

# ***Finnegans Wake* as Proving Ground for Theory and Agent Provocateur in Literary Studies**

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**Abstract:** *Finnegans Wake* has struck many of its exegetes as the epitome of the postmodern text. The oddity of James Joyce's last work has been and still is a provocation not only for literary criticism and theory but for every reader of the work. It provokes us to reflect on our preconceptions concerning such fundamental issues as reading, meaning and understanding. Due to this very quality, the work has been a fertile intellectual stimulus for an illustrious band of thinkers of the "post-projects." Its singularity has provoked and facilitated the further development of theoretical frameworks beyond the confines of literary theory proper. This essay will trace the elaborate theoretical responses of Umberto Eco and Jacques Lacan to Joyce's grand literary arcanum. Eco's concept of the openness of modern works of art and Lacan's elaboration of his psychoanalytic concepts of the symptom and of the Borromean knot were inspired by their study of Joyce. As an extreme instance of literariness, *Finnegans Wake* thus constitutes an ideal opportunity to consider the scope and boundaries of the scholarly study of literary texts more generally.

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Approached upon the subject of the debate on the prospects of Germanistik and the longing for a "return to philology" and to philological "core competencies" (see, e.g., Erhart), the Germanist Thomas Anz said:

the forays of literary studies into other disciplines may well result in neglecting our core competencies. It would be wrong, however, to construct alternatives in terms of *either* solid skills *or* the broadening of perspectives! We need a combination of both. As literary scholars, we cannot afford to fall behind literature. (Anz; my translation)

Certainly, the interpretation of the individual, singular text must remain as vital an interest of an academic field dealing with literary texts as the open-mindedness about relevant findings from other disciplines. But it is the notion of *not falling behind our object of study* which seems to me worth contemplating. Implied in the debate—and in reference to it by the title of our workshop—is the issue of the scope and boundaries of our scholarly study of the literary text. My discussion of this issue takes as a point of departure the

question: What is the value of our categories of analysis for attempting to scrutinize a text which subverts most of the established concepts that we employ to describe, analyze and categorize literary works? Due to this very quality, I regard *Finnegans Wake* (*FW*) as an ideal example to reflect on the scope and boundaries of our discipline—a text, indeed one of the most daring experiments in the realm of the literary, which provokes us not only because, despite all the explicatory efforts, our idea of its content and meaning remains vague but ultimately because it is the site of the loss of our illusion about literary criticism’s descriptive and explanatory power.

*Finnegans Wake* as proving ground for theory and agent provocateur in literary studies—why not take this title literally and define *agent*, following the second edition of the *OED*, as “that which acts or exerts power, as distinguished from the *patient*, and also from the *instrument*” (Def. 1.a), and *provocation* as “a stimulus” (Def. 4) and as the “action of exciting irritation” (Def. 5.a). Thus, we appropriate the term *agent provocateur* as “that which provokes a disturbance” and as “a factor which causes a stimulus.”

James Joyce’s last work *Finnegans Wake* may be just that—an *agent provocateur* not only, as the title implies, for literary studies, philology, Literaturwissenschaft or whatever we call what we are doing, but first and foremost for every reader of the work. One of the text’s most experienced readers, Fritz Senn, has described it thus:

*Finnegans Wake* is odd, and ‘odd’ is defined by what it is not: not usual, not regular, not even, not fitting into preexisting categories. It accommodatingly suggests both a deficiency, a pattern to be completed, and a surplus that defies order. So it provokes us into completing patterns, filling the void uncertainty with some prejudiced substance. We are tempted to press the *Wake* back into the categories that it transcends. (Senn 115)

The work, even more so than *Ulysses*, is said to have no “common readers,” is said to have been monopolized by academia and specifically by a ‘Joyce industry.’ Lacan thought so: “There are no Joyceans to enjoy his heresy outside the university” (Lacan, *Sinthome* 15; trans. in Thurston, “Translation” 3. I quote from Luke Thurston’s unpublished translation of Lacan’s seminar “Le sinthome” by permission of the translator.); the Joyce he construed was being “little read everywhere” (Thurston, *James Joyce* 69; see also Hassan, *Paracriticisms* 80).

For an attempt at explaining its provocative quality, it is worth considering how a work that has provoked its first readers over eighty years ago can have a

similar effect today. As of today, there are 200-odd customer reviews of *Finnegans Wake* on Amazon.com, more than half of them written by people with an obviously favourable attitude towards the book. However, about a quarter of the reviewers awarded the book the lowest possible rating. I do not want to overestimate the representativity of the matter, yet if we suppose that at least some of the reviewers did approach the text, then those frankly negative reviews do attest to the unimpaired provocative quality of the work, do attest to the fact that a certain “aesthetic distance” has not altogether disappeared, that the “original negativity of the work” has not altogether become “self-evident” (Jauß, *Aesthetic* 25). The review headlines speak for themselves: “life is too short for this,” “Belongs in an anthology of abnormal psychiatry,” “A silly little monstrosity,” “A low point in Western Civilization,” and “Exactly what’s wrong with Literary Scholars.” The work has provoked such reactions since its earliest serial publication as *Work in Progress*. An early review from May 1927 read, “It should disgust. [...] When will it strike Mr. Joyce that to write what it is a *physical* impossibility to read is possibly even sillier than to write what is mentally impossible to follow?” (Deming 375f).

What still provokes us is that in order to get something out of “reading” *Finnegans Wake*, it requires, as Derek Attridge has pointed out, our

ability [...] to *shed a number of ingrained preconceptions* [...] expectations and assumptions about linearity, transparency, directness of plot, singularity of meaning, and so on. Above all, readers would have to give up the fundamental presupposition that reading is an attempt at ‘textual mastery’. (32; emphasis added)

In particular with reference to his late work, Joyce, who from a literary history perspective is labelled a modernist writer, has been declared *the* postmodernist writer *avant la lettre*. Lyotard’s “Réponse à la question: qu’est-ce que le postmoderne” is only most obviously symptomatic of such a view, using Proust and Joyce as examples to distinguish between modern and postmodern aesthetics, Lyotard defines the postmodern as “that which, in the modern, puts forward the unrepresentable in presentation itself” (Lyotard, *Postmodernism* 81). According to Ihab Hassan modernism and postmodernism coexist in *Finnegans Wake* (*Paracriticisms* 47f, 43f), but its most striking features seem only explicable in postmodern terms (*Paracriticisms* 85-87). Hassan declares it thus “a monstrous prophecy of our postmodernity” (*Paracriticisms* 93): “the

postmodern endeavour in literature acknowledges that words have severed themselves from things, that language now can only refer to language. And what book, or rather what language, calls attention to itself as language, as ineluctably verbal and quite finally so, more than *Finnegans Wake*?" (*Paracriticisms* 90).

Joyce, whom the *nouveaux romanciers*, with Michel Butor leading the way, had already claimed as one of their predecessors (Lernout 35-37), came to be highly regarded in the avant-garde circles of the early 1960s in France and Italy, *Tel Quel* and *Gruppo 63*, which are notable not least for the conspicuous co-presence of literature and criticism/theory in the writings of their members. The *Tel Quel* group, specifically Philippe Sollers, hailed Joyce as prime instance of the writer as the exceptional subject and as a pioneer of a revolutionary *écriture* (French 250ff); for Hélène Cixous and Julia Kristeva the "Penelope" chapter of *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake* represent models for *écriture féminine* (Schwab 88-93).

Yet even by the early 1970s there could still be disagreement on Joyce's status; unimpressed by the boom of Joyce criticism at American universities during the 1960s, one of the early proponents of a postmodernist break in the literary context, Leslie Fiedler, declared in "Cross the Border—Close the Gap" (1968/69) that "the age of Proust, Mann, and Joyce is over" (Fiedler, "Border" 461). Both Fiedler and Hassan gave addresses at the Second International James Joyce Symposium in 1969. Fiedler—giving his address an air of his personal apostasy from Stephen's light, cerebral and aloof, to becoming a born-again Bloom, self-deprecating and earth-bound—repeated his view of modernism's death: "that age so utterly lost in elitism and snobbism, the vestiges of class values totally alien to a democratic or mass society, [...] it was doomed from the first to die the academic death" (Fiedler, "Bloom" 21). Through Hassan's address, strikingly postmodern in style, subtly runs the notion of *Finnegans Wake* as a "start, end of old artifice [...] and a prophecy" (Hassan, "Joyce-Beckett" 10); these are the vaguely perceptible traces of the notion of Joyce's postmodernity that he was to express more explicitly a few years later.

For better or worse, the result of what has come to be seen by many as an apparent anticipation of some of the central premises of the two closely-related *post-projects* was a canonization of the text on the part of thinkers and theorists whom we have come to associate with the label(s) poststructuralism/postmodernism such as Cixous, Kristeva, Lacan and Derrida (see Lernout, Roughley) amongst others. When Hassan, writing in the early 1970s, declared

“all good structuralists go to *Finnegans Wake* on their way to heaven” (Paracriticisms 84) he would be prophetic but for a missing “post-” — a very American term referring to a very French phenomenon. Indeed, the image of the work as a sort of proving ground for theoretical application, as testing terrain for “French theory” has become a prominent, at times lamented feature of its reception. While Terry Eagleton testifies to this status of the work when he asserts that “[i]t is always worth testing out any literary theory by asking: How would it work with Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake*?” (82), Julian Wolfreys considers

the negotiations between reading and not reading, reading to-come and reading towards a limit which are, we might say, the reading-history of this text, [as] exemplary and singular instances of the contest for reading in the academy in general, and in the humanities in particular, especially since the ‘beginnings’ of the translation of what is termed loosely ‘theory’. (Wolfreys 156, fn. 48)

However, rather than just being a proving ground, Joyce’s later work was, as Wilhelm Fuger rightly points out, a “catalyzer for the development of focal ideas of poststructuralist concepts of text and literature” (Fuger 21; my translation).

What is the result of theory’s engagement with *Finnegans Wake*? Which categories of analysis and theoretical frameworks did it yield? The best traceable marks that Joyce’s last work has left in the field which we have become accustomed to refer to as ‘theory’ — not meant in its narrower sense of literary theory here but in the broader sense of theorizing about literary works — are to be found in Umberto Eco’s and Jacques Lacan’s work. Having said that, Joyce’s work may have left its greatest imprint on the writings of Jacques Derrida; his statement “deconstruction could not have been possible without Joyce” (Jones 77, 78) is a strong indication on his part. And yet, this imprint is rather covert, because, different from Eco and Lacan, Derrida does not to allow for the neatness of identification of Joycean inspiration in his work. The following discussion will be concerned with such theory-oriented work that does allow us to trace, in broad strokes, the theoretical response which the study of Joyce’s oeuvre has prompted.

What may have initially drawn the medievalist Umberto Eco to James Joyce — the writer he considers to be essentially “medievally minded” (*Chaosmos* 6) and, as he wrote, “the node where the Middle Ages and the avant-garde meet” (“Author’s Note” xi) — is their common Catholic background. Eco reads Joyce’s works as the narrative of an apostasy — a reading

that should be viewed in the context of Eco's own spiritual development. In addition, both shared an interest in the aesthetics of Thomas Aquinas. In Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* the aspiring poet, and more Icarian than Daedalian character, Stephen Dedalus derives his aesthetic theory from Aquinas. Eco wrote his dissertation on Aquinas' aesthetics, published in 1956 as *Il problema estetico in San Tommaso*; its conclusion postulates a similarity between scholastic and structuralist thought and references to Joyce's work surface here already.

It would eventually play an essential part in Eco's conception of the "open work" as developed in the same-titled book *Opera aperta*, published in 1962. (The English version of *Opera aperta* is a partial translation and a revised and enlarged edition of the Italian original; it was published under the title *The Open Work (OW)* only in 1989. The English collection of various translated essays of Eco *The Role of the Reader (RR)*, published in 1979, contains the translation of the first chapter of *Opera aperta*, entitled "The Poetics of the Open Work.") Here Eco describes what he perceives to be the aesthetics of indeterminacy in modern art—as the subtitle *Forma e indeterminazione nelle poetiche contemporanee* suggests—and develops a theory of aesthetic communication and of interpretation. It is a critique of Croce's aesthetics influenced by the ideas of Luigi Pareyson. Predating his turn to semiotics, which will mark his career as theorist from *La struttura assente* onward, and acquaintance with Jakobson's and Lévi-Strauss's ideas—I am referring to the year of publication of the first edition of *Opera aperta (OA)* here—but already marked by forays into information theory, the work owes its significance to the elucidation of the concept of "openness" and to its emphasis on the role of the reader in the "co-production" of the literary work.

In this respect Eco's perspective anticipated American reader-response criticism and German Rezeptionsästhetik which both had their founding year in 1967, when Hans Robert Jauß' gave his Schiller-inspired inaugural lecture at Constance "Was heißt und zu welchem Ende studiert man Literaturgeschichte?", published under the title "Literaturgeschichte als Provokation der Literaturwissenschaft" and translated in *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, and Stanley Fish's *Surprised by Sin: The Reader in Paradise Lost* appeared. In his last lecture, entitled "Die Theorie der Rezeption - Rückschau auf ihre un-erkannte Vorgeschichte," Jauß acknowledged Umberto Eco's contribution to the development of reception theories by crediting him for "draft[ing] the first theory of an open, constantly progressing constitution of meaning, a theory by which the work of art, seen as an open structure, requires the active co-

production of the recipient” (“Retrospective” 66). According to Jauß, *Opera aperta* marks the beginning of the debate on ‘the reader’ as well as the rediscovery of the communicative function of literature (65). Yet, Eco has never considered himself as belonging in the tradition of reception theories; in the retrospective of *Lector in fabula* he labels *Opera aperta* an unaware example of text pragmatics.

Through the concept of openness, Eco tries to account for what he perceives to be the pervasive presence of disorder, deliberate and systematic ambiguity and indeterminacy in modern works of art: “nowadays it is primarily the artist who is aware of its [the poetics of the open work] implications. In fact, rather than submit to the ‘openness’ as an inescapable element of artistic interpretation, he subsumes it into a positive aspect of his production, recasting the work so as to expose it to the maximum possible ‘opening’” (Eco, *OW* 4f; emphasis added). Eco refers to the state of arts in general; he introduces his study of openness with references to works by composers such as Luciano Berio, Henri Pousseur, Karlheinz Stockhausen, Pierre Boulez and the sculptor Alexander Calder. For Berio, whom Eco had introduced to *Ulysses*, and Boulez in particular Joyce’s work became influential (see Klein); John Cage is mentioned by Eco only in the second edition (*OA*<sup>3</sup> 219ff). The transition to the deliberate composition of open literary texts begins, in Eco’s view, with the late nineteenth century Symbolists Verlaine and Mallarmé. Kafka’s and Brecht’s works are also mentioned as notable instances of openness but Eco’s great paradigm is Joyce’s work in which he engages at length in *Opera aperta*.

That it has become a common critical paradigm should not hide the fact that Eco’s concept of openness was going against the grain of structuralist notions of the time. After the French translation *L’Œuvre ouverte* appeared in 1965, Claude Lévi-Strauss criticized Eco’s assumptions by emphasizing closure as a defining feature of works of art: “*What makes a work of art a work is not its being open but its being closed. A work of art is an object endowed with precise properties and [it possesses], as it were, the rigidity of a crystal*” (qtd. in Bondanella, *Open Text* 25; emphasis added). Consequently, in his preface to the second edition Eco is eager to emphasize that his study is not to be understood as structuralist (*OA*<sup>3</sup> 22). Incidentally, Eco had his turn when he dismissed Lévi-Strauss’s, and Lacan’s, work as “ontological structuralism,” essentialist in its premises, in the notorious ‘Sezione D’ of *La struttura assente*.

Eco differentiates three levels of openness of works of art. The most extreme form of the open work is the *opera in movimento* ‘work in movement’

(OW 12ff), the openness of which allows the interpreter to “complete” it himself (OW 19); such works are characterized by the invitation to “make the work together with the author” (OW 21). Eco regards the idea behind Mallarmé’s *Livre* (OW 12) and the works of the aforementioned composers and sculptors as belonging into that category. Eco’s analysis is primarily concerned with the second level of openness: “works, which though organically completed, are ‘open’ to a continuous generation of internal relations which the addressee must uncover and select in his act of perceiving the totality of incoming stimuli” (OW 21). With reference to *Finnegans Wake* Eco writes: “the work is *finite* in one sense, but in another sense it is *unlimited*” (OW 10), i.e. unlimited in terms of its openness. Finally, Eco refers in a more general sense to the fundamental openness of every work of art, “effectively open to a virtually unlimited range of possible readings” (OW 21).

The openness of modern works of art requires a different kind of reception effort: “a particularly independent cooperation on behalf of the recipient, often a reconstruction, always variable, of the offered material” (OA 85; my translation (the English translation (OW 44) is not accurate enough here)) that makes use of the “full emotional and imaginative resources of the interpreter” (OW 9). In putting the emphasis on the recipient as “active principal of interpretation” (RR 4), Eco reevaluates the role of the reader within the discourse of literary theory.

The continuous elaboration of his concepts is a crucial feature of Eco’s theoretical work—as illustrated by the revision of *Opera aperta* in the two subsequent editions of 1967 and 1976—spanning four decades from the late 1950s to the late 1990s. *Finnegans Wake* remains a point of reference in a number of his various theory works of that time. From the idea, first conceived in *Opera aperta*, that “the text postulates the co-operation of the reader as a condition of its actualization” (Caesar, *Philosophy* 122f), Eco arrives at the conclusion that “the text is a product whose ‘interpretative fate’ must be part” (Caesar, *Philosophy* 123) of its generative process, as formulated in the two works published in 1979: *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts* and *Lector in fabula: La cooperazione interpretativa nei testi narrativi*. In the former, Eco defines the open text as “a paramount instance of a syntactic-semantic-pragmatic device whose *foreseen* interpretation is a part of its generative process” (RR 3). Open texts are only the “extreme and most provocative exploitation—for poetic purposes—of a principle which rules *both the generation and the interpretation* of texts in general” (RR 4f; emphasis added).



Although the distinction between “*apertura*” and “*chiusura*” (OA 30) is already present in the first edition of *Opera aperta*, Eco elaborated on the relationship between open and closed texts (*opera chiusa*) only in *The Role of the Reader*. His 1965 essay “Le strutture narrative in Fleming” represents Eco’s first analysis of a closed text. According to Eco, the closed text is characterized by limiting *itself* its potential area of response. Closed texts are defined as texts that “obsessively aim at arousing a precise response on the part of more or less precise empirical readers” (RR 7); such texts are in fact “open to any possible ‘aberrant’ decoding” (RR 7). Eco’s examples of closed texts in *The Role of the Reader* are taken from popular culture—the narrative structures in Ian Fleming’s James Bond novels, the relationship between rhetoric and ideology in the fiction of Eugene Sue and the socio-political assumptions implicit in the Superman comic books. It was held against him that this juxtaposition tends to be normative (see Eco, OA<sup>3</sup> 18).

One often finds Eco’s distinction between open and closed texts cited in connection with Roland Barthes’s distinction of *writerly* (*scriptible*) and *readerly* (*lisible*) texts and *texte de jouissance* and *texte de plaisir*. Although it is based on a very different idea of textuality, Barthes’s characterization of the *writerly* resembles Eco’s concept in its notion that “the goal of literary work (of literature as work) is to make the reader no longer a consumer, but a producer of the text” (S/Z 4). In *The Role of the Reader* (40), Eco himself mentions Barthes’s notion of *texte de jouissance* as if it were synonymous with his concept of open texts. And yet, Barthes’s is an ambiguous concept, intentionally so, vaguely hovering between the idea of writing as act and process, i.e. excluding “finished” works, and the idea of a descriptive category of literary works approaching what Eco calls ‘work in movement’ (Not surprisingly *Finnegans Wake* has repeatedly been cited as the text coming close to Barthes’s notion of the *texte scriptible* and of the *texte de jouissance*).

Eco describes the mode of operation of the open text as follows:

An author can foresee an ideal reader [...], able to master different codes and eager to deal with the text as with a maze of many issues. But in the last analysis what matters is not the various issues in themselves but the maze-like structure of the text. You cannot use the text as you want, but only as the text wants you to use it. An open text, however ‘open’ it be, cannot afford whatever interpretation. (RR 9)

The issue of interpretation is one of the major concerns in Eco’s theoretical oeuvre. The notions of *intentio operis* and “limits of interpretation” addressed

in this passage are fundamental to Eco's theory of interpretation. His emphasis on the limits of possible interpretations has to be understood as a reaction to certain deconstructionist practices which he criticizes for constituting an "any-reading-goes"-mentality, in other words what he perceives to be overinterpretation (see *Limits* 148). The difference between Eco's and Derrida's view of signification and meaning is evident in their diverging readings of Charles Sanders Peirce's theories. A simplified description of Peirce's idea of "unlimited semiosis," vital to Eco's semiotic theory, would be the following: The meaning of every sign can only be understood through another sign, its "interpretant," as Peirce calls the second sign, which, in turn, can only be understood through yet another sign, and so on ad infinitum. While Derrida sees in Peirce a precursor to his own project (*Grammatologie* 71), Eco assumes a pragmatic end of semiosis in the consensual judgement of interpretation in a community of readers (*Limits* 6, 39ff; *Interpretation and Overinterpretation* 143). Eco characterizes *Finnegans Wake* as being "itself a metaphor for the process of unlimited semiosis" (RR 70) and as a work that "seems to instantiate such notions as 'infinite regression'" (Eco, *Limits* 142).

In Eco's view, the infinite interpretability of any literary text in principle is constrained by a community or culture and by the necessity on part of the interpreter to consider the text's intention. Even though it is "difficult to say whether an interpretation is a good one, or not" (*Interpretation and Overinterpretation* 144), Eco believes in the idea of privileged interpretations. In *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*, he explains his understanding of *intentio operis*:

The text's intention is not displayed by the textual surface. Or, if it is displayed, it is so in the sense of the purloined letter. One has to decide to 'see' it. Thus it is possible to speak of the text's intention only as a result of a conjecture on the part of the reader. The initiative of the reader basically consists in making a conjecture about the text's intention. (64)

Eco's emphasis on the role of the reader in *Opera aperta* seemed outlandish in the landscape of literary studies in the early 1960s. It would become mainstream only in the reader response and Constance School influenced 1970s. In *The Role of the Reader* and in *Lector in fabula*, Eco elaborates his theory of the reader to include the concept of the *lettore modello* 'model reader' to conceptualize the reader's presence in the text. One can hardly fail to notice the similarities not only to Iser's concept of the *implied reader*, as set

forth in *Der Implizite Leser* in 1972 and in *Der Akt des Lesens* in 1976, but to other aspects of Iser's theorizing as well; incidentally, Joyce's works serve as frequent point of reference for Iser's theories too. Eco explicitly mentions Joyce's reference to an "ideal reader" of his work as an inspiration for his concept (*Limits* 46). In *Lector in fabula* he writes the author must "foresee a model of the possible reader supposedly able to deal interpretively with the expressions in the same way as the author deals generatively with them" (qtd. in Bondanella, *Open Text* 90). One has to keep in mind here that 'author' in Eco's theory is "nothing else but a textual strategy establishing semantic correlations and activating the Model Reader" (RR 11).

The assumption is that "[a]t the minimal level, every type of text explicitly selects a very general model of possible reader" (RR 7). (Later Eco conceived of texts as producing model readers at two levels [*Limits* 55].) Eco suggests, that a text "presupposes a model of competence" (RR 8) *coming from* the reader but at the same time the text "*creates* the competence of its MR [Model Reader]" (RR 7).

A lucid articulation of this communicative scheme Author-Text-Reader, conceptualized by Eco to explain the production and interpretation of a text, is to be found in *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*. Here Eco writes:

A text is a device conceived in order to produce his Model Reader. I repeat that this reader is not the one who makes the 'only right' conjecture. A text can foresee a Model Reader entitled to try infinite conjectures. The empirical reader is only an actor who makes conjectures about the kind of Model Reader postulated by the text. Since the intention of the text is basically to produce a Model Reader able to make conjectures about it, the initiative of the Model Reader consists in figuring out a Model Author that is not the empirical one and that, in the end, coincides with the intention of the text. (64)

The last part of *Opera aperta* is a comprehensive study of Joyce's works. (Since Eco's study of Joyce's poetics was published separately in revised form as *Le poetiche di Joyce: Dalla 'Summa' al 'Finnegans Wake'* in 1966, it is not included in the second and third edition of *Opera aperta*. The English translation, a revised version of *Le poetiche*, was published as *The Aesthetics of Chaosmos: The Middle Ages of James Joyce* in 1982 and reprinted in the wake of the publication of *The Open Work* in 1989.) In writing *Finnegans Wake* Eco sees Joyce establishing "a principle [...] that would govern the entire development of contemporary art," namely the splitting up into "two separate universes of discourse" (*Chaosmos* 86). Joyce has added to the traditional con-

tent-driven discourse a second one that “carries out, at the level of its own technical structures, a type of absolutely formal discourse” (*Chaosmos* 86). Eco describes *Finnegans Wake*, his model of an open text, as

in a sense unlimited. Each occurrence, each word stands in a series of possible relations with all the others in the text. According to the semantic choice which we make in the case of one unit so goes the way we interpret all the other units in the text. [...] The principle tool for this all-pervading ambiguity is the pun, the calembour, by which two, three, or even ten different etymological roots are combined in such a way that a single word can set up a knot of different submeanings [here the English translation misses the point of “nodo di significati” (*OA* 36); the translation should be *meanings*, not *submeanings*], each of which in turn coincides and interrelates with other local allusions, which are themselves ‘open’ to new configurations and probabilities of interpretation. (*OW* 10)

At the same time, he emphasizes that this principle of operation does not imply that the work lacks specific sense. One of the elements of the medieval aesthetic that Eco identifies in the later Joyce is what he refers to as “il gusto del *labor* interpretativo” (*OA* 347), namely “the idea of aesthetic pleasure, not as the flashing exercise of an intuitive faculty but as a process of intelligence that deciphers and reasons, enraptured by the difficulty of communication” (*Chaosmos* 81).

Referring to the model reader which the text presupposes, Eco writes: “The model reader of *Finnegans Wake* is that operator able to simultaneously realize the maximal number of overlapping readings” (*Lector* 58f; my translation). He adds: “As regards those kind of readers that are not postulated by the text and to the generation of which it does not contribute, the text becomes unreadable [...] or it becomes another book altogether” (*Lector* 59; my translation). *Finnegans Wake* “foresees, demands, and requires a model reader endowed with an infinite competence, superior to the empirical author James Joyce—a reader able to discover allusions and semantic connections even where they escaped the notice of the empirical author” (Eco, *Six Walks* 109f.).

Given Eco’s insistence on the limits of interpretation, his identification of *Finnegans Wake* as “the most terrifying document of formal instability and semantic ambiguity that we possess” (*Chaosmos* 61) may not come as a surprise. At the same time, Eco—marvelling at the scope of Joyce’s offer to participate in making his last work—appreciates Joyce’s courage to leave his readers “free and responsible in the face of the provocation caused by chaos and its possibility” (*OA* 361; my translation).

Not only was Umberto Eco the first of the theorists mentioned here to write a book-length study on Joyce (although the label theory is more appropriate for Eco's work from the late 1960s onward), but his were also the first essays on Joyce in *Tel Quel*; the issues 11 (1962) and 12 (1963) contain two extracts, together forming a condensed version of Eco's study of Joyce in *Opera aperta*, under the title "Le Moyen-âge de James Joyce." In his survey of *Tel Quel*'s interest in Joyce, published in the very last issue of the journal, Jean-Louis Houdebine emphasizes his symbolic value for the *tel quel*iens: "Paradoxically, the name Joyce was inscribed from the beginning in the history of *Tel Quel*" (Houdebine 35). The statement would also hold true for *Gruppo 63* (Eco, *Literature* 123), the avant-garde circle co-founded by Eco in the year following the publication of *Opera aperta*.

Like Joyce and Eco, Jacques Lacan was born into a family of Catholic background. He too received an early Catholic education and like them he suffered a crisis of faith in his youth. His study of Joyce provoked Lacan to further elaborate the concepts of his psychoanalytic theory. Its influence on literary theory has not been insignificant. Julia Kristeva's feminist appropriation of Lacan's ideas in her work, in which Joyce is a frequent point of reference, e.g. as model of a polyphonic novel (*roman polyphonique*) in the Bakhtinian sense in "Le mot, le dialogue et le roman" (Kristeva, "Le Mot" 152) and as an revolutionary instance of *text-practice* (*la pratique signifiante "texte"*) in *La Révolution du langage poétique* (Kristeva, *Révolution* 98), may only be the most evident instance that comes to mind.

Although we must keep in mind the essentially semiotic foundation of Eco's theorizing after *Opera aperta*, Eco's studies refer to the literary-theoretical discourse, whereas Lacan hardly does, at least not explicitly. If one were to identify a common ground between Eco's thought and Lacan's, it would be the fact that Lacan—inspired by the structuralist work of Claude Lévi-Strauss through which he also became acquainted with the ideas of de Saussure and Jakobson—virtually reads Freud's work as a semiotic system. The linguistic turn in Lacan's thinking occurred in the early 1950s. His by now classic—then revolutionary—thesis that "the unconscious is structured like a language" illustrates the integration and reinterpretation of Saussurean thought and Freudian psychoanalysis—an approach which he referred to as his "retour à Freud."

Lacan posits *langage* where Saussure had spoken of *langue*. For Lacan the *signifier* is the basic unit of language which Saussure had assumed to be the *sign*. The unconscious becomes a structure of *signifiers* in Lacan's theory.

According to his theory, the subject is constituted through language, is ‘caught up’ in language. Whereas Saussure had posited the mutual interdependence of *signifier* and *signified*, Lacan assumes that the *signifier* produces the *signified* in that the *signified* is “a mere effect of the play of signifiers” (Evans 186) along the signifying chain (*chaîne signifiante/chaîne du signifiant*); the pivotal supposition being that the *signifiers* refer only to each other in a process of circulation causing a perpetual deferral of meaning (Evans 114). Given such a concept of signification and his conspicuous fondness for wordplay, and maybe not least the fact that Joyce’s very name echoes Freud’s (“Joyce I” 27), *Finnegans Wake* must have been a truly desirable object for Lacan to explore—a fact of which he makes no secret: “Joyce’s text abounds in entirely captivating problems, fascinating problems” (“Joyce I” 23; my translation). By radically equivocating the signifier and, thus, making readers aware of their complicity in producing the corresponding signified, Joyce, in writing *Finnegans Wake*, seems to be the perfect proving ground for Lacan’s views, all the more interesting for the complex relationship between author and work.

Similar to Freud, Lacan occasionally referred to literary texts in his seminars; Poe’s short story “The Purloined Letter,” *Hamlet* and Joyce feature prominently in this respect. Remarkably enough, in the preface to the English edition of his seminal Séminaire XI “Les quatre concepts fondamentaux de la psychanalyse,” written in 1976, Lacan, with reference to Joyce, speaks of his “embarrassment where art—an element in which Freud did not bathe without mishap—is concerned” (“Preface” ix).

The reproach for this “use” of literature was the occasion for one of the most prominent intellectual confrontations in France at the time. In his critique of Lacan’s essay on Poe’s *Purloined Letter* (Lacan, “Lettre Volée”), Derrida has criticized Lacan and psychoanalytic writing for apparently appropriating literature as the scene of psychoanalytic truth:

A “literature,” then, can produce, can place onstage, and put forth something like the truth. Therefore it is more powerful than the truth of which it is capable. Does such a “literature” permit itself to be read, to be questioned, or even deciphered according to the psychoanalytic schemes that have emerged from what this literature itself produces? [...] Psychoanalysis finds itself/is found [*se trouve*]*—everything that it finds—in the text that it deciphers.* (Derrida, “Facteur” 419)

What has often been interpreted as an attack on Lacan was also the last act in the rift between Derrida and *Tel Quel* (Rabaté, “Theory” 260). *Tel Quel*’s

disengagement with Derrida in the 1970s opened the door, through Kristeva's work, for a turn to Lacanian psychoanalysis (French 220). Jean-Michel Rabaté has argued that rather than using literary works as objects of exemplification for his theory, literature "inhabits the [Lacan's] theory from the start" (Lacan 6) and views Lacan as "an essentially 'literary' theoretician" (Lacan 7).

According to his own account, Lacan had as a medical student attended the lecture on *Ulysses* by Valéry Larbaud in late 1921 at which Joyce was present. Whether this early encounter had any effect would be a point of mere conjecture. In 1975, however Lacan gave the inaugural address at the Fifth International James Joyce Symposium in Paris (There exist two different published versions of this lecture—a version published in *L'âne*, 1982, n. 6, pp. 3-5 and a version that was published in the first vol. of Aubert *Joyce & Paris*, 13-17. Both versions are reprinted as "Joyce le symptôme I" and "Joyce le symptôme II" in Aubert *Joyce avec Lacan*). In what turned out to be a clash of French avant-garde thought and attitude with the established, mainly American Joyce criticism (see Aubert, *Joyce & Paris*) was also a clash of two claims to interpretative sovereignty, "Joyce Parisien" versus "American Joyce" and a call for a corrective to the "quick transit from the avant-garde to the academy" (Levin, *Joyce*<sup>2</sup> 198). In his address, Lacan proposed the idea of "Joyce le symptôme" which he later described in his seminar in the following way: "Joyce in that what he advances in a singular artistic manner—he knows how to—is the *sinthome*, such that there is no way it can be analysed" (Lacan, *Sinthome* 125; trans. in Thurston, "Translation" 48). Lacan believed that in renaming Joyce "Joyce le symptôme," he conferred to him "nothing less than his proper name" ("Joyce I" 22; my translation). The term *sinthome*, which he introduces in his seminar, is an archaic form of the word *symptôme*, the pronunciation of which allows Lacan to play on echoes like "saint homme" and "Saint Thom(as)" (d'Aquin).

The term *symptôme* is usually employed by Lacan with reference to neurotic symptoms, i.e. to the observable manifestations of neurosis. Freud had determined the neurotic symptom as a formation of the unconscious. Lacan initially conceived of neurotic symptoms in linguistic terms: the symptom is itself structured like a language—a "coded message to be deciphered by interpretation" (Žižek 128f). However, Lacan's later work is characterized by a shift from the linguistic conception of the symptom, towards the idea of the symptom as *jouissance* which cannot be interpreted—"a kernel of enjoyment immune to the efficacy of the symbolic" (Thurston, "Sinthome" 189): "the

symptom can only be defined as the way in which each subject enjoys [*jouit*] the unconscious in so far as the unconscious determines him” (Thurston, “*Sinthome*” 188).

Lacan devotes his twenty-third Séminaire (1975-1976) to “Joyce le *sinthome*”, further elaborating on the previous seminar’s discussion of the Borromean knot through an exploration of the work of the Irish writer. The acknowledgment, that Joyce played a significant role in the development of Lacan’s later ideas, particularly in the “redefinition of the psychoanalytic symptom in terms of Lacan’s final topology of the subject” (Thurston, “*Sinthome*” 188), has gradually gained acceptance, most prominently in the work of Slavoj Žižek.

Lacan’s conflation of Joyce’s works and of his biography is not just a result of the psychoanalytic rationale, it is a common phenomenon in Joyce criticism; Joyce aimed at it with his works. Following the fashion of Sartrean biographical criticism, Hélène Cixous’s central thesis of her dissertation on Joyce, published in 1968, is: “to Joyce life and art are consubstantial” (*Exile* xii). This is to no less degree the view of Harry Levin’s pioneer study and of Richard Ellmann’s seminal biography. Lacan equates Stephen the character in *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and *Ulysses* with Joyce the author, attempting to figure out “Joyce in the guise of Stephen” (*Sinthome* 71, 79, 148f; trans. in Thurston, “*Translation*” 21). His discussion of Joyce is more or less guided by two questions: “Is Joyce’s desire to be an artist who would occupy everyone [...] not an exact compensation for the fact that his father had never been a father for him?” (*Sinthome* 88; trans. in Thurston, “*Translation*” 40) and “[H]ow can art aim, in an expressly divinatory mode, to embody in its consistence, and equally in its ex-sistence, the fourth essential term of the knot [the *sinthome*], how can it aim to render it as such, to the point of approaching it as closely as possible?” (*Sinthome* 38; trans. in Thurston, “*Translation*” 10).

Lacan insists that his study of Joyce is not to be understood as “applied psychoanalysis.” Yet, he does indicate that Joyce had a psychotic structure as a result of paternal failure, “erecting [as compensation] a literary monument in place of his father’s [...] shortcomings” (Rabaté, *Lacan* 162). ‘Le cas Joyce’ is interesting for Lacan as it is out of the ordinary and not least because it promises the excitement of an intellectual challenge: “Joyce is stimulating. This is what is suggested by him—but it remains only a suggestion, an easy way of presenting him; in exchange for which, and this is certainly his ... [quality], everyone breaks a tooth there” (*Sinthome* 120; trans. in Thurston,



“Translation” 45). Elsewhere Lacan says of his effort to cope with Joyce: “it provokes me, this difficulty” (*Sinthome* 143; trans. in Thurston, “Translation” 56) and calls him “the writer of the enigma par excellence” (*Sinthome* 153; trans. in Thurston, “Translation” 62).

In *Finnegans Wake*, Lacan sees Joyce “breaking or dissolving language itself, by decomposing it (*imposer au langage même une sorte de brisure, de décomposition*)” (*Sinthome* 96; trans. in Thurston, “Translation” 43). After identifying writing as “an act which provides a support for thinking” (*Sinthome* 144; trans. in Thurston, “Translation” 56), Lacan reasons “with Joyce [...] that what is generally called the ego played a quite different role to the simple role it plays for the everyday mortal [...] writing is absolutely essential to his ego” (*Sinthome* 147; trans. in Thurston, “Translation” 58). In fact, Lacan suggests that in *Finnegans Wake* Joyce had indeed “unregistered [*désabonné*] to the Unconscious” (qtd. in Rabaté, *Lacan* 163). In his seminar, he describes psychosis as the unravelling of the Borromean knot.

The Borromean knot (see fig. 1)—the figure has an ancient history as a symbol—is a group of three rings which are linked in such a way that if any one of them is severed, all three come apart (see fig. 3) It is, as Lacan points out, thus more appropriate to conceive of it as a chain rather than a knot (*Sinthome* 75, 87). The structure of the Borromean knot affords Lacan the ability to conceptualize his fundamental classification system of the order of the *Real* (*le Réel*), the *Symbolic* (*le Symbolique*) and the *Imaginary* (*l’Imaginaire*) of which, according to Lacan, the human subject is constituted. In Lacan’s view desire and lack are at the core of human subjectivity, a subjectivity caught in language: The *Other* (*l’Autre*) as the locus of desire and as such always out of reach and the *Real* as outside language, resisting symbolization. Subjecthood in Lacan’s theory comes with loss, with having but a permanently mediated relation to the *Real*. The shift from linguistics to topology and the exploration of knot theory ensuing from it mark the final period of Lacan’s work. Freud had already used topographical systems to describe the psyche (Evans 208).

In the last lecture of the seminar, Lacan in fact concludes that “Joyce’s text [...] is made exactly like a Borromean knot” (*Sinthome* 153; trans. in Thurston, “Translation” 62). Lacan proposes that in Joyce’s case the unravelling of the Borromean knot is prevented by the addition of a fourth ring, the *sinthome*, which holds the other three together (see fig. 2). His writing, Lacan argues, afforded Joyce an effective substitute to prevent the on-

set of psychosis: “Through this artifice of writing ... the Borromean knot comes to be restored” (*Sinthome* 152; trans. in Thurston, “Translation” 61).

The *sinthome* is conceived in terms of *jouissance*. The Lacanian *jouissance*, which denotes a painful pleasure, has affinities to Freud’s concept of the *Libido*. Relating Joyce’s name to *joy*, affords Lacan to establish a more direct relation between Joyce and *jouissance* (“Joyce I” 27) based on their common etymological root, namely Old French *joie*. Lacan regards *jouissance* as the crucial element in Joyce’s writing. In *Finnegans Wake*, he recognizes an “opaque *jouissance* of excluding sense” (Lacan, “Joyce II” 36; my translation) and this *jouissance* is, according to Lacan, the one thing that we can apprehend in Joyce’s text:

This jouasse, this *jouissance* is the only thing of his [Joyce’s] text that we can get hold of. There is the symptom. [...] The symptom is, purely, that which conditions language, but in a certain way, Joyce brings it to the power of language—without anything being analyzable. This is what strikes and [...] astonishes. [...] This is what makes up the substance of what Joyce accomplishes, and whereby, in some sense, literature can no longer be what it used to be. (“Joyce I” 27; my translation)

Jacques-Alain Miller has interpreted Lacan’s analysis of Joyce’s work as presenting a radical challenge for the very discourse of the psychoanalyst: “The reference to the psychosis of Joyce in no way indicated a kind of applied psychoanalysis: what was at stake, on the contrary, was the effort to call into question the very discourse of the analyst *by means* of the symptom Joyce, insofar as the subject, identified with his symptom, is closed to its artifice” (qtd. in Žižek 137). What remains for the psychoanalyst, according to Žižek, is to identify with the *sinthome* (Žižek 137); it thus represents the “final limit of the psychoanalytic process” (137). Although Lacan’s work has found a not insignificant reception within literature departments, his reading of Joyce and the notion of the *sinthome* have often been overlooked. It was Žižek who emphasized their centrality in Lacan’s work.

Two years before his lecture on Joyce, Lacan had reflected on the similarity of the language of *Finnegans Wake* and the subject-matter of analytic discourse, the slip of the tongue—a connection that Michel Butor had expounded in an essay in 1957—in his *Séminaire XX* (1972-73):

What happens in Joyce’s work ? The signifier stuffs (*vient truffer*) the signified. It is because the signifiers fit together, combine, and concertina (*se télé-*

scopent)—read *Finnegans Wake*—that something is produced by way of meaning (*comme signifié*) that may seem enigmatic, but is clearly *what is closest to what we analysts, thanks to analytic discourse, have to read—slips of the tongue (lapsus)*. It is as slips that they signify something, in other words, that they *can be read in an infinite number of different ways*. But it is precisely for that reason that they are difficult to read, are read awry, or not read at all (*que ça se lit mal, ou que ça se lit de travers, ou que ça ne se lit pas*). But doesn't this dimension of "being read" (*se lire*) suffice to show that *we are in the register of analytic discourse*? What is at stake in analytic discourse is always the following—you give a different reading to the signifiers that are enunciated (*ce qui s'énonce de signifiant*) than what they signify. (*Feminine* 37; emphasis added)

The very style of Lacan's later texts and seminars seems to be an appropriation of this language, as numerous commentators have pointed out: "His discourses on that which ruptures discourse quite precisely exhibit and even enact the very rupture in question," as symptomized by his "ever-growing delight in multireferential and multilingual wordplay" (Lee, *Lacan* 134). In the final analysis the "astonishing number of neologisms, portmanteau words, and more or less spectacular puns" (Lee, *Lacan* 134) suggests that Lacan was affected by the Joycean *sinthome*, just as Derrida was affected by Joyce's signature—that "joyceance of language" as Jean-Michel Rabaté called it ("Discussion" 206). Lacan acknowledges it when he establishes for his *Écrits* a genealogy—spelling "comme pas-à-lire"—that links the unreadability and untranslatability of his writings with his image of the Joycean enigma (Lacan, "Postface" 251f):

after all, the written [or writing] as the not-to-be-read [*l'écrit comme pas-à-lire*] is introduced by Joyce—I'd do better to say intraduced [*intraduit*] (both introduced and translated), because to deal with the word is to negotiate beyond languages, and he can hardly be translated *being likewise little read everywhere*. (Thurston, *James Joyce* 69; emphasis added)

Rather than considering it in terms of "influence," it is more appropriate, I think, to say that Joyce's last work has been a provocative and fertile intellectual stimulus, an *agent provocateur* in the aforementioned sense, for an illustrious band of writers and theorists. The two approaches to Joyce discussed here attempt to explain the text, in Lacan's case one should rather say "Joyce the phenomenon," within the context of their specific scope of understanding. They represent a tiny fraction of the massive corpus that is labelled Joyce criticism.

Returning to our initial question, we may note that there are at least two answers. We may concede that the boundaries of our discipline concerning its

traditional object of study, the literary text, apparently lie in those instances where the traditional tools of analysis cannot properly explain the phenomenon under investigation. We may consequently state the need for new concepts and useful descriptive terms and understand it as an opportunity to sharpen and refine our critical tools and to reconsider the usefulness of others. This view is affirmative.

The other view may be termed skeptical. It leads us to ask ourselves if we are still aware of the boundaries of literary criticism. Are we confusing the feasible with the ideal we are striving for when we say “we cannot afford to fall behind literature”? There are “liminal” texts that provoke the skeptical perspective. The contest for reading that *Finnegans Wake* has provoked has neither resulted in the elucidation so desired nor has it provided a descriptive or analytical apparatus. The numerous attempts of rewriting this text, one of the singular features of its reception history, have not led to a domestication of its ineradicable oddness. It is the site of the loss of an illusion—“No light, but rather darkness visible.”

It is in the etymology of *obscurus*, dark, literally “covered over,” and *opacus*, shady, that we still perceive the underlying conceptual metaphor “understanding is seeing.” Joyce’s “book of the dark” (*FW* 251.24) plays on this universally dominant metaphor of cognition. Seeing requires light, but in the dark the priority shifts from vision to hearing— “our ears, eyes of the darkness” (*FW* 14.29). In Joyce’s last work we find an aesthetic foregrounding of the synaesthetic experience through a baffling of our audio-visual perception. The readers of *Finnegans Wake* are free to contemplate, indeed to “drink up[,] words, scilicet, tomorrow till recover will not, all too many much illusiones through photoprismic velamina of hueful panepiphanal world spectacurum” (*FW* 611.11-14).

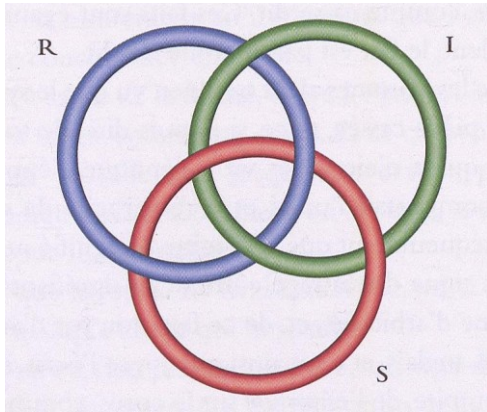


Figure 1

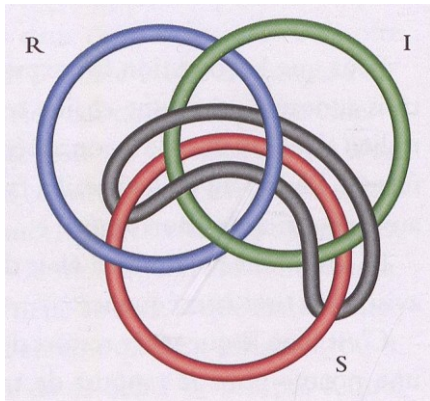


Figure 2

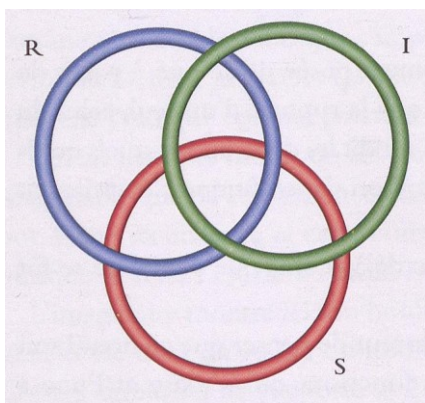


Figure 3

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**Finnegans Wake as Proving Ground for Theory and  
Agent Provocateur in Literary Studies**

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