CHAPTER 1

Introduction: the subject of Ireland in Finnegans Wake

Finnegans Wake, James Joyce's last and most difficult work, engages its readers in ways both rich and strange. The same readers who wander through it with delight and fascination often find themselves annoyed to the point of throwing it aside. The annoyance the *Wake* can provoke, though, invites careful study for what it can tell us about ourselves and our common experience. Joyce once answered critics of his last book by suggesting that the *Wake*'s humor compared favorably with the making of modern warfare: "Now they're bombing Spain. Isn't it better to make a great joke instead, as I have done?"[1] For all of his carefully cultivated artistic aggression, Joyce seemed hardly to comprehend the power of the literary bomb *Finnegans Wake* dropped upon the world.

Finnegans Wake has always provoked as much suspicion as pleasure in its readers. The most enduring and deserved question they have asked about the book is not whether it is good, but what it is "good for." Harriet Shaw Weaver, Joyce's financial benefactor and devoted reader, delivered one of her rare harsh criticisms about the *Wake*'s arcana: ". . . I am made in such a way that I do not care much for the output from your Wholesale Safety Pun Factory nor for the darknesses and unintelligibilities of your deliberately-entangled language system. It seems to me you are wasting your genius."[2] Over fifty years after the publication of *Finnegans Wake*, reader reception of the novel continues to involve the ethical anxiety that the novel account for itself, that it open its linguistic ledgers and give the world something of use.

Finnegans Wake serves for many as a marker for "postmodernity," a label for our own time denoting vast alterations in human habits of self-definition and performance, alterations that throw notions of

[1] Richard Ellmann, *James Joyce* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), p. 693.
[2] *Ibid.*, p. 590.

tradition and historical continuity into radical question. Perceiving the *Wake* as "postmodern" in this sense casts light on the mixture of bewilderment, vertigo and aversion that many readers have felt toward it from its first fragmentary appearance in *transition*, Eugene Jolas' avant-garde modernist journal. The *Wake*'s first readers watched as it emerged amid the turbulent transition between the first and second world wars, and critics as politically diverse as Ezra Pound and Max Eastman demanded of Joyce that he deliver a clear and usable message for a troubled humanity.[3] Readers troubled by their sense that Joyce's last work is irrelevant to the real problems of humanity might find irony in the fact that James Joyce died a refugee from the Nazi onslaught toward which he often professed indifference.[4]

Finnegans Wake can still irritate people hungry for clarity and coherence. Its hermetic, facetious dovetailing of over sixty languages into its own literary dialect may easily fail to amuse in a world where a "global village" of collapsing national boundaries combines the ancient competition of tongues with widespread warfare, exploitation, ecological terror and famine. Such pragmatic, ethical objections to *Finnegans Wake* must be acknowledged and answered by anyone who chooses to promote the book as both useful and necessary. These challenges are historical in the best sense. Asking what the *Wake* is "good for" advances a demand that it help people make sense of their past and present experience and enable them to conceive a livable future. I argue that the *Wake* answers this demand by dramatizing crucial problems of history-making common both to the country from which Joyce came and the wider human world to which he gained entrance.

Joyce contrived narrative fiction wild with the rhythms of an era marked by uncertainty and transformation, an era in which we can perceive features of our own configured in blurred outlines. Joyce engaged history with consistent ethical ambivalence, using sharply defined issues and events to question the process of historical definition and understanding. Nothing struck him as certain about the temporal process that he deemed, in one of the *Wake*'s many parodies of the Holy Trinity, "the former . . . the latter and . . . their holocaust" (*FW*419.10–11). *Finnegans Wake* challenges readers who want it to account for itself by demanding that they examine the

[3] *Ibid.*, pp. 584–85; Jeffrey Segall, "Thirteen Ways of Looking at an Ad-Canvasser: The Politics of Joyce Criticism," *Joyce Studies Annual* (1991), 73–74.
[4] Ellmann, *James Joyce*, pp. 732–41.

grounds on which they question it. The novel stages modern humanity's attempts to account for its own experience by presenting history as invention, a game of improvisation predicated on both the power of explanatory meaning and the abysmal uncertainty which makes explanation meaningful. The modern Ireland from which Joyce emerged and to which he always responded from a geographically safe distance seethed with such improvised attempts to define, assuage and further Ireland's slow and painful break from its colonial past.

In the pages that follow, I study Joyce's involvement with the writing of Irish history in *Finnegans Wake*. "Irish history" has summoned forth countless addresses from many witnesses in the past few centuries, many of whom contradict themselves and each other. At the same time, the reality of that concern can drive people beyond the known limits of passion and expectation, agitating those who care about Ireland into winding new stories about it out of the stories they have received. Consequently, a country defined by vast ranges of conflict and agreement has produced a history whose unity is questioned at every point by the narrative improvisation that constitutes it. In *Finnegans Wake*, Joyce responded to this Irish process of historical self-questioning by placing various approaches to inventing Irish history squarely into the narrative foreground. Joyce interlaced these Irish historiographical modes in order to form a referential field at once comical in its staging of specious explanation and serious in what it implies about the meaning of historical making.

Focusing on *Finnegans Wake* in terms of approaches to Irish history allows us to interpret Joyce at some of the most intense levels of his artistry. Studying the difficult ways in which Joyce explored Irish history also enables us to open up new and affirmative dimensions of historical experience in ourselves. The affirmation in *Finnegans Wake*, like Molly's "yes" at the end of *Ulysses*, trembles on the edge of negation and oblivion – it is cast in the tenuous clarity between life and death, sleep and awakening, then and now. Joyce, in his peculiar courage, could salvage a "yes" from human experience without ceasing to explore and acknowledge the constant terrors and uncertainties that beset any attempt to redeem human history for the sake of a living present. Everyone has a spiritual country where such terrors and uncertainties howl and haunt. For Joyce, that country was a suffering, stumbling Ireland whose moral history he never failed to try and bring to account.

Throughout this work, I seek to interweave crucial but competitive

ways of questioning Joyce, Irish history and *Finnegans Wake*. In this and the second chapter, I polemically set my humanistic assumptions and methods in relation to the current scene of Joycean historicism, and demonstrate how the critical dialogue on Joyce's engagement with history intersects with that of professional Irish historians seeking to define their common subject matter. In the third and fourth chapters, I explore Joyce's philosophical and thematic response in his fiction to the vast ontological and ideological problems of historical understanding involved in the making of modern Irish historiography. In chapters four and five, I treat Joyce's responses to "national" and "international" versions of Irish history as a paradigm of universal historical truth, especially late nineteenth-century Irish antiquarian historiography and Giambattista Vico's *New Science*, which justifies Ireland's subjugation under England through providential principles of Catholic and other natural law theory. Throughout, my primary focus falls upon the slippery but persistent ways in which Joyce forces Irish historical writing to yield insight into how the ideological and material misery of his country mirrors vast continua of oppression, especially the seemingly ubiquitous forces of patriarchy and imperialism. In the sixth and final chapter, I propose that the *Wake*'s semantic opacity is a performance of crucial problems in historical understanding, enabling the book's readers to "resolve" its meaning in the optical sense, to focus on historical information which seems opaque because it is so intensely compounded in the human present.

My hope is to evolve a historical approach to reading *Finnegans Wake* that is documentarily based, thematically provocative, and widely useful to readers of many backgrounds. The stakes of my explanatory game may be reduced to the crucial question of whether Joyce did indeed enact narrative performances of historical meaning in *Finnegans Wake*. This question predicates on two major interpretive problem areas. The most important of these concerns Joyce's engagement with Irish history, especially in the period during which he composed *Finnegans Wake*, and the dependence of my analytical procedures on structural narrative analysis, a procedure that has been repeatedly and pointedly challenged as a means of approaching the *Wake*. The first problem area grounds all of the pages that follow. The second and more arcane problem area – the intersection of narrative, history, and narrative's ambiguous status in *Finnegans Wake* – is far more important than any justification of interpretive method. It is profoundly relevant to the deepest and most universal

quandaries of human experience as they materialize in history, especially the history of Ireland with which Joyce continually grappled. The rest of this Introduction confronts the crucial problem of narrative's relation to history and postulates ways in which this problem bears on the Irish historical play in *Finnegans Wake*.

Using narrative analysis in a historical approach to *Finnegans Wake* immediately involves two serious problems inherent in any conjunction of narrative and history. First, a long-running controversy continues to rage over the ethical and ideological conditions of narrative in historical construction, a controversy fueled by increased critical awareness of ways in which storytelling can serve forces of social oppression and inertia. Socially conscious criticism of narrative's function in history-making has recently drawn on the later work of Joyce to illustrate its arguments regarding ideology's role in culture. The second problem, related to the first, concerns the highly questionable status of narrative in texts like *Finnegans Wake* that seem to explode narrative and free their writers and readers from ideological confines of historical definition.

The development of modern historiography and modern fiction in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries provides the subject matter for critics who see the two fields as sharing formal, thematic, and ethical traits that open both up to question.[5] Post-Marxist and post-structuralist ideological criticism has carried forth arguments from positions as diverse as the French *Annals* school and the Russian Formalists in order to render narrative, the dominant mode of explanation in both history and fiction, accountable as the paradigm of accountability. The logic of such an approach may be illustrated by the punning, dual metaphor ingrained in the French/English word "account," which derives the logic of explanation from the process of keeping one's financial books in a consensually defined fashion, and by a reasonable extension anchors metaphysics – to some, the apotheosis of explanation – in the vaster and empirically "graspable" forces of economics which thus provide the material basis for reflection. By this logic, accounts of human experience are deeply anchored, at least in the Western tradition, in the limiting and defining realm of economic feasibility: narrative is structured by economics. Rhetorical economies

[5] For a fine account of this critical controversy, see Hayden White's "The Question of Narrative in Contemporary Historical Theory," in *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), pp. 26–57.

or tropologies thereby correspond, one-to-one or set-to-set, to what is socially and culturally possible in light of local rules of material transaction. This economic model of narrative bridges the formalist and cultural-materialist approaches to ideological criticism. To employ Jacques Derrida's terms, the ideological critique of narrative attempts to open up the "restricted economy" of localized and collective human behavior to the "open economy" of human possibility (or presumed "impossibility").[6] Such a task assumes great moral urgency when it is combined with a sense of narrative's potential "police" function, its capacity to reinforce social institutions of property and political power.[7]

Such economic and cultural quantification of narrative has enabled ideological critics from Claude Lévi-Strauss to the present to ascertain narratives as "structures" that can be measured, comprehended formally and contextually, and generalized.[8] This ascertaining process authorizes generalization not only about seemingly "fixed" narrative forms, such as tribal repetitions of folk-tales and myths, but also improvisational narratives and "master narratives," stories used within societies and cultures to disseminate eschatologies proper to their survival in the *status quo*. The notion of the "master narrative" is unquestionably useful, as Sigmund Freud demonstrated with his elaboration of the Oedipus story and his application of this myth to the formation of societies and individual personalities.[9] For philosophers and critics who view narrative as ideologically determined, individual narratives devolve coherently from "master narratives" that structure human subjectivity, locking individual people into ideological grids even when they seem to act in non-determined, free, spontaneous ways. Narrative, from this perspective, tends to be a pernicious process that forces people to repeat oppressive social patterns with each exchange of storytelling. Such a charge against narrative has enormous relevance to a work like *Finnegans Wake*, where the repetition of historical patterns and narrative improvisation appear as prevalent themes and structural principles.

[6] Jacques Derrida, "White Mythology," in *Margins of Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), pp. 207–72.
[7] See, for instance, Michel Foucault's confessional excursus in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), p. 17, in which he responds to logically grounded criticisms of his critical discourse.
[8] White, *The Content of the Form*, pp. 30–49.
[9] See especially Sigmund Freud's *Totem and Taboo: Resemblances between the Psychic Lives of Savages and Neurotics* (New York: Norton, 1972).

The ideological critique of narrative depends upon a notion of what the process of interpretation is. The designation of this process provides at once a major point of divergence for ideological critics of narrative and a productive point of comparison between them. It also involves essential decisions concerning the ability of individual human beings to react and interact in ways that exceed theories of social formation. Consequently, interpretation is a field from which philosophers and critics dispute human possibilities of freedom and personal transformation. The theories of narrative interpretation advanced by Fredric Jameson, a premier Marxist cultural critic, and Paul Ricoeur, a formidable advocate of phenomenological hermeneutics, define between them a powerful spectrum of belief regarding subjective activities implicit in the social agency of textual narrative. Jameson's and Ricoeur's theories can give us varied insight into the human subject buffeted by the bountiful narrative signals of *Finnegans Wake*, particularly the subject of Ireland.

Jameson, who embraces Marx's theory of class struggle and ideology, seeks to replace the master narrative of capitalism with a providential, dialectical Marxist narrative of collective human becoming. Central to this project is the refiguration of a socially determined human subject that only seems to exist autonomously on the individual level. Ricoeur, on the other hand, affirms the transformative power of narrative experience for the individual. At the same time, Ricoeur shares Jameson's skepticism of a "post-Cartesian" autonomous subject and accepts the general concept of "false consciousness," or individual acceptance of social contingency as Necessity. Without suggesting that either thinker is completely right or wrong, I argue that Ricoeur's notion of the human subject and phenomenological theory of narrative interpretation are preferable to Jameson's for clarifying the interplay of narrative and history in *Finnegans Wake*.

For over a decade, Jameson's *The Political Unconscious* has guided and shaped post-Marxist cultural studies of narrative. The book's remarkable shelf-life is due to its prophetic provision of a methodological blueprint for critics representing political interests "marginalized" in the Western world – e.g. women, ethnic minorities, non-Occidental cultures and cultures imperialized by Occidental cultures, homosexuals, postmodern anarchists, and technologians – who have established significant leverage in academic circles during the past few years. The paradigmatic status of *The Political Unconscious* has been assured by

Jameson's realistic application of the current Marxist project in the context of "late capitalism," a widely perceived apocalypse of human alienation and commodification that often seems to eclipse Marx's providential eschatology and the liberationist hopes to which it has given rise.

In *The Political Unconscious*, Jameson attempts to overcome both the ineffectual and totalitarian tendencies of Marxist cultural politics in the context of "late capitalism" by creating a theory of interpretation axiomatically anchored in Louis Althusser's historical model of "structural causality." Althusser, in an attempt to perceive social unity without transgressing or denying the powers of social difference, chose as his transcendental term "the concept of 'Darstellung', the key epistemological concept of the whole Marxist theory of value, the concept whose object is precisely to designate the mode of *presence* of the structure in its *effects* . . . the structure, which is merely a specific combination of its peculiar elements, is nothing outside its effects."[10] In social theory, the upshot of Althusserian "structural causality" is a human society unified solely through an immanent "mode of production" expressed on the collective level. People in this society are to be defined not as individuals, who as such are merely the instruments of hegemonic forces, but as agents of "subject positions" determined by the whole system of class relations. The painful condition of Althusser's social model, for Jameson, is its resonant definition of Marxists as well as non-Marxists as alienated subjects whose only redemption is a grasp of their own "positions" in the world of late capitalism, "with its systematic quantification and rationalization of experience, its instrumental reorganization of the subject just as much as of the outside world."[11] The Marxist, wandering with the rest of humanity among the "isolated broken bits and pieces of the older unities," works to evolve a meaningful

[10] Louis Althusser as cited in Fredric Jameson's *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982), pp. 24–25. William C. Dowling's *Jameson, Althusser, Marx: An Introduction to The Political Unconscious* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984) provides a worshipful, plain-English summary of Jameson's work and its intellectual milieu. See also White's essay "Getting Out of History: Jameson's Redemption of Narrative," in *The Content of the Form*, pp. 142–68.

[11] Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, p. 62. A strong, historically based background to Jameson's notion of "late capitalism" may be found in the work of Herbert Marcuse, especially *Reason and Revolution: Hegel and the Rise of Social Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1954) and *One-Dimensional Man* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964). See also Richard J. Bernstein's sensitive essay on Marcuse's work, "Negativity: Theme and Variations," in *Philosophical Profiles: Essays in a Pragmatic Mode* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1986), pp. 176–96.

Marxism through a utopian subversion of capitalist society's effective relations.[12] Consequently, the Marxist dialectic is a transcendental term in which Marxists may invest their faith, a non-empirical object in which they may ground a science, like Augustine as he systematically extrapolated the City of God from within the fallen City of Man. For this reason, Jameson resists Althusser's attempted deconstruction of historical teleology: if no *telos* exists, the Marxist dialectic leads nowhere.[13]

Jameson's narrative objects are thus stories told by human collectivities from within the false consciousness of individual subjects defined and confined by capitalist "strategies of containment." Such strategies interiorize the ideological validations by which capitalism's hegemonic system justifies its injustices and internal contradictions.[14] The hegemonic strategies of containment, like Freud's Superego, force the voices of marginalized social classes beneath the interiorized hegemony of conscious utterance into what Jameson calls the "political unconscious," where the antagonistic dialogue created by class struggle weaves and rips the fabric of social discourse.[15] For Jameson, the collective political unconscious is accessible at the level of narrative, just as the individual analysand's repressed desire slips between his or her words in Freudian psychoanalysis: "[The specific critical and interpretive task of the present volume is] to restructure the problematics of ideology, of the unconscious and of desire, of representation, of history, and of cultural production, around the all-informing process of *narrative*, which I take to be (here using the shorthand of philosophical idealism) the central function or *instance* of the human mind."[16] Jameson's narrative analysis consists of destroying the narrative's unity as a figure of false consciousness and re-writing it as a figure of Althusserian Marxism. This viral transformation inscribes the narrative in the Marxist dialectic's terms, thereby creating a mental object that stands in for empirical evidence in Marxist "science":

[12] Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, pp. 63, 291. See also Paul Ricoeur's "Ideology and Utopia," in *From Text to Action* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1991), pp. 308–24.
[13] Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, p. 33.
[14] *Ibid.*, pp. 283, 82–83.
[15] Classic formulations of a Marxist/Freudian "unconscious" and concomitant theories of repression include Marcuse's *Eros and Civilization* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955) and Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's *The Anti-Oedipus* (New York: Viking, 1977).
[16] Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, p. 13.

> The appropriate object of study emerges only when the appearance of formal unification is unmasked as a failure or an ideological mirage . . . The aim of a properly structural interpretation or exegesis thus becomes the explosion of the seemingly unified text into a host of clashing and contradictory elements. Unlike canonical post-structuralism, however . . . the Althusserian/Marxist conception of culture requires this multiplicity to be reunified, if not at the level of the work itself, then at the level of its process of production, which is not random but can be described as a coherent, functional operation in its own right.[17]

When applied to Joycean narrative, at least three of Jameson's axioms are put to the test: (1) social collectivities must be decipherable in terms of the "false consciousness" implicit in narrative discourse; (2) the narrative must have a preexisting, "realistic" unity that can be destroyed so that the Marxist dialectic can reconstruct it in the dialectic's image; and (3) the human problematics implicit in the narrative must conform to Jameson's problematics.

As I discuss at length in the next chapter, condition (2) presents little problem for Jamesonian critics dealing with Joyce's work from *Dubliners* through the first third of *Ulysses*, where nineteenth-century realistic narrative blazes toward entropy with unparalleled lucidity. Historical representations in that part of Joyce's work practically invite the analytical tools of people like Jameson, whose methods require narrative unities charged with problems of ideology and social ontology. As Joyce's narrative begins to warp into increasingly bewildering configurations through the second two-thirds of *Ulysses* and the entirety of *Finnegans Wake*, though, designating a narrative unity to deconstruct becomes increasingly difficult. As that difficulty increases, condition (3) also becomes a distant hope.

Even before the destabilization of conditions (2) and (3), though, Joyce's work throws up enormous resistance to Jameson's central tenet as expressed in condition (1). In *Ulysses*, the social typification to which Joyce adheres as he creates his characters in *Dubliners* and *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* shatters with the appearance of Leopold Bloom. Identifying monolithic social collectivities in Bloom has proven to be a favorite critical pastime, especially for "consumer culture" critics fixated on Bloom's masturbatory interlude with Gerty MacDowell. On the other hand, discovering a complete complex of social collectivities in the figure of Bloom would be a difficult task for anyone seeking to carry Jameson's line of analysis to its logical end: for

[17] *Ibid.*, p. 56.