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THE JOYS OF EXILE

Edited by
Franca Ruggieri

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CONTENTS

Franca Ruggieri

Foreword

James Joyce's Exiles and the Joys of Exile 9

1. JAMES JOYCE: THE JOYS OF EXILE 13

Mina M. Đurić

Canon in Exile: James Joyce and Serbian Literature 15

Annalisa Federici

*Being Expats Together: Joyce in Expatriate Little Magazines
and Autobiographies* 37

Gabriele Frasca

Exisle. The angst of return 55

Laura Gibbs

*In the Wake of Trauma: Exploring Exilic Identity Through
James Joyce's Use of Narrative Fetishism* 75

Andrew Goodspeed

Searching for the Women in Exiles 87

Lia Guerra

Style in exile. The exile of style. Giacomo Joyce 99

John Morey

The Joys of Disabled Internal Exile in Finnegans Wake 113

Taura Napier <i>“Cyclops” As a Hologram of Exile</i>	123
Fritz Senn <i>Joyce in terms of Exile</i>	137
Carla Vaglio Marengo <i>Joyce as Madama Butterfly</i>	153
Jolanta Wawrzycka <i>‘The fringe of his line’: Metaphors of Exile in Joyce</i>	167
Ioana Zirra <i>Silence and Cunning: the Irish Exile’s Postcreative Immortality in “Oxen of the Sun”</i>	179

2. BOOK REVIEWS edited by Fabio Luppi 201

Joyce Garvey, *Lucia. The Girl who Danced in Shadows* 201
(Annalisa Federici)

Jolanta Wawrzycka and Serenella Zanotti (eds.), *James Joyce's Silences* 204
(Annalisa Federici)

William S. Brockman, Tekla Mecsnober, Sabrina Alonso (eds.).
Publishing in Joyce's Ulysses. Newspapers, Advertising and Printing 209
(Ana López Rico)

Frank McGuinness, *The Woodcutter and His Family* 214
(Fabio Luppi)

Patrick O'Neill, *Trilingual Joyce. The Anna Livia Variations* 218
(Fabio Luppi)

Giuliana Bendelli, *Leggere l'Ulisse di Joyce* (With essays by
G. Giorello and E. Terrinoni. Pref. by M. Bacigalupo) 220
(Emanuela Zirzotti)

Onno Kusters, Tim Conley, Peter de Voogd (eds.), *A Long the
Krommerun. Selected Papers from the Utrecht James Joyce
Symposium* (European Joyce Studies 24) 223
(Emanuela Zirzotti)

CONTRIBUTORS

THE JOYS OF DISABLED INTERNAL EXILE
IN *FINNEGANS WAKE*

In this article I identify two forms of exile in *Finnegans Wake*, and consider the interrelationship between them. The first of these is the internal exile of the disabled subject in society as textually performed throughout the narrative and universalised through the dysmorphic character of Shem. Joyce deploys the antinormative influence of disability both through the enactment in multiple personae of bodily deformity and malfunction, and through what I conceive as a musical semantic disabling of the English language itself. My second exile is that which results from Joyce's inward displacement in this novel or anti-novel of standard elements of literary coherence such as character, location and timeframe. I argue that it is from this subsemantic structural reconfiguration that much of the humour and the radical musicality of *Finnegans Wake* arises, and that this process of displacement leading to a joyously malfunctional lyricism displays a kinship with the melancholic dysmorphia of Arnold Schoenberg's dodecaphonic music.

While the *Wake* comically depicts and textualises the internal social exile of the disabled, it also subverts the ablenormative poetics of otherness, emphasising the ubiquity of disability while creating a comedy of impairment with disabled subjectivity at its centre. The "fun" had at 'Finnegan's Wake' in the song of that title largely involves near-death experience, dipsomania and Actual Bodily Harm. The familiar

strategy of seeking the humour in death, debility and injury lies at the heart of both the narrative and the aesthetic construction of Joyce's *Wake*. This is accompanied by the book's constant allusive, representational and imitative, but also often disruptive and deformative, invocation of music. This disabled, comic, musical sensibility is achieved in part through the addition across successive drafts of distorted song allusions, extrasemantic musicalised phrasing, and descriptions of vocal and instrumental performance in which players, audience and instruments are disgenically divided and intermingled.

The apparent instigators – and certainly the epitome – of this comic musical fracturing and recombination, are the “whackfolthe-diddlers” (*FW* 42.01) of chapter 1.2. Their ‘Whack fol’ conjures the refrain of the ostensibly thoroughly Irish ‘Finnegan’s Wake’, while their ‘diddle’ invokes quite another song, sometimes known as ‘God Bless England’. They ramble through the streets of Dublin, singing to the accompaniment of a “crewth fiddle” (*FW* 41.22) – a crude medieval instrument whose “Cremoaning and cronauning” (*FW* 41.22) somehow approximate to the tones of a fine Cremona-made Stradivari, Guarneri or Amati violin – and command the rapt awe of the city folk, perhaps with a loud distorted rendering of G. F. Handel’s oratorio *Messiah*, which was premiered in Dublin in 1742:

[...] to the thrummings of a crewth fiddle which, cremoaning and cronauning, levey grevey, witty and wevey, appy, leppy and playable, caressed the ears of the subjects of King Saint Finnerty the Festive who, in brick homes of their own and in their flavory fraiseberry beds, heeding hardly cry of honeyman, soed lavender or foyneboyne salmon alive, with their priggish mouths all open for the larger appraisal of this longawaited Messiagh of roaratorios, were only halfpast atsweeep and after a brisk pause at a pawnbroking establishment for the prothetic purpose of redeeming the songster's truly admirable false teeth and a prolonged visit to a house of call at Cujas Place, [...] where, the tale rambles along, the trio of whackfolthe-diddlers was joined by a further intentions apply tomorrow casual [...] (*FW* 41.21-42.03)

From these beginnings, an ill-assorted group of chimeric players and their hybrid instruments assembles to produce a poly(dis)phonic soundtrack for the un-stage-managed musical comedy of 1.2.

In defining a comic, musical, disgenic Wakean aesthetic, I will here touch upon the music and disability scholar Joseph N. Straus's conception – to which I return in more depth below – that the antinormative dodecaphonic music of Arnold Schoenberg, with its, as I argue, not un-Wakean poetics of exile, possesses what Straus calls “disablist”¹ characteristics. Straus hears Schoenbergian disruptions of traditional harmony as potential causes of aesthetic stimulation for listeners, but also as structural disablers within a composition.

My research demonstrates the ways in which Joyce's displacement of key narrative structural elements, such as protagonist and plot-point in favour of deconstructive compositional principles, compares to Schoenberg's exiling of the tonic – the key harmonic component of all earlier classical music.

A central aim has been to discover how the narrative profusion of bodily impairments in *Finnegans Wake* and the book's textual performance of these states and experiences distinguishes the resulting enactments of non-typical embodiment from those of for example the glasses-wearing young Stephen in *A Portrait of the Artist* or the blind piano tuner in “Sirens”. In these instances, while the character is physically impaired, the language is ablenormative, exhibiting little of the stammering, stumbling, Tourettic, dyspraxic musico-verbal dynamic of the *Wake*.

I have sought to establish what the disablist joys are that might be derived from the reorientations of sound and sense in *Finnegans Wake*, and how disablements both bodily and textual feed into the book's humour, its musicality, and its aesthetic of displacement. The

¹ Straus defines “disablist” as follows: “In using the term “disablist” here, I intend an analogy to the term “feminist”” (Straus, 2011: 150). In practice, Straus employs the term – as I do above – in a broader and more aesthetically inflected way than this simple definition may suggest.

somatic and psychic disorders experienced by so many of the dramatis personae of the *Wake* give rise to a rabblement of human variety and to a subordination of normative and hegemonic identities. The kinds of deformity, oddity, sickness, degeneracy and corruption attributed to Shem by his brother² and indeed to Joyce himself by some of his peers, speak of humanity in all its malfunctioning polyvalence. These pluralities in the *Wake* of bodily identity, experience and perspective are all the more remarkable for their broad contemporaneity with the eugenic attitudes and pronouncements of such authors and commentators as H. G. Wells, Wyndham Lewis and Virginia Woolf. Of these three, it was Wells who framed his ideas most explicitly and pragmatically, calling for the eradication of various human imperfections in terms of “the sterilisation of failure” and “an improvement of the human stock” (McLean, 2009: 171). Lewis made his feelings clear in more theoretical terms³ and Woolf’s leanings emerged through passing remarks both private and published. This said, it is perhaps Woolf’s instinctive eugenicism that is most striking, exposing as it may be seen to do, a broader tacit desire in modern Western humanity – during the interwar period and since – to erase certain traits, if not from its genepool, then from its public life and self image. In her diaries, Woolf described *Ulysses* as “an illiterate, underbred book” (Woolf, 1978: 189) – a choice of terms that, as Marion Quirici observes, “betrays her eugenic predilections as well as her class biases” (Quirici, 2016: 90). As Quirici goes on to say, “Illiteracy could refer to a lack of learning opportunities rather than an inability to learn to read, but the inclusion of the word “underbred” alongside “illiterate” implies an inborn deficiency” (Quirici, 2016: 91).

² “Shem’s bodily getup, it seems, included an adze of a skull, an eight of a larkseye, the whoel of a nose, one numb arm up a sleeve, fortytwo hairs off his uncrown, eighteen to his mock lip, a trio of barbels from his megagegg chin (sowman’s son), the wrong shoulder higher than the right, all ears, an artificial tongue with a natural curl, not a foot to stand on, a handful of thumbs, a blind stomach, a deaf heart [...]” (*FW* 169.11-17).

³ In *The Art of Being Ruled*, Wyndham Lewis conceived of a “willed sickness” and a “campaign against language and the articulate” in the experimental fiction of Joyce and Gertrude Stein.

Music is, in itself, illiterate, a purely aesthetic medium with no codifiable semantic capabilities. Joyce frequently plays on the sonic aesthetics of illiteracy in forming Wakean poetics. Far from seeking to eradicate anomalous or surplus elements, Joyce's Wakean sonic semantics elevate the traditionally secondary and tertiary in prose writing above the primary. They emphasise for example, the rhythms of phatic expression, ostensibly semi-nonsignificative subcultural modes, and the morphology of forgetting and misrecollection. Schoenberg's emancipation of the secondary and tertiary in Western harmony (notes from outside of the diatonic scale) and exiling of the primary (the tonic and dominant) is comparable to Joyce's linguistics of illiteracy in that now none but the most educated listening ear is easily able to find the components in the artwork that it had previously understood as essential to a work's construction and consumption. Thus, it is not the author, characters or narrative voices of the *Wake* who are functionally illiterate, nor the composition, motifs, or harmonic progressions in Schoenberg that are intrinsically disphonious. Rather, in each instance it is we the readers and/or listeners who may be thought of as, in a sense, impaired.

In her 1919 essay for *The Times Literary Supplement*, entitled 'Modern Novels', Woolf refers, speaking of Joyce, to the "comparative poverty of the writer's mind" (Woolf, 1970: 126). In one of many trans-morphic rejoinders in the *Wake* to critiques both of *Ulysses* and of its author's supposed character pathology, Joyce disfigures Woolf's judgement as, "horrible awful poverty of mind" (Quirici, 2016: 100). There is to Joyce's antisemantic musicalising of Woolf's words here something of the child's singsong mimicry of an adult's pompous admonishment. Joyce summons the sensibility of music in order to undermine the mere posture of criticism. The apparently weaker figure – the inferior, degenerate, or otherwise othered person – finds him or herself at home in the prelinguistic illiterate hinterland of music. In Woolf's responses to *Ulysses*, citations of cognitive or learning disability and what Quirici calls "abject embodiment" (Quirici, 2016: 104) are adduced by the author to back up her condemnation of Joyce's supposed lower class moral and spiritual constitution. The parlance of class in fact stands in

for that of disability, applied as it is to what Woolf conceives as Joyce's inherent inferior mental fitness.

The disabled person can never truly be made to conform, because otherness of form is his or her defining trait. Societies can exclude or confine gender identities, minority ethnicities or sexual deviancies; but the normate sibling that is strength, health, and bodily regularity, is inseparably conjoined with its sickly twin, deformity, illness and disability. In the *Wake*, Shem's disabled qualities provide his brother Shaun with both flattering binary opposites to his own virtues of health and fitness and a worrying family connection to those degenerate qualities. This extends in Chapter 3.3 to a sort of irresistible ventriloquism by Shaun of his brother. Brian Fox notes that, "Shaun's own physical characteristics attain qualities previously associated with Shem, [...] the Shem Shaun structural pairing exercising its potential for mimicry or impersonation" (Fox 2014: 98).

But it is perhaps the very nonbinary universality of disability that makes it, despite its horrors, so relatively safe and relatable as a locus of humour. This humour is, however, usually externalised – done "about" the disabled "without" their consent. In *Finnegans Wake*, Joyce substantially avoids this externalisation by absorbing disability into the language that describes and performs, not only that disability, but all persons, events, themes and locations in the text. Witness only the (disfunctionally) auditory mouths of the "subjects of King Saint Finerty", the messy 'agh!' of the diddlers' song, or the pro(s)thetic but "truly admirable" false orality of the songster. As a result, in the *Wake*, not only is nothing said or done "about us without us" (as demanded in one well known disability rights campaigning slogan⁴), but nothing is said or done without us at all because disability – or at least "object embodiment" – is encoded into the very genetic structure of the text.

Joseph Straus proposes that disability enters an ostensibly – as it were – able-bodied work of music in the form of what Arnold

⁴ "Nothing about us without us" originated in Central European politics. It was adopted into disability activism during the 1990s. See, for example, Charlton (1998).

Schoenberg called a “tonal problem” (Straus 2011: 48). The tonal problem is a musical disruption (often a note from outside the work’s main diatonic scale) that can lead to the destabilisation of a sense of key. In each instance, as Straus writes, “the music contrasts its normative content with a disruptive deviant intrusion whose behavior threatens the integrity and normal functioning of the musical body” (Straus 2011: 48-9). To my ear, this offers a compelling analogy for Joyce’s interposing of foreign words and neologisms into the relatively eugenic linguistics of the *Wake*’s early drafts.

As well as hearing alien elements in musical artworks as analogous with disruptive processes in the human body, Straus proposes the disabled experience in society as a model for many other kinds of outsider status or repression. Adapting Mitchell and Snyder, Straus upholds disability as a model of how best to be excluded (not in a normative, but in an emancipatory abnormative sense). He conceives that,

[...] femaleness, non whiteness, and gayness can all be understood as forms of disability [...] In this sense, disability is the “master trope of human disqualification,” the fundamental form of deviant Otherness of which gender, race, and sexual orientation are specific manifestations. (Straus, 2011: 10)

While I sympathise with the desire of Straus and others to universalise disability, to dissolve bodily abnormality into a generalised otherness of gender, racial, sexual and all other difference, I think that the master trope model both overestimates disability’s strength as a metaphor (or metacategory), and somewhat diminishes its inherent power in the real world as it stands.

With Shem, HCE and others in the *Wake*, Joyce enacts the social disqualification of the deviant body, but simultaneously affords a potent influence within the body of the text to deviant semantic elements. The internal displacement in the *Wake* of traditionally primary narrative elements chimes clearly with Straus’s conception of the replacement in

Schoenbergian serialism of tonic-dominant-based hierarchical scales by the antisequential basic set⁵. Straus writes of twelve tone music that,

For the listener approaching the piece from the outside, imbalance and unrest are sources of pleasure and interest, but from the point of view of the piece's tonic, its principal harmony, they are disruptive and potentially disabling events that must be contained, abnormalities that must be normalized. (Straus 2011: 49)

I explore this idea and its relevance to the *Wake* in depth in my doctoral thesis, identifying alignments between the uprooted root note in dodecaphonicism and the dislocated protagonist or plotpoint in *Finnegans Wake*. But I offer this analogy in brief here to enlighten my notion in this article of disabled, literary, internal displacement.

In my broader research I am seeking, through musico-literary analogy, to compare and contrast elements of coherence in the *Wake* and in dodecaphonic music. Specifically, I have considered how these elements are internally displaced or exiled within a work, and how a disabled aesthetics and perspectivalism might help both to locate and to integrate them within both disabled and nondisabled readings. In coming (partially) to understand *Finnegans Wake*, one is both seeking in earnest these inwardly exiled elements, and having, to some degree, to acknowledge both their presence under one's nose, and the impossibility of ever categorically locating them.

Exile, like disability, is experienced as a function not merely of self, nor of environment, but of a disabling dynamic between the two. Similarly, upheavals in art culture pose elements of artistic construction against their formal or generic context. Joyce wrote an antinovelistic novel in *Finnegans Wake*, and Arnold Schoenberg and Pierre Boulez composed harmonically transfigured works in sonata form. Each artist needed a home in which to lose, in Joyce's case character, location and

⁵ The "basic set" is the non-sequential, non-hierarchical replacement in Schoenbergian serialism for the conventional scale. It is also known as the "tone-row".

theme, and for the composers the tonic, the pitch interval and the melodic phrase.

The internal refugee, the disabled person and the modernist character or root note, has no fixed home, not even a ghetto, but remains paradoxically restrained within the porous and shifting borders of a hostile domain which he, she, or it, is nevertheless forced to treat as home.

The joys of internal disabled exile offered by *Finnegans Wake* emerge from an acknowledgement on the part of both author and reader that, even at home, objects, ideas, persons, symbols and sounds can be displaced, and that being oneself as a bodily individual, a character or a note of music can often clash with a sense of being at home.

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