

JOYCE STUDIES IN ITALY

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**JOYCE'S FICTION
AND
THE NEW RISE
OF
THE NOVEL**

*A special volume to celebrate the X Annual Conference organized
by
The James Joyce Italian Foundation*

*edited by
Franca Ruggieri*

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ENCYCLOPEDIC NOVEL REVISITED. JOYCE'S
ROLE IN A DISPUTED LITERARY GENRE

In 1976 Edward Mendelson published an essay entitled "Gravity's Encyclopedia" in the collection *Mindful Pleasures: Essays on Thomas Pynchon* (Levine and Leverenz 1976). That same year, with the article "Encyclopedic Narrative: From Dante to Pynchon", his theoretical proposal reached its most synthetic (and ambitious) definition. Talking about encyclopedic narrative, Mendelson referred to a literary genre that had developed over the course of seven centuries, in which no more than seven works could be counted: Dante Alighieri's *Commedia*, François Rabelais's cycle of *Gargantua et Pantagruel*, Miguel de Cervantes's *Don Quixote*, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *Faust*, Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*, James Joyce's *Ulysses*, and Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*. These books were united by the fact of having been composed by an author "whose work attends to the whole social and linguistic range of his nation, who makes use of all the literary styles and conventions known to his countrymen [...] and who becomes the focus of a large and persistent exegetic and textual industry comparable to the industry founded upon the Bible" (Mendelson 1976: 1268).

Though rigid and pretentious, Mendelson's proposal has enjoyed a moderate but steady success in recent decades, generating a group of studies that deserves interest in and for itself, because of the profound instability that marks its theoretical boundaries with striking distinction. Thus, it is possible to find a number of studies that have

dealt with the topic in various ways: all proposing their own ‘canon’ for the new literary genre and all widely diverging in defining it. And the divergences are not limited to the list of titles and distinctive features, because they also touch upon the very denomination of the genre, which oscillates from “encyclopedic narrative” (or “encyclopedic novel”) to “world-novel”, passing through the “systems novel” and the “mega-novel”, to finally reach the “maximalist novel”. And yet, while individual proposals jar, it is possible to define an extraordinarily compact force field, which affirms its vital permanence in the contemporary critical landscape.

Tom LeClair (1989) talks about the *Art of Excess*, that specific mastery (which is primarily a domain practice) through which an author manages to expand our knowledge by bringing the information channels to the limits of overload: it is in this region that a new, non-reductionist theory unfolds (the “systems novel”), modeled by the systemic logic described by the biologist Ludwig von Bertalanffy. Franco Moretti (1996), on the other hand, focuses on the aspects of openness, incompleteness, and polysemy of the “world-novel”, finally finding a unifying element in the theory of complexity, which expands but does not contradict the logic of von Bertalanffy. Frederick R. Karl (2001), insists on the “oceanic” experience and on the indeterminate elements in the “mega-novel”, resorting to the image of cellular structure to describe its functioning—an image that is connected once again with the dynamics of complex systems.

It is important to notice how Joyce’s role in this theoretical framework, while central in its very inception, is becoming increasingly marginal: both LeClair and Karl, for example, focus their analysis solely on contemporary North-American literature, anticipating a tendency that is now a dominant attitude.

The most recent of these studies, written by Stefano Ercolino (2014), deserves a separate analysis. It is a book that, on the one hand, leads the theoretical debate to its highest level of maturity, while, on the other, it also articulates its most intimate contradictions. Ercolino chooses to lay the foundations of his own investigation on LeClair’s, Karl’s, and Moretti’s studies (while also mentioning Mendelson), but

only to see them objectively and subject them to a close critique. The very proposition of a different denomination (“maximalist novel”) demonstrates how the debate does not proceed through comparison and inclusion, but through continuous slippage and expansion. At its centre, there is an object that is never completely circumscribed and which reaffirms its dominant centrality with each new attempt at definition.

Ercolino’s theorization is distinguished by its amplitude and elegance, with a Decalogue of elements to shape the genre. In his words:

The maximalist novel possesses a very strong morphological and symbolic identity. There are ten elements that define it as a genre of the contemporary novel:

1. Length
2. Encyclopedic mode
3. Dissonant chorality
4. Diegetic exuberance
5. Completeness
6. Narratorial omniscience
7. Paranoid imagination
8. Intersemioticity
9. Ethical commitment
10. Hybrid realism

(Ercolino 2014: xiii-xiv)

These elements act within the “maximalist novels” in a dynamic and dialectical relationship because some of them (such as length, encyclopedic mode, dissonant chorality and diegetic exuberance) embody a “chaos-function”, while others (such as completeness, narratorial omniscience and paranoid imagination) give rise to a “cosmos-function”: “The internal dialectic of the maximalist novel would appear then to work toward the *synthesis* of [these] two opposing functions” (Ercolino 2014: 115). The relationship with the great literary tradition is sustained by a vigilant criticism of the postmodernist debate, as well as by attempting to frame the maximalist phenomenon in a longer-

term perspective, focused on a dialectical relationship with the complementary minimalist tendencies of the contemporary novel. An attempt that, however, seems to be driven by the same urgency that led Mendelson to build an entirely new theory around Pynchon's novel while testifying to that extremism from which not even Ercolino's proposal can be said to be completely exempt. The amplitude of the theoretical construction, in fact, is accompanied by its inevitable rigidity, which may excessively reduce the scope of the analysis while pushing the critical focus towards the maximum level of definition. In the perspective of Joyce studies, Ercolino's decision to limit the 'canon' of this new genre to only seven titles is extremely significant. Specifically, these are: *Gravity's Rainbow* by Thomas Pynchon, *Infinite Jest* by David Foster Wallace, *Underworld* by Don DeLillo, *White Teeth* by Zadie Smith, *The Corrections* by Jonathan Franzen, *2666* by Roberto Bolaño and *2005 dopo Cristo* by Babette Factory, all books published between 1973 and 2005. However, through a systematic analysis of Ercolino's ten defining elements, it will be easy to demonstrate that Joyce too can be considered a "maximalist author".

Regarding length, it is necessary to acknowledge the substantial frailty of this defining element. Ercolino refers in particular to the promotional campaign for *Infinite Jest*, interpreting the insistence on its notable length "within the framework of the 'sex appeal of the inorganic'" (Ercolino 2014: 23). However, it is difficult to extend this element to a general rule without running the risk of relativism. Ercolino refers to the number of pages, thus defining the range of his selection "[f]rom a minimum of 401 pages to a maximum of 1,105 pages" (Ercolino 2014: 19). Both *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake* fit comfortably into these limits.

As for the "encyclopedic mode", Ercolino himself confirms that "[t]he encyclopedism of *Ulysses* is a commonly recognized fact" (Ercolino 2014: 28). The third element, "dissonant chorality", is defined as "an inextricable web of chorality and polyphony" (Ercolino 2014: 48), a web that is characteristically exemplified by *Finnegans Wake*, where all histories and all identities finally lead back to a single point or person (e.g., the protagonist H.C.E. or the year 1132 A.D.),

while the linguistic strata are exponentially—and dissonantly—expanded. And the same can be said for *Ulysses*, whose dissonances and polyphonies have been repeatedly studied by Joyce scholars, with insistent references to Bakhtinian theory (see Booker 1995) and to music (see Melnick 1980).

Regarding “diegetic exuberance”, the extremely reduced chronological span of the primary plots in both *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake* might suggest a mismatch, but it is precisely through the secondary elements that this exuberance emerges with renewed strength. Following the suggestions of Tindall (1969: 30-31), for example, it is possible to identify dozens of embryotic narratives in just the first page of *Finnegans Wake*. And also the fifth element, “completeness”, finds its perfect achievement in Joyce’s fiction, which tends to develop this rhizomatic expansion into a circular, overarching structure—famously synthesized in the “Diagram of *Finnegans Wake*” by László Moholy-Nagy (1947: 347).

“Narratorial omniscience” is defined as “knowing things before they happen and [...] having free access to the most hidden thoughts and desires of all the characters” (Ercolino 2014: 98). An exemplification of the former element can be found in the temporal structure of *Finnegans Wake*, where the end is directly connected with the beginning and the whole of history can stand together in a single moment. The most famous illustration of the latter element is the use of stream of consciousness in *Ulysses*. However, it is also necessary to note that Joyce goes far beyond the nineteenth-century, realist concept of “narratorial omniscience” because in his world “there are no epic heroes; nor are there omniscient narrators who consistently and reliably provide translucent summaries of the characters’ thoughts to the readers” (Schwarz 1987: 64).

“Paranoid imagination” is another problematic element, for which Ercolino provides a definition that is easily conflatable into the more general concept of complexity: “the direct or indirect interconnection of all the stories, of all the characters, and of all the events that proliferate in maximalist novels” (Ercolino 2014: 111). A phenomenon already described by Franco Moretti (1996: 216-217) for *Ulysses*:

“In ‘Circe’ alone, Hamlet is successively linked to a grotesque seduction of Mrs Breen (467), an imaginary plea in defense of Bloom (952), the death of Dignam (1218), a little speech to keep Zoe at a distance (1965) [...]. There is no doubt, *Ulysses* connects everything with everything”.

The eighth element, “intersemioticity”, is significantly exemplified by the semiotic proliferation of the text of *Finnegans Wake* that also includes geometrical figures, musical excerpts, theatre pieces, and even some of the first television broadcasts (see the episode of Butt and Taff, *FW*: 341-353).

Regarding “ethical commitment”, suffice to mention the study by Marian Eide (2002: 2), which is dedicated to confirming how, “[i]n each of his works, Joyce maps the complex relations within a domestic setting or immediate context onto exterior processes in the social and political realms”. On the complex dynamics of Joycean “hybrid realism”, finally, see an entire volume of *Joyce Studies in Italy* (Ruggieri and Terrinoni 2014), or even an article in this very collection (Federici 2017).

These remarks are not aimed, of course, at denying the validity of Ercolino’s theorization, which remains the most advanced on the subject. Rather, they suggest the necessity of expanding it to a larger portion of literary history, while rediscovering Joyce’s central role in the encyclopedic/maximalist phenomenon.

Among Ercolino’s ten defining elements, it is also necessary to acknowledge the importance of the second one. In re-naming the genre “maximalist”, Ercolino chooses to downgrade encyclopedism from a literary genre to a mode of expression. This choice allows attention to be diverted to a phenomenon perhaps less circumscribable, but at the same time more pervasive in literary history. For Ercolino (2014: 39), the encyclopedic mode is definable “as a particular aesthetic and cognitive attitude, consisting of a more or less heightened and totalizing narrative tension in the synthetic representation of heterogeneous realities and domains of knowledge”. The example of Joyce shows how mastering this tension makes it possible to produce novels that are both encyclopedic and maximalist, but that can also be considered

as world-, system-, or mega-novels. Before the genre definitions there is a mode of expression that includes them all: potentially present in all arts, it should be distinguished as a ‘literary encyclopedism’, whose constitutive elements can be described in narratological, theoretical and stylistic terms—always with Joyce’s works at its core.

Firstly, it has been noted that the encyclopedism of contemporary novels is linked to a fundamental historical fracture. Diderot had already highlighted the intrinsic incompleteness of the work of the encyclopedist, who is unable to encompass the totality of knowledge. Faced with the medieval ideal of an all-embracing knowledge, modern culture put forward a more expanded and multifocal model, at the expense of overall coherence:

The proliferation of knowledge in post-Renaissance Europe meant that information could no longer be reliably gained from one polymath intelligence and, as a consequence, single-authored encyclopedias began to be replaced by multi-authored volumes, with an inevitable loss of overall coherence. So while the encyclopedias of the Middle Ages unfolded according to some coherent overarching pattern, the eighteenth century saw the emergence of discrete entries, a development that made locating specific information easier, at the expense of locating that specialist knowledge within some larger scheme.

(Burn 2007: 55)

In literary terms, the encyclopedic mode carries a similar logic within the structure of the narrative, thus bringing into play this complex dynamic between totality and incompleteness. In revisiting Mendelson’s theorization, Herman and Van Ewijk highlighted the implicit contradiction of the alleged encyclopedism of a novel such as *Gravity’s Rainbow*. In their view, Pynchon’s ultimate goal was by no means that of reaching totality, but, on the contrary, its intimate deconstruction:

Mendelson’s much vaunted “totality” [...] is indeed only one side of the encyclopedic novel as exemplified by *Gravity’s Rainbow*. A new working definition is therefore in order: by processing an

enormous amount of information from a variety of fields, quite a few big novels produce the illusion that they have encyclopedic proportions and perhaps even manage to impose some form of order on the wealth of material. [...] *Gravity's Rainbow* is predicated on an insight into its own limitations as an encyclopedic novel. [...] Pynchon was well aware of the fact that any attempt at encircling the totality of knowledge on even one specific topic would prove to be an unattainable goal.

(Herman and Van Ewijk 2009: 169)

It is interesting to note that, in at least four of the seven titles proposed by Ercolino, the narrative structure is tightly centered around a 'latent hinge': a device (be it an object, a person, or an event) that never reveals itself entirely or that is gradually dispersed into the storyworld, thus imposing a tension that stimulates an opening, while never leading to a complete fracture. In its latent existence, this element gradually affirms itself as the synthetic image of an unattainable totality, placed at the very centre of the novel's fictional universe. In DeLillo's *Underworld*, it is the home-run baseball of the 1953 *pen-nant* won by the Dodgers; in Wallace's *Infinite Jest*, it is James Incandenza's experimental film, capable of killing its spectators; in Bolaño's *2666*, it is the mystery of the 400 murders of young women in the city of Santa Teresa; and in Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*, it is the V2 missile carrying the symbolic "00000" label.

Similar devices can also be found in *Finnegans Wake*, like the "untitled Mamafesta" (*FW*: 104) that connects all the principal protagonists of the book—and that has also been defined as a "concentrat[e] of the *Wake* itself" (Tindall 1996: 12)—but that is never fully revealed in its contents; or like the sexual intercourse between H.C.E. and A.L.P., which, according to Edmund Epstein (2009: 13), happens only in the hiatus between the last and the first page of the book. Once again, Joyce's narrative seems to claim its position at the core of the encyclopedic phenomenon, irrespective of the perspective chosen for analyzing it.

From the point of view of literary theory, an even more striking correspondence can be found. As recently suggested by Van Ewijk (2011), literary encyclopedism shows a strong affinity with the concept of hypertextuality. In fact, several exegetical projects have developed around the work of some of the aforementioned authors in recent years, exploiting the potential of hypertextual technologies. It is no coincidence, moreover, that these projects often take the form of *Wiki* websites, relying on the same protocol adopted by the most famous encyclopedia of the ‘Web 2.0’ (*Wikipedia*), where the reader also has the potential to become the author of the text.

Some of the most highly developed of these projects focus on Pynchon and Wallace,¹ but the first to be created was entitled *Finnegans Wiki*.² Supported by the free contributions of its users, *Finnegans Wiki* is part of an extended galaxy of websites dedicated to Joyce’s last work,³ and offers the opportunity to test not only Van Ewijk’s hypothesis, but more generally the connection between literary encyclopedism and hypertextuality as a phenomenon that goes far deeper than the separate histories of literature and technology. Some scholars have gone as far as to state that “Joyce’s text can be said to *solicit* hypertext” (Armand 2003: xi), but perhaps the connection can be established not only *a posteriori* as it is part of a much more extended process of redefinition of encyclopedic knowledge, ready to lead towards the phenomenon that Pierre Lévi (1997) defined as “collective intelligence”. Hypertext, in its intrinsic interactivity potential, invites us to take control of a complexity that escapes us: an active exercise stimu-

¹ See *PynchonWiki*, <pynchonwiki.com> [last visited 15 May 2017] and *Infinite Jest Wiki*, <infinitejest.wallacewiki.com> [last visited 15 May 2017].

² <http://www.finnegansweb.com/wiki> [last visited 28 August 2016].

³ See, for example, *Glosses of Finnegans Wake*, <www.finwake.com> [last visited 15 May 2017] and *Finnegans Wake Extensible Elucidation Treasury*, <www.fweet.org> [last visited 15 May 2017]. Of particular interest is the *First We Feel Then We Fall* project <www.firstwefeelthenwefall.com> [last visited on 15 May 2017], which affects a multimedia/hypertextual adaptation of the text: see Bazarnik and Wróblewski (2016).

lated by the encyclopedias of the new millennium, as well as by Joyce's texts.

Literary encyclopedism, in fact, cannot be considered an isolated, normative framework, totally impermeable to social, cultural and technological mutation. A fundamental node in its development is thus the extreme stage of modernism, during which collapse and paroxysm, acceleration and implosion all intensified exponentially both in the political and the cultural spheres, as well as in science and technology. Joyce's work is one of the highest expressions of this period and is distinguished by its utmost receptivity to the potential of future developments. If the idea that *Finnegans Wake* anticipated hypertext (Volpone 2003) can still be questioned, it is indisputable that, in the face of the much-heralded crisis of written culture, it suggested a solution that is actually becoming the most successful in the era of the internet and of the new encyclopedias. As noted by Fritz Senn (1990: 63), "*Finnegans Wake* induces collective reading, this in the original sense of *col-ligere*, to collect, gather, put together, pool information, data, conjectures, experience. Or, to shift the ground, *Wake* readers become colleagues, *collegae*, those who choose (or read) together". The path that links this experience to that of *Wikipedia*, seems to be simply a natural evolution.

Directly connected to these technological futures, a further perspective on literary encyclopedism is finally offered by the growing field of "digital humanities". Specifically, the area of research known as "stylometry" can provide a reliable tool for testing the original assumption by Mendelson (1976: 1268) that "an encyclopedic author [...] makes use of all the literary styles and conventions known to his countrymen". The origins of stylometry have been traced back to the 1960s, with the pioneering work of Mosteller and Wallace (1964) on the American Federalist Papers, or even to the middle of the nineteenth century, thanks to the original intuitions of Augustus de Morgan (see Juola 2006: 240-242). However, the definitive affirmation of stylometry dates to the beginning of the twenty-first century, when John Burrows (2002) proposed a surprisingly effective method for authorship attribution, known from that moment as "Delta distance". Its

logical implementation was extremely easy: from a group of texts, the occurrences of single words were extracted and a list was built comprising the most frequent words in the whole corpus; for each one of the texts, then, the relative frequencies of these words were calculated, thus generating a vector of numbers. The distance between two texts was therefore the distance between their two corresponding vectors, calculated through an *ad hoc* formula. Burrows tested this method on a corpus of English Restoration poets, obtaining surprisingly accurate results. In most cases, in fact, the ‘closest’ texts were those written by the same authors. Over the last fifteen years many different improvements have been proposed for Delta distance, but the logical process for its calculation has remained substantially the same.

In order to test Mendelson’s assumption as regards Joyce’s texts, a small experiment has been designed,⁴ based on the recent findings by Maciej Eder (2015) that Delta distance reaches high levels of efficiency when working with 8,000-word-long samples.

First, a ‘primary set’ has been composed by randomly selecting two or three novels by 13 different authors⁵ (active in approximately the same period as Joyce), together with the entire texts of *Dubliners* and of the *Portrait*. As evident in Figure 1, Delta is actually able to discern the “fingerprints” of the different authors, which group into well-separated clusters of the “consensus tree”.⁶

⁴ The experiment was implemented using the R package *Stylo*, <<https://sites.google.com/site/computationalstylistics/stylo>> [last visited 15 May 2017].

⁵ The list of 13 authors is made up of: Jane Austen, Anne Brontë, Charlotte Brontë, Florence L. Barclay, Arnold Bennet, Richard D. Blackmore, Mary E. Braddon, Frances H. Burnett, Gilbert Chesterton, Joseph Conrad, Marie Corelli, Charles Dickens and Arthur C. Doyle. As is evident, the selection has been limited to the letters between A and D of the “English Benchmark Corpus” provided by the *Stylo* website: <<https://sites.google.com/site/computationalstylistics/corpora>> [last visited 15 May 2017].

⁶ For a general introduction to the logic behind the “consensus trees”, see Eder (2017).

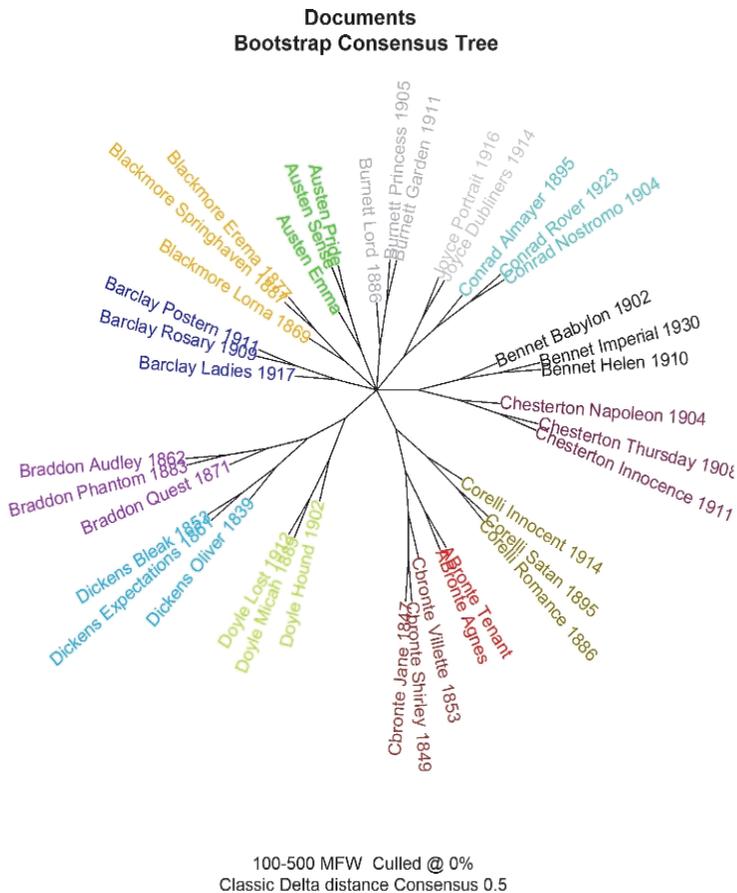


Figure 1. *Bootstrap Consensus Tree of the Primary Set*

When adding to this primary set a series of ‘test sets’ composed of 8,000-word-long excerpts from a traditionally ‘realist’ novel (such as *David Copperfield*), Delta still accomplishes its task because it always places them next to the right cluster (in this case, that of Dickens: see Figures 2 and 3).

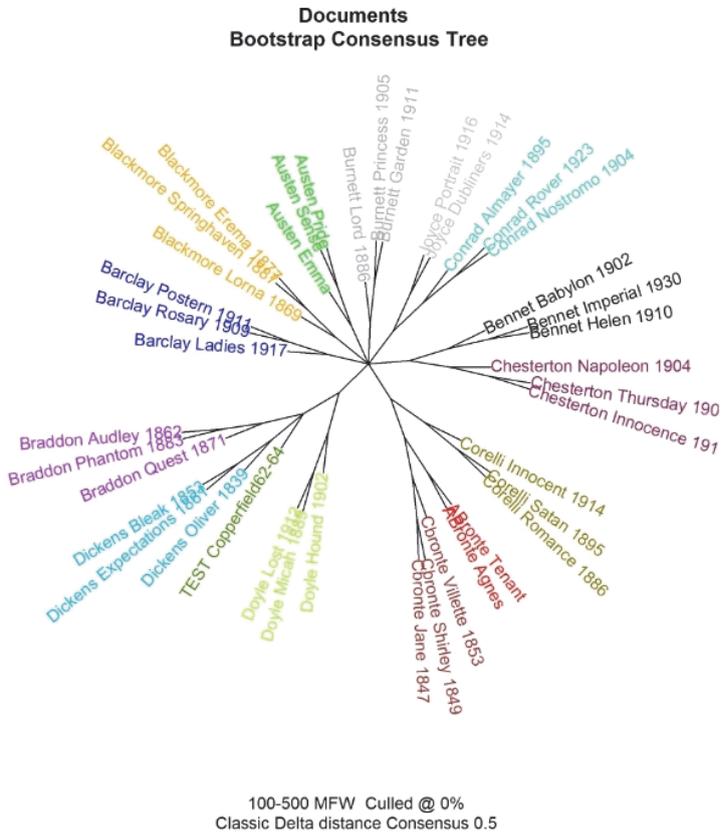
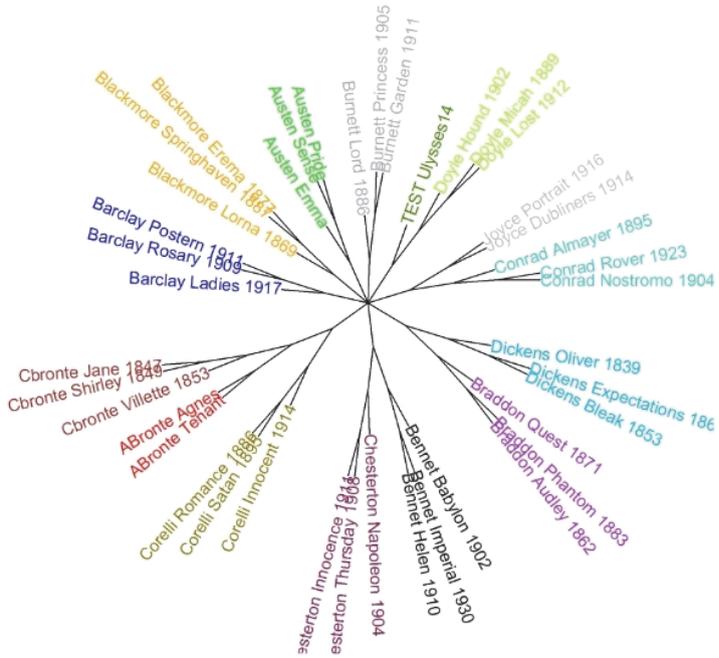


Figure 3. *Test Set: 8,000 Words from David Copperfield (Chapters 62–64)*

With a test set comprising the first 8,000-words of *Ulysses*, Delta is still able to recognize Joyce’s fingerprint, but it commits some evident mistakes when dealing with the most experimental episodes. An excerpt from “Oxen of the Sun” is erroneously attributed to Arthur Conan Doyle (see Figure 4), “Penelope” is ascribed to Frances H. Burnett (see Figure 5), “Ithaca” to Florence L. Barclay, and so on. Evidently, Joyce’s stylistic experimentation succeeded in deceiving the software, thus confirming the supposed “multi-stylism” of literary encyclopedism.

Documents
Bootstrap Consensus Tree



100-500 MFW Culled @ 0%
Classic Delta distance Consensus 0.5

Figure 4. *Test Set: 8,000 Words from Ulysses (Episode 14, “Oxen of the Sun”)*

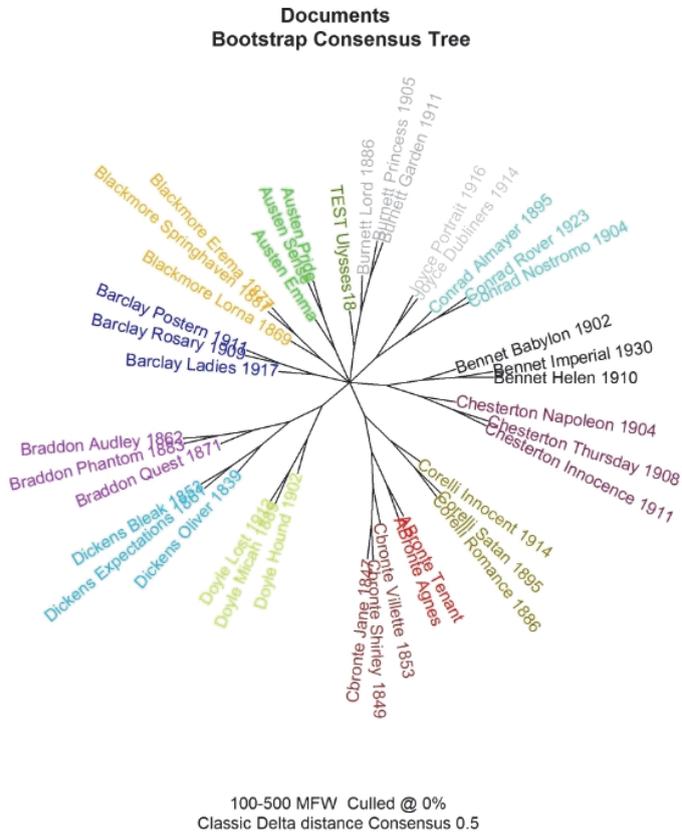
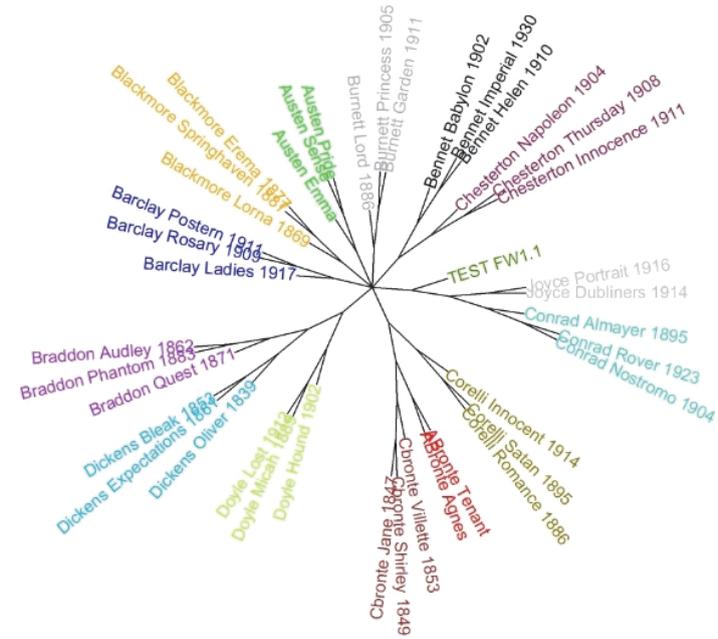


Figure 5. *Test Set: 8,000 Words from Ulysses (Episode 18, “Penelope”)*

Of particular interest, however, is what happens with *Finnegans Wake*. Notwithstanding the elevated experimentalism of its language, Delta succeeds in attributing to Joyce the beginning of the first, second, and third book equally (see Figures 6 and 7).

Documents
Bootstrap Consensus Tree



100-500 MFW Culled @ 0%
Classic Delta distance Consensus 0.5

Figure 6. *Test Set: 8,000 Words from Finnegans Wake (Book 1)*

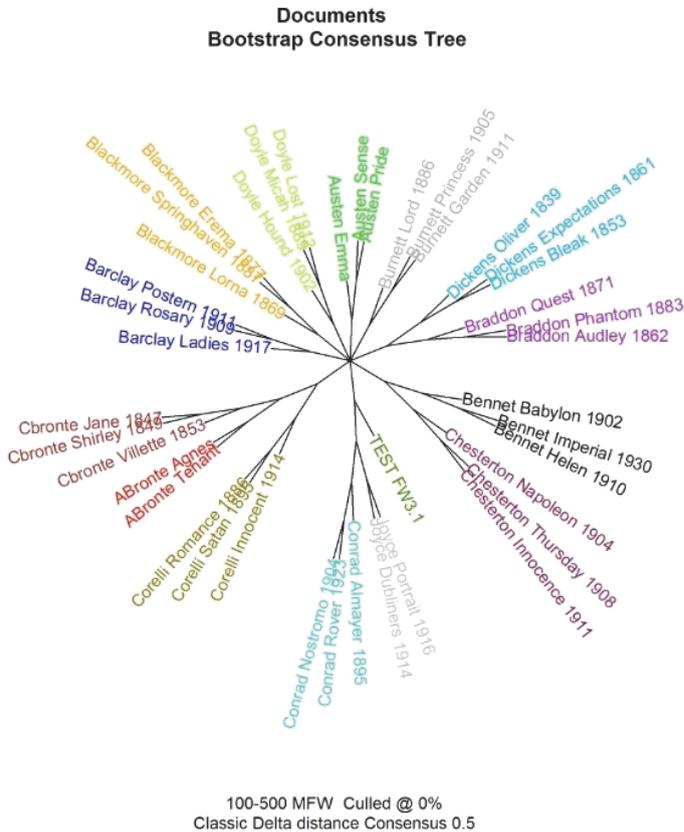


Figure 7. *Test Set: 8,000 Words from Finnegans Wake (Book 3)*

The phenomenon can be explained by the fact that Delta works with the statistical distribution of most frequent words (MFW), which are primarily articles, conjunctions, pronouns, and adverbs. In *Finnegans Wake*, these words provide the English syntactical structure for the text, which is composed, for the rest of the text, of words that are not even present in the selection chosen for the experiment. As already noted by Clive Hart (1963), “[i]t is remarkable that, despite the highly unusual character of the vocabulary of *Finnegans Wake*, the proportion of the 141 [most] common words, taken together, should be iden-

tical with that in *Ulysses*, to within one per cent". The success of Delta in authorship attribution has been generally explained by referring to the subconscious process that drives the choices in this 'lower' part of the vocabulary (see Kestemont 2014) and it is confirmed here, through the analysis of a text that is generally considered the most complex in English literature.

The conclusions that can be drawn from this experiment are not, of course, that *Finnegans Wake* is a less encyclopedic novel than *Ulysses*. However, it is significant that Joyce, while making his language complex to the utmost limits, was driven at the same time towards the linguistic niche of his first works. Further analyses (and further experiments) are advisable on this subject. For the sake of the present study, it is sufficient to note how literary encyclopedism, far from being a purely deviant literary *monstrum*, can offer some precious insights into issues of the greatest relevance in contemporary culture (especially in relation to technological evolution), while Joyce's work still constitutes one of its most central, indispensable, and inexhaustible representatives.

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