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The Mystery of Himself: Joyce in His Own Wake

by DAVID G. WRIGHT

One of the interpretative problems posed by Finnegans Wake—perhaps the central one—is that the book seems to mimic the shape and strategy of any attack made on it, like a boxer shifting his guard. We can find in the text almost anything we suspect it of containing: sacrificing commonsense, we may locate "allusions" to the circumstances of Joyce's death and to Marshall McLuhan.¹ The book is both kaleidoscope ("collideorscape," 143.28) and mirror, disposing itself in patterns which we actually create ourselves, and returning to us our own preoccupations.

Autobiographical analysis of the Wake cannot escape this danger altogether, and it may lead us to suspect Joyce of attempting self-portraiture at moments when he is actually talking about something quite different. Nevertheless, this approach does lead us to study the bridge leading from work to author, as well as the problematic connection of work to reader. Establishing what the work is doing for Joyce may aid understanding of what it is meant to be doing for us.

Signs of Joyce are easy to find. All the characters occasionally, eerily and inevitably assume his contours. Frequently, a Joyce-persona appears in virtual isolation from its environment; an isolation more profound than Stephen Dedalus' somewhat affected inability to relate to his surroundings, and apparently indicating a momentary desire to free the creative self from causal contexts altogether. Little concern with growth appears in the most autobiographical portions of the text, which frequently bear no obvious relationship to any of the naturalistic or symbolic time-scales of the Wake. Joyce investigates the self as it seeks definition by an attitude or credo or way of life. He probably felt that he had analysed his development thoroughly enough in A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man and Ulysses, and could now reflect on more

¹ For the "allusion" to Joyce's death, see "or Christienmas at Advent Lodge, New Zealand, after a leny illness the roofersand Mr Easterling of pentecostits, no followers by bequest, panfare al private," Finnegans Wake (London: Faber & Faber, 1939), p. 130, ll. 7-10. (Subsequent references by page and line number only.) This passage may be construed, at the price of logic, as referring to Joyce's death in the New Year of peritonitis, and as alluding also to the "roe" or deer, the animal with which Joyce associated himself; the Odyssean rover; Joyce's self-identification as Christ; and his assumption that he would be punished for his blasphemy. Many "serious interpretations" of passages in the Wake are as silly as this. Marshall McLuhan may be located in a reference to "Meereschal MacMuhun, the Ipse dadden, product of the extremes giving quotidients to our means" (254.03-05).
static, expansive projections of his personality. In those earlier novels, the self changed rapidly (even within the brief time-scale of *Ulysses*) while its context remained constant; in the *Wake* the self is still and the environment moves.

Thus remarkably few incidents from Joyce’s outer life appear as “events” in the *Wake*. Almost the only example invoked often is his first meeting with Yeats: “I have met with you, bird, too late” (37.13). Allusions to his legal battles and the Henry Carr / *Earnest* incident, like other references to mostly peripheral parts of his life, seem mere private jokes, and all readers will miss some allusions of this type. Joyce, indeed, warns of the danger of trying to understand a person by studying the so-called “facts” of his life, for “the unfacts, did we possess them, are too imprecisely few to warrant our certitude” (57.16-17).

Joyce, then, seldom appears in action; appropriately enough in a work which is more retrospective dream than narrative, more concerned with states than events. His exiled state provides imagery for extended portions of the text; the tone of such references ranges from neutral to melancholy or sardonic. The negative implications of “Was life worth leaving? Nej!” (230.25), if taken seriously, mean that his life in exile from the Liffey has been wasted, a repudiation of life (“life”), or that Dublin never deserved his artistic attention, a conclusion which, presumably, would amount to the same thing. Yet many of the references to exile seem bland enough, as if the inevitability of his state may now be taken for granted; his earlier belligerence has largely disappeared. It is clear that Joyce wishes to be studied as a voluntary exile in control of all possible links to his country and his past. Most of the allusions to people near Joyce involve his wife Nora and his brother Stanislaus, both of whom he coaxed into sharing his exile. His personal context, then, is to be wholly self-defined.

Certain distinctive Joycean attributes receive consistent attention. Such allusions, often slight in themselves, contribute to Joyce’s rather eerie ubiquity in the surface texture of the work; it is as if he wants his book to look like him. References to sight, for example, usually involve Joyce’s own troublesome eyes; “a poor acheseyeld from Ailing” (148.33) recalls his self-depiction as an “international eyesore,” and “piteous onewinker” (174.19) both invokes his famous eyepatch, mentioned repeatedly in the *Wake* for no apparent reason, and links him to Earwicker, another winker. Earwicker’s voyeurism hints at Joyce’s. Several passages anatomise moral failings of which Joyce was, with varying degrees of justification, accused—complacent egotism (“acts active, peddles in passivism and is a gorgon of selfridgeousness,” 137.33-34), melancholy (“the morosity of my delectations,” 189.04-05)

2. See “‘roth, vice and blaise’ (176.23); ‘How matches metroosers’ (280n). Bernard Benstock, in a helpful account of Joyce’s presence in the *Wake*, has located many such references; see his *Joyce-again’s Wake: An Analysis of Finnegans Wake* (Seattle: Univ. of Washington Press, 1966).
and cowardice (“a rank funk getting the better of him,” 176.25–26).

Unsurprisingly, most of the specific personal references concern Joyce the writer; here his tone becomes particularly ironic, and whether the irony is gleeful or defensive is not always apparent. The Shem of the seventh chapter embodies every literary failing of which one could conceivably accuse Joyce, and his weaknesses provoke attack throughout the *Wake*. He indulges in infelicitous wordplay (“Illstarred punster,” 467.29) and stylistic wilfulness, yet he plagiarises shamelessly. Shaun accuses Shem of stealing his ideas, as Stanislaus, not without some justification, had accused Joyce. Shem seizes on the trivial utterances of those around him, being “covetous of his neighbour’s word” (172.30), and has no scruples about displaying other people’s dirty linen in public. His writing can be childish, sentimental, facile, trivially cathartic or onanistic. He “used to stipple endlessly inartistic portraits of himself” (182.18–19); thus Joyce sardonically depicts his own persistent autobiographical concern as self-indulgent, perhaps futile. Ultimately, Joyce’s aim in the *Wake* as in some of his letters may be to appear as a martyr, “in honour bound to the cross of your own cruelfiction” (192.18–19). Joyce mocks the self-conscious artistic integrity he had proclaimed in his early years, remarking that no writer “ever nursed such a spoiled opinion of his monstrous marvellosity as did this mental and moral defective” (177.15–16). He thus anatomises ruthlessly his real, perceived and reported literary failings. Yet by representing them so energetically, he of course vindicates himself, since no apologia is so convincing as that which turns to its own purposes the accusations which prompt it. By depicting real and spurious weaknesses in the same manner, Joyce implies that all are equally spurious. He displays his habitual ingenuity in converting vices into virtues, as well as demonstrating, through self-knowledge and frankness, his determination to make his own moral and literary decisions.

It would be unhelpful to argue whether Shem wrote Joyce’s works; partly because Shem is not detachable from his literary context in the way Stephen is, being, indeed, more a linguistic than a psychological creation. Nevertheless, all the works appear in the *Wake*, including *Stephen Hero* if “sweethart emmas” (328.21) recalls that novel. References to Joyce’s volumes of poetry are patronising and dismissive; allusions to *Dubliners*, like the collection itself, are colorless, neutral and precise. Some of the allusions to *Portrait* poke fun at Stephen: “astonished” (187.03); “wetbed confession” (188.01) and “Up Lancs!” (500.11). References to *Ulysses*, that “usylessly unreadable Blue Book of Eccles” (179.26–27), resemble in tone both Shem’s self-accusing remarks and Joyce’s bantering in letters, where he implies that writing *Ulysses* has exhausted him beyond its merits and that he will be glad to

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3. See “shamebred music” (164.15–16); ‘chambermade music’ (184.04); “Eche bennyache” (302.28). The titles of all the *Dubliners* stories are parodied on pp. 186–87.
see the last of it. At 229.13–16 Joyce parodies the titles of the twelve central episodes of *Ulysses* in phrases a slightly wittier Leopold Bloom could have devised (“Lestrygonians” becomes “The Luncher Out” and “Naughtyscalves” speak for themselves). A few retrospective interpretations or hints appear: “Probe loom” (286.20) seems to advise “poor old Bloom” to watch more closely the weavings of his Penelope; “telemac” (176.36) teasingly associates M’Intosh and Stephen–Telemachus, but the “man in brown about town” (443.20–21) seems to be M’Intosh as Joyce.

The most appealing references to Joyce’s work, however, concern the *Wake* itself. Self-parody had been a Joycean habit before, but never on such a scale. Some of the common reader’s dark suspicions about the *Wake* receive darkly suspicious confirmation; it is “a reel of funnish ficts” (288.08–09) and “Funnycoon’s Wick” (499.13). It parodies its own most delicate moments, even the ending of the “Anna Livia” chapter, which seems to have been one of Joyce’s favorite pieces:

—Besides the bubblye waters of, babbiyebubblye waters of?

—Right. (526.09–10)

Aspiring to all-inclusiveness, the *Wake* should anticipate all possible attacks upon itself, and include antidotes (or, to coin a Wakeism, antidotes) for them; and it probably does so, though Joyce may at times have underestimated the severity of the attacks which were actually made, or buried his defensive weapons, like mines, too deeply in the text. The sheer obscurity of the writing ensures that, while readers may resent the heavy demands Joyce seems to make, they cannot be certain exactly what he is demanding, and also deflects critical attacks away from Joyce and towards other critics who inevitably produce different interpretations.

About these overt references to Joyce’s life and works hovers a comic and sometimes spiteful spirit. The allusions appear almost too simple, and Joyce seems to be testing our assumptions about their deeper significance. Often, in criticism, the mere identification of an allusion will be offered as a more complete explanation of an author’s meaning than it really provides; analyses of the autobiographical content of the *Wake* have been guilty of this tendency to substitute an identity parade for an investigation of motive. Joyce insists that we think about the true purpose of his allusions, sometimes by deliberately depriving them of all but surface meaning, at other times by entangling them in apparently infinite webs of significance. He thus hints that surface and depth exist as two facets of the same block, one reflective and one relatively transparent; one sends us back out of the book, the other (if we can find it) lets us inside.

It should be remembered, then, that the “surface references”—the
kind discussed so far—may run counter to Joyce’s central autobiographical preoccupations, may be, in fact, a calculated disguise; once we think we have found Joyce, we may feel relieved of the need to search further, however trivial may be those aspects of himself which he has allowed as to see, and however false the clues sometimes feel even as we clutch on to them. A complementary critical danger exists here, analogous to over-ingenious allusion-spotting: it is difficult to prove any interpretation of the Wake impossible, and so one may analyse at any “depth” with little fear of correction. While Clive Hart’s advocacy of conservative readings—assuming only those meanings which are necessary to make sense of a particular passage—is obviously sound, it is a criterion applicable only with reservations to the more autobiographical aspects of the work, which may have little apparent connection with the “necessary” narrative sense of a passage. The processes which go on in the Wake are not normally those of Joyce’s life; he appears most frequently in the more static portions of the text, as if he has been waiting for the action to subside before venturing out. Considerable tact must be exercised in exploring Joyce’s presence in a work where he has allowed himself innumerable places to hide but made no promise that he will actually be found there. We cannot altogether escape the facile and reductive conclusion that the whole book is a protracted signature, but we must also look to studiously unsigned material which yet serves autobiographical purposes.

Joyce hints at his personal involvement with the deeper layers of the work by directing his attention past the characters into realms inaccessible to them. Much of the Wake happens outside the consciousness of the characters; much less of Ulysses does, and none of Portrait except certain ironies which Stephen is not allowed to see. In his earlier works, Joyce had allocated some of his creative energy to autobiographical protagonists, though he kept these figures at a safe distance by withholding from them parts of his own being (heroism or actual artistic achievement or eloquence): Gabriel Conroy reviews books but does not write them; the Stephens of Portrait and Ulysses between them manage two theories, a poem and a parable; Bloom would like to write but for the most part produces only advertisements, and is not articulate; Richard Rowan defines himself as an artist more by temperament than by achieved works, and lacks Joyce’s integrity. No single character in the Wake acts in this capacity of author-surrogate. It is, indeed, an open question whether “single characters” exist in the Wake in any case. Joycean energy devolves not only on Shem but on his antagonist Shaun, or divides itself among large groups of characters. The dreamer respon-


5. The names of James—obvious derivatives of “James” and “Joyce,” Joycean nicknames, and so on—concentrate themselves strikingly in the last hundred pages of the text. One signs a letter at the end, too.
sible for the whole book may be the best analogy for previous authorial personae, and his role is a little like that of the mature Stephen in Portrait. Yet the dreamer is not a character in the book; Earwicker cannot dream up the Wake any more than Stephen can write Ulysses. Any candidates for the role of dreamer would have to resemble Joyce closely. Joyce thus shows his close involvement with every consciousness in the Wake, and hence the interrelationships, within his own consciousness, of the qualities they represent. He minimises the distance between work and author, seeking to become commensurate with his creation. This desire to erect a structure reproducing Joyce’s own vast and complex mental contours hints at a preoccupation with literary self-exploration and revelation of the most insistent kind.

Thus while the Wake flouts many of the conventions of autobiographical writing, it accords with one such convention in the profundity of its mimetic strategy. We are encouraged to equate work and author in an unprecedented manner. It is fair to read the Wake as Joyce’s final and irreducible statement about his own consciousness; though he probably expected to live longer and write more, he can hardly, in his late fifties and in severely constricted physical and spiritual circumstances, have contemplated another work on the same scale. So strong is the gravitational power of the book, it is difficult to imagine that much scrap material from its construction could have been salvaged for use on a new project (Joyce’s usual method of beginning work). The Wake often seems as preoccupied with its own claim to exist in its actual form as with reference to externally-significant matters. Joyce seeks to emancipate himself from all popular assumptions about how he should write, just as he seeks to evade other people’s forms of logic. To the implied assertion that he should write about recognisable people and situations, he responds by making his characters and events as ordinary as possible, then loading them with massive symbolic and archetypal import. He studiously repudiates facile assumptions about “naturalistic” characterisation; his figures will behave with all the arbitrariness and inconsistency of real people, responding to events with the same exaggerated fear or guilt and the same evasions of logic. By constant self-contradiction, especially in portraits of Shem, Joyce probes radically our belief in the continuity of a literary or actual personality, thus reinforcing in an additional way his method of distributing his own personality into apparently inhospitable portions of his work. If told to use words to denote objects and concepts familiar to others, he replies by demonstrating his need to use language in ever more elaborate ways, and to establish it as the legitimate object of his own most concentrated attention, pushing the relationship of word and object into new degrees of unanimity. Joyce was always irritated by attempts to summarise works of literature, insisting that their nature was thereby destroyed; they exist only as a function of the language composing them, not by
virtue of what they happen to depict. Reality resides in form rather than content; or, rather, content can only exist as a function of form (Joyce is weakest where this relationship threatens to break down in his own work, as in *Exiles* or *Stephen Hero*). The *Wake*, for all its idiosyncracy, accords with this aesthetic assumption at least. If it were suggested that Joyce should establish some means of making value-judgements of his self-portraits, he would no doubt reply that he seeks to give his self-analysis all the complexity of the self he analyses—and all the strangeness, all the elusiveness. He had always shown through his distinctive manner of complicating his works that his life must be seen as correspondingly irreducible; *Finnegans Wake* merely makes that assertion more explicitly and emphatically than he had made it before. The book is designed to provide no solutions more final than life provides, and it may be no more comprehensible; Joyce said that it would take a lifetime to understand it. He wanted to define himself by proving his ability constantly to find and orchestrate new forms, as if in compensation for the imagination he claimed to lack; in the *Wake* he has ensured that his secrets will be yielded only gradually, and that the work will embody the continuity of its own creative processes, and hence of his struggles to shape it, in a way no other literary work had ever attempted to achieve.

Yet even if we accept this deeper identification of author and text, considerable problems remain. The *Wake* illustrates the difficulty of communicating an impression of the whole being which can be both satisfying to the writer and comprehensible to his readers. It shows that a self-portrait so difficult for a reader to relate to his own life can attract only limited sympathy, readers being as egotistical as authors. Moreover, Joyce seems at times so preoccupied with the means of observing himself that observation itself lapses, so concerned with refining his stance that in the end he cannot see much from it. The *Wake* is perhaps the most knowing work in literature, so much so that it sometimes seems to threaten the independent existence of the objects of its knowledge, including its author. Possible perspectives, rarely achieving a state of necessity, tend to multiply until all seems blurred; deliberate double visions sustain themselves precariously for a moment, then dissolve. Joyce, always reticent, can hardly be expected to remain conspicuous himself while blurring everything else in the work.

Furthermore, in autobiographical writing point of view becomes as crucial as what is viewed from it. In the *Wake* Joyce seeks an all-encompassing point of view; if it is the view of a dreamer, he still seems at least as shrewd and knowledgeable as any waking being, as it were. Yet a broad outlook readily becomes diffuse; the brilliantly clear pictures of *Ulysses* and *Portrait* at their best give way to fast-moving, more generalised glimpses which are frequently striking in themselves but also perplexing in the kinds of relationship with context they seem to suppose. Point of view begins to give way to the voracious appetite of the text.
itself; as the puns and allusions multiply, a controlling viewpoint becomes increasingly difficult to discern. No doubt Joyce undercuts assumptions about point of view deliberately, as he does those about character, and something of the kind happens in *Ulysses* as well. Yet it is doubtful whether the result in the *Wake* is the production of a more flexible sensitivity to meaning, as he apparently intends. More often, the protean viewpoint makes it difficult to discern anything but mere forms with any confidence, and informed evaluation of the significance of the material becomes impossible. Joyce’s mode may enact the texture of a dream, but success in that area does not necessarily suffice to substantiate a long text, particularly one which constantly tempts with hints of meaning and pattern which it yet holds out of reach. Ultimately, a reader’s demands for more attainable viewpoints may be no more naïve than Joyce’s assumption that they are unnecessary.

Thus: the “surface” of the *Wake* is altogether too easy to detach, but the work’s deeper being, however refreshing Joyce’s iconoclasm, energy and ingenuity cause it to be, constantly upsets attempts to come to terms with it. No single element can be isolated for discussion without involving one in some analysis, if only implicit, of everything else in the book; everything is defined by contexts, yet those contexts are as elusive and changeable as what they define. The self-preoccupation of the *Wake* equals and discloses Joyce’s own; its introspection and retrospection, its constant assertions of recurrence, reflect his own attitudes and concerns. The work enacts the fusions and transfusions of memory, both encouraging and discouraging the reader’s power to remember what he has read.

If Joyce seems to tease and frustrate his readers more than he intended, then we may be wise to investigate what the *Wake* may be doing for him. (This can be the work’s third “level,” for those who prefer their concepts horizontal.) The *Wake* is his most assertively “confessional” work, as though his difficult language acts as a mask behind which he can bare his soul in a way which is not possible in the relatively circumstantial *Portrait* and *Ulysses*. The dominant moral concern of the *Wake* is with guilt and attempts to deal with guilt. Such concerns animate much of *Portrait, Ulysses* and *Exiles* as well, but in those cases Joyce circumscribes the guilt by specifying its causes and attributing it to particular characters. In the *Wake*, Earwicker’s unspecified sin in the park simply will not substantiate the volume of guilt which the work manifests, yet it may indicate either uncertainty or reticence on Joyce’s part in determining or explaining the causes of his own. It is, inevitably, tempting to speculate about biographical causes for such authorial feelings, and Joyce’s response to his daughter’s mental disorders, though it could have affected only later-written sections of the *Wake*, suggests itself immediately. It is Lucia who “tears up lettereens she never apposed a pen upon” (276.06–07). Such psychological speculations can-
not be investigated here, though they are plausible enough. Whatever his extra-literary motives, in any case, Joyce’s determination to explore the emotions of self-doubt and remorse on a massive scale seems indisputable. His characters are accused of a vast array of indiscretions, ranging from Shem’s plagiarism to Earwicker’s earthshaking sin. The circumstances producing guilt may be exaggerated to stress the extent of the guilt Joyce actually felt, as with Stephen’s remorse about his mother’s death in *Ulysses*, but it seems that in the *Wake* the exaggeration goes far beyond the requirements of that particular strategy. Yet the characters also appear in, and define themselves through, their attempts to overcome their guilt, which often take the form of nervous jests. Life, for Joyce, can be a serious business made liveable by laughter (“Loud, heap miseries upon us yet entwine our arts with laughter low,” 259.07-08). The coexistence of real pain (agenbite of inwit) and the necessary transcendence of it, by humorous understanding of its place, or lack of place, in the scheme of things, marks much of Joyce’s work from Stephen’s early musings to the end of the *Wake*. In his last book he takes on all sins, but by making art from them he becomes a martyr on his own terms. He appreciates that guilt is basic to his behavior, as to human behavior generally, and labors to come to terms with it.

Thus the *Wake* includes a cathartic function among its many identities. Yet it also accepts. Joyce acknowledges, in however idiosyncratic a manner, the likeness of his own life and other lives. Having defined himself initially by stressing his difference from others, as *Portrait* shows, Joyce approaches in the *Wake* a definition based on resemblances, though he still asserts his independence by showing his superior awareness of those resemblances. He retains his isolation and integrity with all the old diligence (if less ferocity) but admits analogies and bonds with those around him. His manner of writing, which has ironically prompted accusations that he has cut himself off from humanity, in fact represents a desire to incorporate as much as possible of what other people have made of the world; in his own terms, Joyce has never been more human. He seems to acknowledge here for the first time that the most “private” areas of the soul may be, paradoxically, the aspects we can most readily share, if only because we all use similar means to conceal them.

For all its undeniable perversity, then, the *Wake* must also be seen as a gesture of reconciliation. Joyce pours self and world into his book, exploiting every possible interaction between the two. He acknowledges

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6. Richard Ellmann prudently avoids invoking the Lucia connection specifically when he talks about the *Wake*, but notes “the possibility that a more regular family life might have prevented her illness invaded and occupied Joyce’s mind. He did not disavow guilt; he embraced it eagerly... . . . He identified himself closely with her.” Again, “Joyce had had difficulty... . . . in working out the final aspects of *Finnegans Wake*, and saw Lucia’s turmoil during the same period as parallel to his own.” See James Joyce (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, rev. ed. 1965), pp. 663, 674.
the continuity between his life and other lives, domesticating and validating the theme of cyclic recurrence, for all the idiosyncrasy of the work in which this process occurs. Yet he still insists on the right to investigate his material from his own peculiar angles, maintaining to the last that same independence he had proclaimed in his earliest work.

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