woke the busker that grattaned his crowd that bucked the jiggers to rhyme the rann that flooded the routes in Eryan's isles from Malin to Clear and Carnsore Point to Slynagollow and cleaned the pockets and ransomed the ribs of all the listeners, leud and lay, that bought the ballad that Hosty made. (580.26-36)

Compare these mutations with the Uncollected Monkey Series

example I offered in the previous chapter, and mine will seem modest. Indeed, Joyce's miniature "series", like a subroutine loop in the metaloop of the "Joyceware" program, suggests a continuity of its evolution rather than a climax. The Babel-tower-like "hoax that Joke bilked" is an ongoing construction; a persistent gesture of defiance towards the lofty authorities which regulate interpretation and reality; a joke without a punchline and a riddle without an answer. The text offers a dialogue with a reader in which the rules of language, as recognized and disseminated by its definers and authorities, lose their structural grip on any form of argument. If as an accomplishment *Finnegans Wake* seems to stand so tall and so "odd", it is because so many readers have helped to bilk it, and shall continue to do so.

Notes Chapter III

1. Narrative identity crises within the *Wake* ponder how "to isolate i from my multiple Mes" (410.12).
2. The reader should recall that this claim about Bloom is made by no less an authority on scurrilous activities than Lenehan.
3. The introductory *Wake* word "riverrun" (1.01) is not so unusual as it is frequently presented by commentators; juxtaposed with the "moocow" of *A Portrait*'s opening sentence, its construction (compound: noun + representative action) does not, perhaps, appear so freakishly new after all.
4. The most remarkable point about this reading is Cixous' focus on *Dubliners* (and to a lesser extent, *Ulysses*), as it seems to me Joyce progressively and explicitly "frees" the games in his works as he moves towards the *Wake*.
5. Ellmann claims that Joyce treasured sincerity --"for him the supreme virtue as well as the rarest" (1977, 74)-- but while this may be a valuable biographical note, it signifies nothing aesthetically.
6. In this form of analysis the approach of the critic is very likely obligated to be the very opposite that of the author. Those daring *Wake* commentators who construct linguistic "maps" (like Eco's for "meandertale" [141]) are aware not only of the fallibilities of drawing the universe to scale but of the necessity of a top-down perspective. Tracing a complex word to its associated roots and discernibly sensical fragments is

reductive, whereas Joyce's construction and compounding is perhaps unfathomably additive.

7. Here is the relevant skit excerpt; text taken from *Monty Python's Flying Circus: Just the Words* (Ed. Roger Wilmut. Vol. 1. London: Methuen, 1989. 259).

> *Fade in on an ordinary interview set. Interviewer sitting with man with large semitic polystyrene nose.*
>
> **Interviewer** (MICHAEL [PALIN]) Good evening. I have with me in the studio tonight one of Britain's leading skin specialists-- Raymond Luxury Yacht.
>
> **Raymond** (GRAHAM [CHAPMAN]) That's not my name.
>
> **Interviewer** I'm sorry -- Raymond Luxury *Yach-t*.
>
> **Raymond** No, no, no -- it's spelt Raymond Luxury Yach-t, but it's pronounced 'Throatwobbler Mangrove'.
>
> **Interviewer** You're a very silly man and I'm not going to interview you.

8. Jorge Luis Borges has noted the Cabalists' attention to the idea in their focus on holy writ, comparing it with Johannes Scotus Erigena's claim that Scriptural meanings are infinite in number ("The Golem (I)" Trans. N. T. di Giovanni. *Borges: A Reader*. Ed. Emir Rodriguez Monegal and Alastair Reid. New York: Dutton, 1981. 272). If Joyce is trying to rewrite the "Word" which is God, the Word must be all-meaning to reflect its being (of the) all-powerful: but then, maybe Joyce was only human after all.

9. For a discussion of the theme of "nothingness", the "void" in the "woid", see Bishop 42-65.

10. The following "experiment" occurred to me after puzzling over a student's disparaging critique of a certain novel as being "no more literary than a phonebook." However, I later found that the possibility for the reading comparison is suggested, though perhaps only facetiously, by Purdy (65); and, incidentally, Joyce himself "referred to [*Ulysses*] as the 'Greco-Bavarian telephone directory'" (Fitch 160).

11. This element of randomness is, admittedly, partly a fiction vis-a-vis one of the passages, as the reader will likely guess; but the novelty of the actual case interpretation is not a pivotal point of the argument, and I think that any other choice of passage would produce similar general (though of course different in particular) problems of meaning.

12. It is surely significant that Tristram Shandy is born on Guy Fawkes Day (Sterne 40).

13. Some critics write of an "uncertainty principle" which governs Joyce's writings; a somewhat clinical expression for a pervasive ambiguity not especially particular to Joyce, but, I suppose, catchy for a title.

14. Fritz Senn's estimate places the total at 1510. Some question mark calculation trivia, based upon my own tallying: the page with the most marks is 89 (26 marks), and the most concentrated cluster occurs in pages 88-90 (61 in three pages). About two-thirds of the pages of the *Wake* (418 of them) bear question

marks.

15. I am also reminded of the unique trial in *Duck Soup*. Sample dialogue:

> ATTORNEY: Chicolini, you are charged with high treason and if found guilty, you will be shot.
>
> CHICO: I object.
>
> ATTORNEY: You object! On what grounds?
>
> CHICO: I couldn't think of anything else to say.
>
> GROUCHO: Objection sustained.
>
> ATTORNEY: Your Excellency, you sustained the objection?
>
> GROUCHO: Sure, I couldn't think of anything else to say either. Why don't *you* object?

16. Cf. Sterne: "'tis just as discreditable and unscholarlike a question, Sir, as to ask what year (*ab urb. con.*) the second Punic war broke out" (232).

IV. Notes towards "one more unlookedfor conclusion"

There was a long pause.

"Is that all?" Alice timidly asked.

"That's all," said Humpty Dumpty. "Good-bye."

(Carroll 1872, 202)

You will tell me some time if I can believe its all.

(*FW* 622.15-6)

I began by expressing general unease with the notion of qualifying Joyce as "read": with this same "hesitency carried to excelcism" (*FW* 82.30-1) I must concede that the effort to draw any "hugely sistisfactuary conclusium" (84.15) in a study of his works, particularly of a book which refuses its own closure --and which book I have postulated as a monumental riddle with "ni ansa"-- is not one which inspires much confidence in either this author or, I suspect, my reader.

Chesterton's Father Brown famously compared the artist to the criminal and the critic to the detective; in these analogous terms Joyce the arch-criminal still has us nth-rate sleuths chasing shadows, and *Finnegans Wake* represents the unsolvable crime (Benstock understates the matter when he says that the *Wake* "as an enigma may well go unsolved" [40]). Simply to posit that questions without answers exist is itself an affront to the dominant hegemony of reason, but to do so at such a length and to simultaneously tease with the possibility of answers after all

"(for teasers only)" (*FW* 284.16) demonstrates a determined attack upon inflexibilities in reading and understanding.

Elizabeth Sewell worries that "if Nonsense is a game, we still have to find out who is the player" (42). The troublesome word "still" is rooted to the challenge readers and critics face in Nonsense texts and their evolutions and progressions away from standardized (and "common") sense. *Finnegans Wake*, as the most radical modern product of this literary direction, unabashedly reveals in its doggerel and sing-song prose the incidental nature of meaning within a text, the fragility of comprehension a reader may claim, and even ultimately the arbitrariness of language itself. The arbitrariness of the *Wake*'s language, however, is such that it rejects even consistency, and thus categorization and conquest.

Who is the player? Joyce, certainly; but recall that it cannot be enough to say that Alice is the player of the games which serve as structure to Carroll's books (cards in *Adventures in Wonderland*, chess in *Through the Looking-Glass*). Someone makes the reciprocating moves. Someone turns the pages, wills Alice to go on adventuring, challenging the realities which she finds presented to her, and challenging those authoritative interpreters who present them.

Can you rede? *Finnegans Wake* still asks. I have begun to; I think many can; and I hope that more will. "But we'll wake and see" (*FW* 375.08).

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Abbreviations

D *Dubliners*
P *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*
U *Ulysses*
FW *Finnegans Wake*

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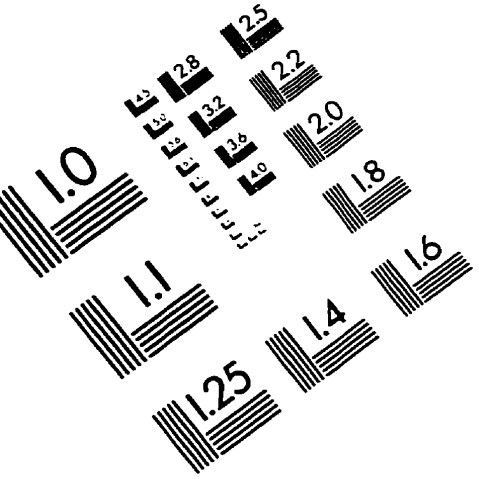

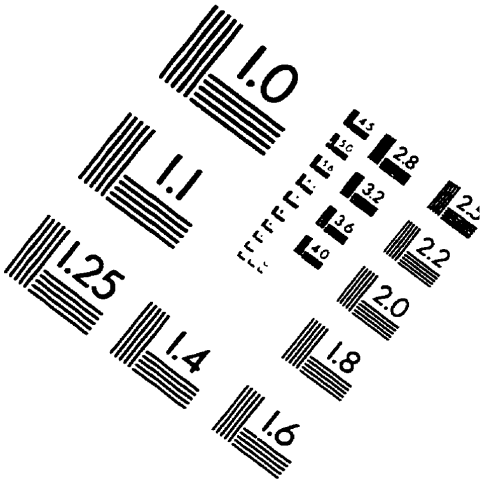

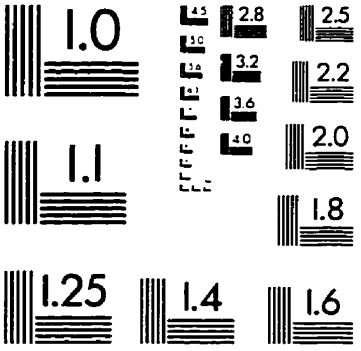

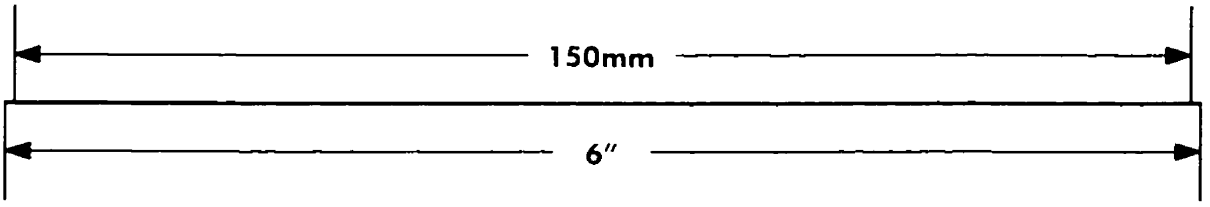

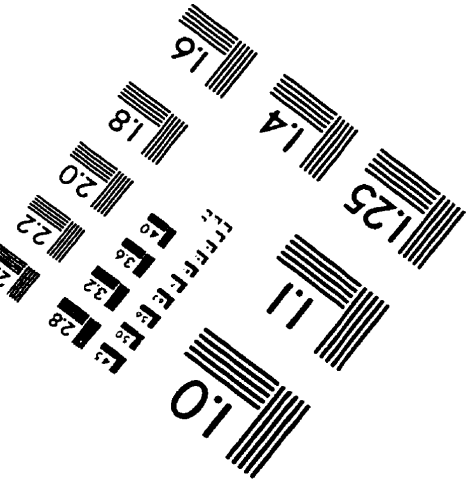

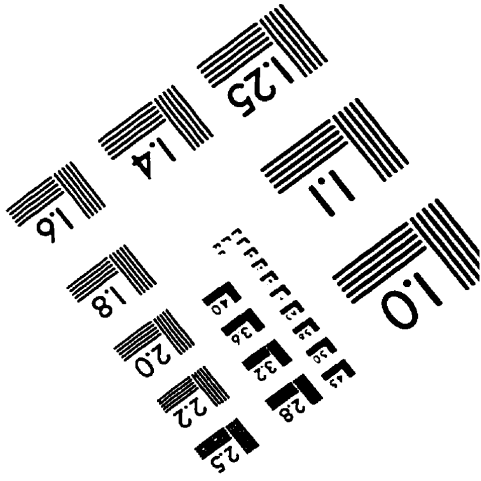

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