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## Alliteration and Reading in *Finnegans Wake*

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*Finnegans Wake* and common sense do not always go together. It is no news to add that at times criticism has to choose between the two. The ways in which the parts and the whole of *Finnegans Wake* relate to each other are an example of this, because, as it has been said, “each phrase contains, potentially and actually, the whole,”<sup>1</sup> the text is “a part larger than the whole of which it is a part,”<sup>2</sup> or “the key to the puzzle is the puzzle, because dreams are puzzles.”<sup>3</sup> Affirmations like these, while meaningful for *Finnegans Wake*, seem to question implicitly one’s common sense, at least considering that wholes cannot be literally folded into one of their constitutive parts, 628 pages into one phrase; or can they? This apparent puzzlement helps us understand that what is said about *Finnegans Wake* may be a response to certain strategies, and perhaps alliteration is one of the strategies that produces this particular effect, a certain illusion of fusion, or confusion, between the textual detail that has just been read and the global perception of the book.

The idea of alliteration as relevant repetition of consonants—and sometimes vowels—has a peculiar ambiguity, because there are not many consonants, only a handful of vowels, and some repetition is just normal.<sup>4</sup> That is to say, as it occurs with other figures of repetition, or the poetics of continuity, to perceive alliteration in this broad sense is somewhat subjective and can even depend on the degree of the reader’s obsession. Perhaps due to this ambiguity, there is a narrower meaning of alliteration which refers to the repetition of consonants or vowels at the beginning of words.

*Finnegans Wake* is full of alliteration in the broad sense, that blurs gradually as other kinds of repetitions come into play (stuttering, echo, rhyme, etc.); and also full in the more restricted sense. Alliteration appears in the first line, “from swerve of shore to bend of bay” (003.01), the last one, “A way a lone a last a loved” (628.15), and basically on every page. It is so frequent that it would be difficult to associate alliteration with a specific section, voice, or sigla. A chapter chosen almost at random, I.v, contains many alliterations at the beginning of words, and in the majority of cases double or triple; there are at least 258 cases in its 22 pages, between 10 and 14 per page.

What does seem certain is that alliteration was an important ingredient in Joyce’s corrections, and perhaps this is why it is seen so often in the lists and enumerations that accumulate with each revision. In the following example, the first lines that Joyce supposedly wrote, it is evident that alliteration grows and grows:

So ~~anyhow~~ **after that** to wind up *that long to be chronicled get together day [the anniversary of his 1st coming]* after the ~~whole~~ **same beanfest barbecue** was all over poor old *hospitable* King Roderick O’Conor the *paramount chief polemarch* last *preelectric* King of all Ireland. . . .<sup>5</sup>

So anyhow, melumps and mumpos of the hoose uncommons, after that to wind up that longtobechronickled gettogether thanksbetogiving day at Glenfinnik-en-la-Valle, the anniversary of his first *homy communion*, after that same barbecue beanfeast was all over poor old hospitable corn and eggfactor, King Roderick O'Conor, the paramount chief polemarch and last preelectric king of Ireland. . . . (380.07-13, emphasis added)

During this process, the years are not the only thing to see a change. "Longtobechronickled" becomes a long word, "get" and "together" "gettogether," "homy" and "communion" seem to exchange a letter. And three alliterated series are added, one in "m" ("melumps and mumpo"s), another one in "p" ("paramount . . . polemarch . . . preelectric"), and the most curious "barbecue beanfeast." This last one is the most interesting because, when looking at the draft, it seems that Joyce was not sure which word to use. For a while he chose "barbecue," but it also seems that behind "barbecue" he could always see "beanfeast," because in the end both come to the surface, adding even more alliteration. Here, as elsewhere, nothing is thrown away, and Joyce recycles as he rereads.

In fact this example helps us to see why there is so much alliteration in *Finnegans Wake*. It is just that, after all, the use of alliteration is very similar to that of the pun. The only difference with "barbecue beanfeast" is that they do not fit into one word. In a pun like "penisolate war" (003.06), the coincidences are folded into the word. It is a coincidence—and a lucky one—that "penisolate" includes "pen," "penis" and "isolate," without losing the trace of "peninsular," the word that appears in the earlier versions. But if we had to deploy these associations for "penisolate" in the syntactic chain, the result could well be alliterated, something like "war of pens, penis, peninsular, isolated." And that is precisely what occurs in "barbecue beanfeast," where the coincidences are unfolded in the syntactic chain, otherwise it would be difficult to recognize "beanfeast" with only the aid of the "b" in "barbecue." Puns in *Finnegans Wake* are given more attention, for they seem to threaten the meaning of words, while alliteration is less noticed, perhaps because it only covers syntax with analogies, but otherwise leaves its organizing ability intact. And that is important, because Joyce had discovered that conscience is pierced when words are pierced, and not when syntax is disrupted.

To make sense of all this alliteration, it would be necessary to consider the way in which alliterated words, like puns, condense their meanings. However, the explanation that first comes to mind is that alliteration produces an onomatopoeic effect,<sup>6</sup> which quickly brings us problems without solutions. René Wellek also stumbled upon the familiar example of "The murmuring of innumerable bees."<sup>7</sup> At first sight one could say that the repetition of nasal sounds is a way to imitate the sound of bees. But Wellek recalled that "if we make a slight phonetic change to 'murdering of innumerable beeves' we destroy the imitative effect completely."<sup>8</sup> This is to say that alliteration reinforces meaning, its onomatopoeic component is dependent on the meaning of words like "murmuring" and "bees." In the same way, "the mar or murmury mermers, to the mind's ear, uncharted rock, evasive weed" (252.16-7) clearly depends for its imitative effect on the meaning of "murmury," "ear," and even "mermers." Once the artificiality of the convention is unveiled, Wellek moves on to distinguish alliteration (now a convention) from "the actual imitation of physical sounds, which is undeniably successful in cases like 'cuckoo.'"<sup>9</sup> Isn't "cuckoo," nevertheless, also dependent on meaning? Actually, the study of onomatopoeia shows a similar process and, as Derek Attridge has shown elsewhere, onomatopoeia

is “a convention among conventions.”<sup>10</sup> The paradoxical conclusion is that these devices, which originally appeared to effect some kind of analogical relationship between words and objects, are in fact the opposite of what they achieve. Eventually, to think about alliteration as onomatopoeia hides a larger and more general problem, for sooner or later the arbitrariness of language itself has to be confronted.<sup>11</sup>

Keeping in mind the proportions of such a task, one may be more easily persuaded that the importance of alliteration is not in its relation to a referent, but in its connection to other words. As John Hollander says, “words can only ‘sound like’ other words, and it is thereby that they sound like nature if at all.”<sup>12</sup> For this reason, the importance of alliteration is not only in its relation to a referent, but in its condensing, agglutinative ability. This condensing effect does not require a very sophisticated procedure. An alliteration like “an azulblu blowsheet for his blousebosom blossom” (180.13-4) might invite the reader to see a peculiar relationship between sound and meaning (if somehow he or she comes to terms with its arbitrariness), but the only thing that alliteration does in this example is to sew the borders of the words together.

It is true that the value of words as signs is in their ability to point to something beyond themselves and, in this sense, the syntactic linearity is only the transitory ground for inferences or abstractions. However, alliteration, while postponing the abstraction of meaning, chains words to each other, simply because their edges exhibit a material coincidence, in this example “b” and “l.” That is to say, through alliteration words lose their linguistic discreteness: when meaning is abstracted from one word, that same abstraction drags along with it the meaning of the other word; just like the meaning of “beanfest” cannot be dissociated from that of “barbecue”; somehow they have to be related, as puns are related. Joyce weaves words together, at a rate of between 10 and 14 stitches per page in *I.v.* Combined with puns, rhymes, echoes, etc., this condensation gives the text the texture of a whole from which the parts are inseparable.

The paradoxical situation—and another difficulty of *Finnegans Wake*—is that, in this way alliteration does what normally corresponds to the reader. A basic aspect of the reading process supposedly establishes connections between the part and the whole, between figure and ground, between textual detail and global perception. The text provides the parts in a linear succession. The whole takes shape in the reader’s mind. In the reading process that Iser has outlined in detail, the reader incorporates little by little the fragments that appear in the text on to the thematic horizon, which gradually takes a homogeneous shape as the ‘whole’ meaning.<sup>13</sup> Reading does what it is not done in the text, and that is, among other things, to join part and whole.<sup>14</sup>

Nevertheless the reader who goes through *Finnegans Wake* trying to put part and whole together, soon finds that the job has already been done, because, as stated earlier, they are already fused, or confused, with the help of alliteration. Alliteration makes explicit what remains implicit in the reading process, the labor of putting part and whole together. It might even be ventured that what alliteration does in *Finnegans Wake* is applicable to a novel whose thematic coherence depends on re-reading, to a novel that is read at least twice.

The result is not totally surprising. It explains why, when we read *Finnegans Wake*, we are given the impression that we are re-reading what somebody else has already read, that we are reading a reader’s mind.<sup>15</sup> There are those who think that the whole book is an effort to read a hidden

letter, "rede by two and trouved by a poule in the parco!" (201.1); those who suspect that Shem is reading and rewriting *Ulysses*,<sup>16</sup> those who seemingly compare reading with a search for a manuscript buried among thousands of books. This is also the reason why, when we arrive at certain words, we have the impression that someone else has been there before, that someone has already traced the possible associations, between "penis" and "peninsular," between "mar" and "mermer," in the "barbecue" where Joyce read "beanfest."

This way of reading may seem somewhat unconscious, and so it is, but precisely because reading and dreaming are also similar processes. At least that is what Joyce thought when he told his friend William Bird the following: "Do you know that when we dream we are reading, I think it's really that we are talking in our sleep. But we cannot talk as fast as we read, so our dream invents a reason for the slowness" (JJ 560). If dreaming is like reading, there must be ways to show how this reading process functions. And alliteration is a mark of reading.

In the dream, the phonic configuration of language retains a specific weight. The traces left by the material foundation in the mental processes of signification are fundamental, not just for *Finnegans Wake*, but to distinguish consciousness from unconsciousness. Some words, like puns, exhibit in their materiality the associations they have with others.<sup>17</sup> We might only add that these associations are also manifested in alliteration. It would not even be difficult to make room for alliterative literature in this context, if we remember that Vico understands that the succession of cycles are successive moments of consciousness. The democratic age is the moment of conscience and of conventional language. But the age of heroes or barbarians, whose language functions through similarities, comparisons, images, etc.<sup>18</sup> is a less rational stage, less common-sensical, less conventional; it is like the barbarian inside that expresses him or herself with an analogical language. And finally, if reading and dreaming are similar processes, reading and resurrecting are not totally different either. The Egyptian books of the dead in part "were designed to be read at the funeral specifically in order that the dead subject of the book might hear the words and so begin the process of his own internally self-performed resurrection."<sup>19</sup> Like reading, resurrecting is not an easy task for Shaun, for Earwicker, but at least we know it has to be something like "Fa Fe Fi Fo Fum! Ho, croak, evildoer! Arise, sir ghostus!" (532.03-4), with the "f" for "Finnegan." That is to say, it has to alliterate, because in the mind of the reader of *Finnegans Wake*, like the mind of the dreamer and the dying, words also alliterate.

#### Notes

1. Klaus Reichert, "Fragment and Totality," *New Alliances in Joyce's Studies*, ed. Bonnie Kime Scott (London: Associated UP, 1988) 88.

2. Jacques Derrida, "Two Words for Joyce," *Post-Structuralist Joyce: Essays from the French*, ed. Derek Attridge and Daniel Ferrer (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1984) 148.

3. Margot Norris, *The Decentered Universe of Finnegans Wake: A Structuralist Analysis* (Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins UP, 1974) 5.

4. For a more accurate definition of alliteration, see Heinrich Lausberg, *Elementos de retórica literaria: introducción al estudio de la filología clásica, inglesa y alemana* (Madrid: Gredos, 1983) 230, and Bice Mortara Garavelli, *Manual de retórica* (Madrid: Cátedra, 1988) 31-7.

5. David Hayman, *A First-Draft Version of Finnegans Wake* (Austin: U of Texas P, 1963) 203.

6. Lausberg 230.

7. René Wellek and Austin Warren, *Theory of Literature* (New York: Harcourt, 1956) 162.

8. Wellek and Warren 162.

9. Wellek and Warren 162.

10. Derek Attridge, *Peculiar Language: Literature as Difference from the Renaissance to James Joyce*. (London: Methuen, 1988) 141.

11. It is not by chance that the reflection on the origin of language finds in onomatopoeia the perfect vehicle for speculation on arbitrariness. In Foucault's words, "to bring the origin of language back into the light of day means also to rediscover the moment in which it was pure designation. And one ought, by this means, to provide at the same time an explanation for its arbitrariness" (Michael Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archeology of the Human Sciences* [New York: Vintage Books, 1970] 104).

12. John Hollander, "Rhyme and the True Calling of Words," *Vision and Resonance* (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1985) 120. Similarly Michael Riffaterre ("Intertextual Representation: On Mimesis as Interpretive Discourse," *Critical Inquiry* 11.1 [September 1984]: 142) contends that in certain texts, mimesis "is from words to words, or rather from texts to texts, and that intertextuality is the agent both of the mimesis and of the hermeneutic constructions on that mimesis" (142). This is also the second effect that Lausberg (230) notes.

13. "The particular always exists in a context, the figure we focus on always comes embedded in a background. Our universals lift the figures straight out of their ground, pretend they are surrounded by emptiness, and line them up in procrustean beds to lop off corners that do not fit" (Naomi S. Baron and Nikhil Bhattacharya, "Vico and Joyce: The Limits of Language," *Vico and Joyce*, ed. Donald Phillip Verene [Albany: State U of New York P, 1987] 189). The commentary is very helpful, although their example is from *Ulysses*, "the car tooraloom round the corner of the tooraloom lane. . . ." (189); and their conclusion rather tangential to the present argument: "Normal language may be quite appropriate for representing speech, but its ability to represent experience is feeble. Since Joyce was out to represent experience, he insisted on putting the sound back where it belongs" (189-90). See also Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 1978).

14. Leo Spitzer's experience is enlightening at this point: "When I spoke in terms of a series of back-and-forth movements (first the detail, then the whole, then another detail, etc.), I was using a linear and temporal figure in an attempt to describe states of apperception which, in the mind of the humanist, only too often co-exist. This gift, or vice (for it has its dangers), of seeing part and whole together, at any moment, and which, to some degree, is basic to the operation of the philological mind, is, perhaps, in my own case, developed to a particular degree" (*Linguistics and Literary History: Essays in Stylistics* [Princeton: Princeton UP, 1947] 26).

15. "The reader of *Finnegans Waks* often feels himself in a world full of tricky déjà vus, of elusive voices uttering vaguely familiar sounds that get more familiar, if not always more clear, with each successive tour, guided or unguided, through the maze. As usual, Joyce. . . has a way of indicating not only what happens in the book, but also what happens to the reader" (Fritz Senn, *Joyce's Dislocations: Essays on Reading as Translation* [Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins UP, 1984] 87).

16. John Paul Riquelme, *Teller and Tale in Joyce's Fiction: Oscillating Perspectives* (Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins UP, 1983) 4.

17. "Perhaps it is now easier to understand why Freud says of the dreamwork that it is comparable rather to a writing than to a language, and to a hieroglyphic rather than to a phonetic writing" (Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* [Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1974] 68). Kimberley Devlin also reminds us that "As Joyce may have learned from Freud, the crucial difference between unconscious and conscious thinking lies in the former's sensitivity to the material base of language" (*Wandering and Return in Finnegans Wake: An Integrative Approach to Joyce's Fiction* [Princeton: Princeton UP, 1991] 13).

18. Giambattista Vico, *Principios de una ciencia nueva sobre la naturaleza común de las naciones* (Barcelona: Ediciones Orbis, 1985) I (32) 55.

19. John Bishop, *Joyce's Book of the Dark: Finnegans Wake* (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1986) 107.