

When Is a Man not a Man?: Deconstructive and Reconstructive Impulses in *Finnegans Wake*

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The question of Shem the Penman that opens chapter seven of *Finnegans Wake*--When is a man not a man--and the range of answers that it elicits, represents just one of many instances in which phenomenological pursuits and the concomitant inadequacy of terms come to the foreground of Joyce's work. No matter whom one reads, however, in any given situation labels / signifiers / designations more often than not generate as much ambiguity as certitude. The following quotations, for example, come from works by two of the men most often linked to British Modernism--T.S. Eliot and James Joyce, yet a scrutiny of either author immediately raises doubts about the efficacy of such a characterization: "In my beginning is my end" (T.S. Eliot); "A way a lone a last a loved a long the . . . riverrun, past Eve and Adam's, from swerve of shore to bend of bay, brings us by a commodius vicus of recirculation back to Howth Castle and Environs" (James Joyce). Neither writer is British, and the quotations cited reflect markedly different aesthetic assumptions from those commonly singled out as traits of Modernist writing.

Nonetheless, the connection to Modernism serves as a useful benchmark for viewing both Eliot and Joyce, even as their lives and their works continue to call the range of such a designation into question. The line from "Burnt Norton" that appears above certainly intensifies this perception of ambiguity. It enforces the idea that, for all of the easy associations that one makes between Eliot's earliest published poetry (*Prufrock and Other Poems* and *The Waste Land*) and the Modernist impulse, in his later work he had no power (or perhaps more precisely no inclination) to resist the recidivist attractions of linear thinking. Similarly the conflated passages from *Finnegans Wake* quoted above (the final line of that work elided with its opening) enforce Joyce's evolution from a Modern to a Postmodern writer. As one contemplates the late versions of both writers' works, one can see in Joyce a turn marking a dexterous inversion of Eliot's perspective, showing that in the end of his last work one finds its beginning. Because of the connections that many make between Eliot, Joyce, and Modernism, these gestures stand as more than simply deft stylistic maneuvers. They imply epistemological assumptions inherent in the writings of both authors that readers, too much given to the power of labels, have proven extremely reluctant to acknowledge.

I make these observations not from a desire to impose new designations upon either author or from a wish to disbar all use of labels in literary criticism. Rather I seek to raise questions about both the impulse to categorize and the subtle movement from the act of reading to that of interpreting, from apprehension to expression. Just as the specific designation of H on a faucet fixes only broad limits on the range of possible temperatures for the water that will

flow from the tap, labels introduced into any critical discourse can only set down, at best, wide parameters of shared discernment. As a consequence, they do not assure an analogous exchange of views. Rather, they merely delineate approximate areas of common understanding. Labels do not complete the discourse, but they do begin the process. Thus, we must treat them as kinetic elements and continually expand and refine the implications attached to them.

Adopting such a perspective leads one to implications especially useful in reading works by an author like Joyce, whose writing vigorously resists interpretation through exclusive, cause and effect correspondences. *Finnegans Wake*, for example, clearly was not written to please the Cartesian mind. Its cyclical and circular narrative contiguity contradicts the linear distinctions implied by the segmentation of chapters and parts. Furthermore, the overt multiple signification of its puns, portmanteau words, linguistic allusions, transliterations, and other syntactic devices intentionally disrupts consideration of meaning as a binary condition. Resistance to this diversity surfaces most strikingly in the unconscious bifurcation of the act of reading and the act of interpretation, and in seeking to reunite these divided concepts one comes towards a more sophisticated and richer response to the work.

The division to which I refer stands less as a stark binary opposition than as a more subtle shift from one mode of emphasis to another. Even among the most open of post-Structuralist critics, including those most energetic in advocating pluralistic views, one notes inclinations to produce prescriptive interpretations that emphasize closure rather than contingency.¹ Such a tone derives in part at least from the very nature of the critical process, but nonetheless directly conflicts with the openness of *Finnegans Wake*. The aim of this essay is to offer a strategy for resisting this drift towards closure.

The movement from sensation to analysis transverses several stages, each with its own grammar and vocabulary distinct from every other state. Thus, in any discussion of an aesthetic experience, the transmission of that impression to others becomes really a translation, a shift from the idiosyncratic discourse of individual thoughts and feelings to the accepted patois of the critical profession. (A final transmutation occurs, of course, as the sensation passes from the general realm of critical analysis to enter the consciousness of each person who encounters it.) One can find this practice at work, in varying degrees, in any piece of literary criticism that one might choose to examine. Indeed, one might argue that all discourse reflects a translation of idiosyncratic apprehension into conventional signification, providing auditors with approximations rather than with duplications of the speakers' views. Nonetheless, critics gen-

¹ See Clive Hart's *Structure and Motif in Finnegans Wake*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press; London: Faber and Faber, 1962; and Roland McHugh's *The Sigla of Finnegans Wake*. Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1976. A recent example of this appears in John Bishop's excellent study, *Joyce's Book of the Dark*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1986. Bishop's examination of the *Wake* offers a number of insightful responses to the work, but its central premise, that the narrative evolves out of the dream of HCE, necessarily circumscribes its interpretive options. Similar approaches obtain in the following: Danis Rose and John O'Hanlon's *Understanding Finnegans Wake*. New York: Garland, 1982. John Gordon's *Finnegans Wake: A Plot Summary*. Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1986. Michael Begnal's *Dreamscheme: Narrative and Voice in Finnegans Wake*. Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 1988.

erally write as if the gap between personal sensation and public pronouncement remained narrow and easy to bridge, devoting relatively little attention to exploring this divergence.

This disjunction between our aesthetic apprehension and our interpretive endeavors has significance for any critical response that one might choose to examine, but here I will restrict myself to the space that develops between reading and interpretation as it applies to one's experience with *Finnegans Wake*. Paradoxically, the overt multiplicity of signification within the discourse of the work leads to the manifestation of strong impulses towards reduction as one moves from apprehension to expression. Personal comprehension of the *Wake* comes close to what one feels when listening to a musical composition or looking at a painting, with responses generally operating at the level of pure sensation. As long as these reactions remain private, our critical experience needs no mediating language. When we attempt to share our attitudes about the *Wake* in open discourse, however, a change occurs. The grammar of academic exchange conditions our views, and this results in the presentation of a work arguably different from the one that we have read. This occurs because the approximate nature of language continually disrupts efforts to produce interpretive homogeneity while the protocols of criticism relentlessly enforce the need to affirm the certitude of any reading. As a consequence critics feel caught in an Alice-in-Wonderland world. They wish to remain open to the spontaneity of the work, but, perversely, they also fear that the credibility of their own assessments would suffer if they too closely paralleled the free-form contextual approach of Joyce's writing.

I do not wish to imply that the *Wake* of necessity resists all efforts to form a unified interpretation of its aesthetic impact. To do so would be to assume the same posture of certitude that I am criticizing in others. Nonetheless, I do feel that the time has come to challenge the readings that apply conventional methodologies to an unconventional work. Those who have been reading *Finnegans Wake* with an unwavering faith in the existence of an ideal reading and in the possibility of discovering it may very well have important insights to offer. At the same time, given the shift in contemporary intellectual assumptions, I feel that they, like other critics, must now relinquish their privileged ontological position and precede each exegesis with a defense of hermeneutic principles.²

My contention remains that *Finnegans Wake* demands a form of patterning that stands in opposition to traditional cause and effect thinking. Further, I believe that, no matter what pattern an individual reader chooses to impose, it can at best be implemented only as a provisional attempt at interpretation. Any other inclination would turn one towards reductivism. Given this condition, I would like to raise the question of how one advances a reading that does not succumb to easy generalization or to hasty leveling.

² I do not, of course, mean to imply that all critics of *Finnegans Wake* follow this approach. For a number of years the writings both of David Hayman and of Margot Norris, to name just two, have been characterized by a preference for multiplicity and a deferral of closure.

Specifically, I am interested in exploring how one acknowledges its range of alternatives rather than in how one can resolve all of its antinomies into a single interpretation. To those committed to traditional assumptions of literary criticism, my project must certainly seem, at the very least, anarchic and possibly subjective to the point of being meaningless to anyone else. Nonetheless, the kinds of imaginative responses that *Finnegans Wake* provokes demand such a view.³ "In the buginning is the woid, in the muddle is the sounddnce and thereinofter you're in the unbewised again, vund vulsyvolvy" (378. 29-31). Certainly, one can impose a linear reading on the above passage, but difficulties arise from such a rendering. Not only does such a methodology not exhaust all of the potential meanings in a work (what approach does?), but it does not even capture the immediate personal experience of reading. Instead, what one has is an academically acceptable interpretation deaf to the invitations of the work to which it putatively responds. My methodology seeks to break the hegemony of the view giving primacy to a single reading by outlining a non-conventional, nonlinear response that allows one to acknowledge the episodic associations that one derives from reading, rather than from explication, and to exploit the choices offered to one for forming a text for the work.⁴

The approach to reading that I am advocating grows out of the view suggested by critics like Roland Barthes of a text as a conceptualization of any of a vast number of potential responses inherent in a piece of art.⁵ I suspect that most of us already imitate Barthes by very adeptly adducing "writerly" texts fashioned from the freeplay of our imaginations, but we then deny this whole process by producing "readerly" criticism based on tightly reasoned arguments and allowing little room for variant opinions. Here, of course, I am translating Barthes's concepts of "scritable" and "lisible" and extending their scope through a separation of the acts of sensation and articulation, but the analogy remains. My aim quite simply lies in forming a methodology that allows one to maintain the "writerly" impulse throughout the interpretive process, resisting the drift towards closure that generally characterizes critical expression.

I should assert here my position that one plays within a piece of art. That is to say one's imagination responds to the stimuli of the work. If one makes interpretive claims about *Finnegans Wake*, then those claims must function

³ James Joyce, *Finnegans Wake* (New York: Viking Press, 1939) 378. 29-31. All further citations from this edition appear in the body of the essay.

⁴ As part of my approach to reading *Finnegans Wake* I give a very precise meaning to the term "text." Considering it metaphysically rather than physically, I see a text as an imaginative construct stimulated by the images of the work and not as the artifact of wood pulp and ink that we have before us. Further, I do not believe that a text is ever a definite article. I view any text as only one of a variety of possible responses, conditioned both by the reader's experiences (retentions) and by his or her expectations (protentions). Over a number of readings and re-readings the mutability of all of these factors becomes evident: experiences accumulate and recede in our consciousness, and we shift or emend our expectations as our perceptions of specific situations change. This flux works against the possibility that one would ever arrive at a final or complete text for *Finnegans Wake*. Rather in each encounter with the work, the individual creates a provisional reading, subject to continuing revision. Each one draws upon past interpretations, and each one gives way to subsequent modifications. The basis for this approach comes from the works of reader-response critics, especially Wolfgang Iser's *The Implied Reader*. Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974, and his *The Act of Reading*. Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978.

⁵ See especially *S/Z*. Trans. Richard Miller. New York: Hill and Wang, 1974.

within generally held perceptions of the *Wake*. According to this logic, the piece of art itself acts as the ultimate validator of all claims to interpret it, and I am asserting that the structure of *Finnegans Wake* calls into question the efficacy of the conventional hermeneutic assumptions of many of the interpretations now in the critical canon.

An aversion to conventionality, however, does not inevitably lead to chaos, for *Finnegans Wake* like any work of art imposes very real interpretive constraints through the paradigm laid down by the elements that make up its narrative discourse. The aesthetic features which define the creative limits of any imaginative representation of the material in Joyce's work—setting, characterization, tone, descriptive tenor, allusive associations, and any other aspects of the work that distinguish it from all other pieces of fiction—all play a part in this process. They invite wide-ranging responses to portions of the work without imposing the need to establish a continuity or a consistency from one segment to another or from one reading to another. At the same time, they establish a paradigm that invites one to construct these responses or texts within identifiable literal limits which the book lays down. The challenge for readers consists of delineating the paradigm and articulating options for responding to the work which fit logically into its limits.

The approach that I am advocating, then, hinges upon two separate though complementary critical operations, both of which remain fluid and subjective. At the initial stage of aesthetic response, one acknowledges the breadth of the paradigm, the factor guiding interpretive response, laid down by the work. From this acknowledgment, one then goes on to create readings that do not step outside the limits delineated by the paradigm. I realize that such an approach intentionally succumbs to the subjectivity of language, but despite this inclination I do not wish to appear to advocate any gesture as prescriptive as defining or outlining. Rather, as I see it, any reader realizes that an interpretation must accommodate the contingencies arising from the narrative, but many wish to suppress the overt subjectivity of this condition: these contingencies do not and cannot exist outside the actual process of reading.

In a critical analysis of the Ondt and the Gracehoper episode, for example, one can adduce a wide range of meanings, all of which stand as valid interpretive contributions as long as they remain within the possible characterizations of the Ondt and the Gracehoper that emerge for other readers of the discourse, i.e., the response of the public always determines the validity of any public exegesis. Those disturbed by this criticism by consensus ignore the fact that no criticism, either applied or theoretical, has ever moved forward without the overt approval of those exposed to it. Characterizations like those of the Ondt and the Gracehoper do not exist as Platonic ideals; they come into being only through the act of reading. As a result, one must continually reassess all efforts to articulate meaning in accordance with the evolving and subjective concept of the work that one entertains. Rather than stand as an impediment, however, a deeply idiosyncratic view becomes the basis for celebrating individuality while simultaneously sounding intellectual resonances within a broader critical community. It allows one to articulate responses to *Finnegans Wake* that do

not succumb to the constraints of linear, cause-and-effect thinking nor to the anarchy of private discourse.

As noted above, this whole approach emphasizes an open-ended act of inquiring without investing any intellectual capital in the need for resolution. It advances instead an epistemology that eschews hermeneutic closure as the basis for aesthetic satisfaction. Instead, this methodology features the freeplay of the imagination (to borrow another concept from Barthes) as its central critical gesture. While *Finnegans Wake* provides numerous invitations to the reader to undertake alternative lines of interrogation, the key to full participation with artistic features of the work remains taking an open-ended view of the entire process.

One specific instance in chapter six exactly illustrates my point. Although Joyce overtly organized the whole chapter around interrogation, the ambiguity of the twelfth question and answer, compressed into just two lines, highlights possibilities for the approach that I am advocating.

12. *Sacer esto?*

Answer: *Semus sumus!* (168. 13-14)

Through a binary structure, both clearly defined and at the same time open to multiple interpretations, it illustrates precisely the type of interpretive responses that one could reasonably expect to make throughout the entire work.

The question itself, with its ambiguous Latin construction, demands translation before one proceeds further. Despite the directness of its verb, the accompanying adjective proves anomalous. It could be glossed as asking "Are you sacred," or it could, with equally sound logical support, be rendered as "Are you damned." The answer that follows reflects the same kinds of possibilities with one version being "We are the same" and another "We are Shem." The point is not that we as readers must settle on one meaning or another. Rather the lines show how a series of options shape an emerging aesthetic experience even before formal interpretation begins. While the passage offers a range of possible apprehensions inherent in the words that one considers, any interpretation that develops necessarily remains under the influence of the paradigm of the work. In this respect this selection functions microcosmically. More than a preview of the discourse that follows, the question and answer that close chapter six suggests an appropriate posture, an intellectual orientation for reading subsequent chapters, especially for the next one dealing with the dissection of Shem the Penman.

For linear thinkers, those lines, emblematic of the rest of the book, seem to tell us too little by telling us too much. Stylistically, they disrupt cause and effect thinking by a paratactic strategy, replacing the either/or approach of common interrogation with the both/and condition characterizing the *Wake*.⁶ Thematically, they collapse the distance between reader and character, not by

⁶ See especially David Hayman's *Re-Forming the Narrative: Toward a Mechanics of Modernist Fiction*. Ithaca and London Cornell University Press, 1987.

producing a conflation of essence, for with an apparent antipathy for metaphysics they call into question the very concept of absolutes. (I say apparently to avoid reductive assumptions, for the discourse of the *Wake* also shows little inclination to support the reification of abstractions.) Rather, these lines, and others with similar characteristics throughout the book, insinuate an equivalence of consciousnesses and highlight the multiplicity of interpretation inherent in any experience.

Such possibilities for construing form and content contribute to the ambivalence that becomes the operating emotion for anyone reading *Finnegans Wake*, but too often traditional attitudes exert disruptive pressure. The impulse to impose closure can create a counterforce that inclines one to move outside the limits of the paradigm laid down by the work. Perhaps in anticipation of such temptations, the discourse at various points underscores the tenuousness of all perceptions. "Thus the unfacts, did we possess them, are too imprecisely few to warrant our certitude, the evidencegivers by legpoll too untrustworthily irreperible where his ajudgers are seemingly freak threes by his judicandees plainly minus twos" (57. 16-19). Inevitably, readers struggling against the domination of exclusive, linear thinking need such periodic reminders to reassure us that feeling a measure of bafflement remains a necessary and proper aspect of our experience and that certitude does not enjoy a privileged position in all critical expression.

The aspects of reading that I have outlined above do not recur in discrete episodic instances. Instead they run throughout the discourse and provide a structural unity and continuity that one does not find at the contextual or stylistic level. Thus, it inevitably develops that, while the final portion of chapter six underscores the sense of ambivalence surrounding any segment of the *Wake*, chapter seven extends the proposition to argue for the desirability of such a condition. It begins with a broad question—"the first riddle of the universe . . . when is a man not a man" (170. 04-05)—and a series of answers analogous to the range of responses that any number of readers might make to one of the book's episodes. This question and the thirteen attempted solutions that follows may or may not trace an archetypal search for understanding, but the exchange certainly evokes a sense of the variability characterizing the individual readings of the discourse of the *Wake*.

No answer achieves a privileged status, for as the narrative tells us, "All were wrong" (170. 21-22). At the same time, by this point in the book, the discourse has so often undermined absolutes that concepts like correct and incorrect have lost their significance. More to the point, since not one of these answers proves itself more efficacious than any of the others, a reader may pursue the implications of one as well as another. Freeplay rather than prescriptiveness becomes the rule.

This is not to say that one should assume intellectual postures analogous to those held by the respondents to Shem's riddle. Although the prize for the correct solution, "a bittersweet crab," calls to mind a pre-lapsarian image of the Edenic fruit from the tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, the answers of the brothrions and sweestureens hardly represent a very deep or broad testing

of the metaphysical conceit that the riddle invites us to form. Among other things, their replies illustrate the flawed perceptions and degraded conditions directly resulting from humanity's fall from grace: drunkenness, "when the wine's at witsends"; lust, "when lovely wooman stoops to conk him"; old age, "when you are old I'm grey fall full wi sleep"; the subversion of reality, "when dose pigs they begin now that they will flies up intil the looft"; and death itself, "when the angel of death kicks the bucket of life." They taunt us with our secret fears and insecurities: castration, "when he is just only after having being semisized"; a loss of Faith, "when he is a gnawstick"; and a loss of all prospects, "when yea, he hath no mananas." And sardonically, they call to mind past losses while predicting an apocalyptic future: the expulsion from Eden, "when he yeat ye abblokoken and he zmeaz hezelf zo zhooken"; and the end of the world, "when the heavens are quakers" (170. 09-21). An obvious paradox obtains here. With the emphasis on degeneration, the individual answers betray a narrowness in their point of view coming out of a linear sense of the inevitable decline of the human condition. At the same time, the cumulative diversity of the replies encourages readers to continue to seek a pattern for legitimizing multiplicity in reading. After this digressiveness, a linear mode of thinking would wish to come to some sort of resolution in the putatively correct answer—correct in the sense of being officially sanctioned—that Shem supplies for the riddle. His solution, however, infers an equally broad range of alternatives for seeing the world, "when he is a—yours till the rending of the rocks—Sham" (170. 23-24).

At first glance this response may strike one as little more than a weak punchline for a rather elaborate joke, reminiscent of the ill-conceived riddle about the fox and his grandmother that Stephen Dedalus tells in the Nestor chapter of *Ulysses*.⁷ I believe, however, that such an interpretation takes too much at face value. To me, Shem's answer suggests the most lucid approach to the entire chapter. In seeing the thing that is/is not in the thing that is not/is, it rejects certitude in favor of potentiality, leaving worth open to interpretation.

To return to a point made earlier, it strikes me as significant that the narrative offers this multiplicity in both the "right" and the "wrong" answers. In its own fashion the discourse reminds us that within the epistemology of *Finnegans Wake* the act of responding takes on much greater importance than does a particular response. The narrative introduces a familiar linear structure—the question and answer exchange—but it then inverts all our expectations regarding this form. If the predictability of the values of interrogative exchanges emerges as so uncertain, the value of other assumptions that we bring to interpretive projects becomes equally uncertain. As a result, by foregrounding multiplicity and provisionality in the discourse, *Finnegans Wake* actively discourages the closure and the certitude of conventional criticism.

Joyce's narrative, however, does not stop there. Indulging in the possibilities of pluralism, it proves unwilling to allow a single meaning to sustain the in-

⁷ A detailed account of this and other riddles employed in Joyce's narrative can be found in Patrick McCarthy's *The Riddles of Finnegans Wake*. Rutherford, Madison, Teaneck: Farleigh Dickinson Press; London and Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1980. For a detailed discussion of Edenic references, see Margaret Solomon's "Sham Rock: Shem's Answer to the First Riddle of the Universe," *A Wake Newsletter*, 7 (October 1970): 69.

terpretation of a word. As a consequence of this play of signification, interpretation evolves in a hypostatic environment. Each acknowledged meaning of a particular word counters, without refuting, all previous meanings (a gesture that in essence illustrates Jacques Derrida's concept of *sous rature*). This, in turn, expands one's parameters for reading--both/and meanings coexisting in place of the either/or struggle of linear cognition--even as it establishes the paradigm in which these alternatives coexist.

A simple examination of the implications that adhere to the term sham illustrates this operation at work. We commonly think of a sham as something or someone who pretends to be more or less than he/she/it is. In Shem's case, the narrator has tried to narrow the possible significations for an assessment of his character with a qualifying adjective--a low sham. Nonetheless, as we can see by forming the original question and answers into a brief syllogism, the scope of consideration remains significantly broad:

- a. A man is not a man when he is a sham.
- b. Shem is a sham.
- c. Shem is not a man.

Epistemologically, such a conclusion leads us to the questions which take up the remainder of chapter seven: who then is Shem and how literally can one take what he says. The apparent contradiction (in terms of linear logic) inherent in the syllogism, however, provokes an expanded ontological inquiry.

By this point in *Finnegans Wake*, undercutting has become a characterizing feature of the narrative. From the opening pages, the discourse has refused to extend to readers the security of certitude. Now the discourse routinely intensifies alternative readings whenever the formal or contextual structure of the narrative appears to be moving towards closure. "Who can say how many pseudostylic shamiana, how few or how many of the most venerated public impostures, how very many piously forged palimpsests slipped in the first place by this morbid process from his pelagiarist pen?" (181. 36-182. 03) In any episode an erosion of the reader's initial expectations quickly sets in. Thus, even the contingency-fraught approach of the exchange between Shem and the "brothron" and "sweestureens" in the opening question and answer format seems too pat, and the narrative voice immediately counterpoints Shem's disquisition by underscoring the broad association between his own nature and the human qualities in solution to the riddle that he has just proposed: "Shem was a sham and a low sham and his lowness creeped out first via foodstuffs" (170. 25-26).

In the above characterization of Shem, one can find an unmistakably binary oscillation. The deconstruction that occurs in the first half of the sentence--Shem's apparent essence undermined as a false representation--flows seamlessly/seemlessly into an analogous reconstruction--Shem as constituted by the foods he eats. At the same time, the paradigm of the *Wake* refuses to sustain the equilibrium of even so rudimentary a system of balances. Instead, the discourse almost immediately begins to offer possibilities for interpretation ly-

ing well beyond the modest restrictions on the reader's creation of a text proposed by the association of Shem and food.

With only the briefest pause to define Shem through synecdoche, the narrative moves from assessing incipient dissimulation to gathering support for its conclusions from gustatory evidence. The jump may initially seem a concession to cause-and-effect thinking, but as it develops its extravagance undermines any prescriptive logic generated out of associative patterning. "So low was he that he preferred Gibsen's teatime salmon tinned, as inexpensive as pleasing, to the plumpest roeheavy lax or the friskiest parr or smolt troutlet that ever was gaffed between Leixlip and Island Bridge and many was the time he repeated in his botulism that no junglegrown pineapple ever smacked like the whoppers you shook out of Ananais' cans, Findlater and Gladstone's, Corner House, England. None of your inchthick blueblooded Balaclava fried-at-beliefstakes or juice-jelly legs of the Grex's molten mutton or greasily-gristly grun- ters' goupous or slice upon slab of luscious goosebosom with lump after load of plumpudding stuffing all aswin in a swamp of bogoakgravy for that greeken- hearted yude! Rosbif of Old Zealand! he could not attouch it" (170. 26-171. 02).

Like all of the other characters in the discourse, the narrator functions in a system perpetually at odds with the logic meant to sustain it. As a consequence, the narrative continues the pattern of linear thinking established by the brothron and the sweetstureens with an unswervingly literal devotion to the logic of its argument. The narrative voice labels Shem a sham, assuming this to mean that Shem is less than a man, and it then attempts to support this assumption through analogies to what it considers to be hard facts. These associations, however, seem unnecessarily circumscribed. Like a frenetic health food addict, the narrator labels as spurious any source of nutrition that has suffered the mediating influence of human intervention, adhering to this convention in a manner so unflinching as to call the validity of the basic premise into question. At the same time, the nature of this discourse outlines important features of the reading experience, so by following the logic of the argument, one can better become aware of the alternatives characterizing Shem's nature without subscribing to the narrator's conclusion. As elsewhere in the *Wake*, the scope of signification that a reader is prepared to extend to words directly shapes the interpretive possibilities that one might derive from the selection, and a less rigid response to the potential meaning of this passage would produce a very different interpretation.

If, in fact, we are what we eat, then Shem must be a most artificial (if well-perfected) creature. This obviously stands as a flaw in the eyes of the narrator, for the narrative voice quickly makes clear its own narrow sense of the word artificial by condemning Shem for preferring canned food to the completely organic delicacies found in Ireland. Nonetheless, in fixing upon this interpretation, the narrative dismisses him precipitously. Shem does opt for artificial nourishment, but given his nature one could hardly count that as a flaw. As a writer Shem the Penman lives on artifice and presumably hopes that his creations will be preserved. It seems only natural then that he feel drawn to material transmuted to give it a degree of permanence that it did not previously enjoy. One certainly can characterize Shem's diet as artificial, but only insofar

as the natural elements of the food he ingests have been supplemented so as to insure their constitutive integrity for a longer period. This, of course, involves some change, but in general the natural and artificial combine for their mutual benefit. Artifice stands at the center of art, and if anything it serves to enhance rather than to diminish one's aesthetic experience.

The narrator, of course, takes a very different perspective, asserting that the only thing that one can say with assurance regarding Shem is that he is not the figure whom we perceive before us, yet that characterizes things a bit too simply. One might, with greater precision, view Shem as not merely the figure whom we perceive before us. Shem's character, in fact, displays a protean nature that does not submit to easy categorization. In essence, he personifies a feature becoming increasingly common in critical discourse.

In an essay written fairly early in his career, Derrida offered what has by now become a fairly familiar tenet of post-Structuralist criticism. He delineated the signified as encompassed by the tension between it and that which it is not, with Derrida considering what it is not as having the same level of importance as what it is.⁸ Since making that observation, Derrida and much of his Deconstructionist project have come under harsh criticism. Nonetheless, with the obvious Postmodern implications intruding upon Shem's condition, his work still offers a useful model for delimiting its features.⁹ For the individual aware of such antinomies, the statement--Shem is not a man--can have significance only through some association between Shemness and manness. Asserting that Shem is not a man makes sense to us only as long as we keep the concept of manness in the foreground of our perception of Shemness. In this passage negations contribute to one's sense of definition, becoming as much a part of our perception of entity as concrete attributes, and we read the selection unimpeded by the limitations of linear causality.

The difficulty occurs when one tries to maintain this openness in interpretation. In chapter seven the narrator operates according to exclusionary thinking, and jumps to the conclusion produced by cause-and-effect logic that being not a man is a failing. Someone more conscious of the potential for play inherent in the situation, a critic like Barthes for example, would quite properly defer any such conclusion, dwelling instead on the alternatives--both superior and inferior--to being a man. At the same time, neither Barthes nor for that matter any post-Structuralist critic sympathetic to the tenets of nonbinary logic would wish to relinquish the concept of man, since it stands as the formative proposition that animates all possible alternatives. Following the logic of this approach, one can say that we can only perceive Shem as not a man (assuming of course that we accept the validity of the narrator's judgment) when we think of him in terms of being a man. And, if we subscribe to the sense of shamming

⁸ See Jacques Derrida, "Difference," in *Speech and Phenomena and Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs*, trans. David B. Allison (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973) 129-60.

⁹ While this perspective clearly needs further elaboration, I do not agree with inferences made by some of Derrida's more frenetic opponents that embracing such a condition irreversibly commits one to entropic decay. Two examples of this approach would be Howard Felperin; *Beyond Deconstruction* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), and John M. Ellis, *Against Deconstruction* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989).

suggested above, we cannot say whether it would be more desirable for Shem to remain in his present condition or for him to become more or less manly.

All this still leaves the Cartesian in the dark as to the essence of Shem, but that, of course, remains the point. Far from being a circumlocution, this type of analysis underscores the ambivalence inherent in any process of naming, in any effort at discrimination. Recognizing this condition of ambiguity in the description of Shem can reconcile us to similar dialectical equilibriums throughout the work: instances of both/and thinking displacing the either/or approach. As a result of this condition none of the thirteen incorrect guesses in chapter seven brings about a rapprochement of the breach in comprehension precipitated by the original question. Each attempts to consider a specific existence through isolation and denial, so that each suggests that one can determine when a man is not a man by defining a specific condition that undermines manliness. Each view remains unsatisfactory, however, because none can unify the diverse attitudes articulated by all of the others. In contrast, the apparent circumlocutions of Shem's answer give it the qualities that make it so appropriate: a man is not a man when he only pretends to be what he is not. By denying the desirability of closure, this gesture has a liberating effect. It overturns the hegemony of a single response, and it introduces a way of thinking that allows for a multiplicity of readings. Further, the discourse refuses to conform to a linear logical progression within each statement, and through this refusal it undermines the legitimacy of the logical argument that supports the narrative voice's attacks on Shem.

The point that I hope to make through these associations has a circularity analogous to the text from which it was derived, which in turn maintains affinities to the printed passage that enabled that text's creation. This pattern of deferring meaning runs through every stage of one's experience with *Finnegans Wake*, yet it remains the aesthetic feature most difficult to retain. Reading the *Wake* continually exposes one to assaults on cause-and-effect thinking, yet after an initial furor that the work aroused in the 1920s and 1930s few serious students have dismissed the structure of the discourse out of hand. In other words, we have come to accept the lack of linearity that we encounter on its printed pages. To a degree the texts that we constitute from those pages retain this sense of multiplicity, as we playfully impose any number of intermingled scenarios upon our sense of a particular episode. In the final stage of the critical process, however, when we must commit our views to public scrutiny, we draw back from diversity to generate exclusive, stratified and prescriptive interpretations.

The discourse, at the same time, repeatedly offers models for overcoming this inclination. Shem's own act of creation, for example, centers on the reconstitution of basic organic material into a more artificial state even as he blithely ignores cultural proscriptions on his creative tools. By rendering the account of this project (185. 14-25) into Latin, the discourse initially distances us from the coarseness of the operation (changing feces and urine into writing ink).¹⁰

¹⁰ Robert Boyle's reading of p. 185 remains the most useful introduction to this passage. "Finnegans Wake, Page 185: an Explication," *James Joyce Quarterly* 4 (Fall 1966): 3-16.

Ultimately, however, this format has just the opposite effect, drawing us more intimately into the elemental structure. As we translate the terms from Latin to English, we necessarily concentrate on the prose one word at a time, lingering over phrases that we would have read far more quickly had they initially appeared in a more accessible form. Further, although the passage's use of Latin and its concern for change seem initially to evoke the Eucharist, in fact these elements secularize (but do not travesty) the act of consecration in the Catholic Mass. Rather than setting up the narrative of the *Wake* as a static icon, these associations draw parallels between the Eucharist and the transformation of impersonal words into the language of his own art.

Like transubstantiated bread and wine, the literal accidents--the shape of the letters--remain unaffected by the artist's creativity, but the language itself becomes infused with the presence of its artificer. The converse also obtains, for in keeping with the concept of negation Shem's artifice is self-consuming or at least self-translating. Not only are his materials participating in a continuing cycle--living organism, nourishment, waste, basic elements, living organism--he too participates in a parallel system. He is, after all, "this Esuan Menschavik and the first till last alchemist [who] wrote over every square inch of the only foolscap available, his own body, till by its corrosive sublimation one continuous present tense integument slowly unfolded all marryvoising moodmoulded cyclewheeling history" (186. 34-187. 02). Thus, in viewing the artist's words we confront the "him"--his essence implanted in the language--and the "not him"--art now existing independent of its creator. We read contradictions into our texts as they emerge from the printed pages before us.

Evidence from the various stages of the writing process asserts that this condition exists throughout the work and not simply in isolated instances. The drafts, manuscripts, and page proofs of the closing segment of the chapter give some idea of how this sense of duality, this blurring of differences evolved during the writing process. The holograph of the opening of Mercius's speech reads as follows: "Pariah, Cannibal Cain you oathily forsworn the womb that bore you & the paps you sometimes sucked."¹¹ The passage goes on to trace Mercius's response to the condemnation of Justius, which gives back imprecation with the same harshness of Justius. At the next stage of composition, the *transition* version, the direction of the assault becomes diffused with the substitution of I for the first and third you: "Pariah, cannibal Cain, I who oathily forswore the womb that bore you and the paps I sometimes sucked . . ." (JJA 47, 480). As the work continues to evolve, the pronounced shift in emphasis from polar antipathy to shared guilt allows the reader to see a greater variety in the natures of both characters and destroys the dichotomy of opposition which goes against the nature of the rest of the chapter. This both/and quality, simultaneously assaulting and enhancing the nature of the individual consciousness, allows the possibility for metamorphoses like that of Mercius to ALP in the final pages of the chapter to take place, and equally it makes that change as transient as any text constructed outside the printed page by the imagination of a reader.

¹¹ *The James Joyce Archive*, ed. Michael Groden (New York: Garland Publishing, 1978) 47: 383.

Confronting any portion of *Finnegans Wake* throws into relief the relationships that obtain between author, artifact, and reader. The process of creation and recreation which normally takes place at the subliminal level of comprehension becomes an overt act in the individual's effort to create a text from the work, and, to a degree that goes well beyond those narratives of a more conventional design, *Finnegans Wake* compels one to undertake exploitive reading. While most critics have accepted the first stage of this process, the challenge to retain that characteristic in their interpretations remains: to offer their own readers the same options for extension that are posed by Joyce's work.