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Meaning Postponed: *Finnegans Wake* and *The Post Card*

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To ask what *Finnegans Wake* means presupposes an understanding of how the book means. The frustration given voice in such a question arises from the fact that *Finnegans Wake* dashes the hopes and expectations that we, as readers, have learned to bring to the texts we read. To engage with the *Wake*, therefore, we have to learn how to read anew. This has less to do with what is happening in the elusive language of the *Wake* than with how it is happening in, through, and as that language itself. Such language will not stand for a univocal reading or for a translation into unambiguous narrative statements. It does not, in fact, stand at all but instead is sent and is constantly traveling toward meaning, though never arriving at a meaning. To ask how this language means is to inquire into the nature of sending and reception, destiny and meaning, or what Jacques Derrida, in *The Post Card*, calls the “postal effect.”¹ After a brief rehearsal of some of the “postal theses” of Derrida’s text, I will turn to the role of postality within *Finnegans Wake* as it concerns the figure of Shaun the Post. Shaun is charged to deliver a message that is not his own, and the entirety of his character can be read as so many attempts to avoid the upsetting postal situation that this involves. This avoidance is most evident in his nationalism and his thrift, which I will address in turn. *Finnegans Wake*, however, does more than depict a character vainly resisting the disruptions of postality, for the book itself is written in direct confrontation with these issues. In the concluding section of this essay, I will consider the way that *Finnegans Wake* confronts the problems of postality in its very language and explore the consequences of this postality for any meaningful reading of the *Wake*.

A. The Postal Principle

The first section of Derrida’s *The Post Card*, entitled “Envois,” presents a lacuna-filled series of letters supposedly written on the back of postcards and dealing in one way or another with questions

of sending and non-arrival. In their content as well as their form, these postcards position themselves at the borders of signification,² proliferating around the difficulties of communication: the distance between parties, the contingencies of delivery, and the impossibility of the transmission of messages without a remainder. But “postality” for Derrida is also a matter of being as he claims to compose a “post card ontology” (22). What this means is that Derrida will think of everything as “sent,” his postal exchange operating as an examination of the effect of distance upon presence. What is *is* nothing present; instead it is what has been sent. This change in the conception of things unsettles beings from their supposedly fixed position of pure presence and self-containment and sets them into motion. They are now understood as destined to be here, as sent, and as subject to all the difficulties and obstacles that come with transmission. Two issues of importance for a reading of the *Wake* emerge from this: 1) the postal principle: for everything sent, there is the ineradicable possibility of non-arrival; and 2) the problem of legacy: the postal principle operates at every distance, including the temporal.

Derrida’s early work explores the independence of the written message from its author and recipient. *The Post Card* undertakes a prolonged analysis of this independence, now emphasizing the transitional or mediate nature of what is sent. Rather than start from the position of author or recipient, Derrida does not start at all but is rather already underway, in *media res*, between the poles of sender and recipient. To even speak of “poles,” however, is already a misnomer when it is precisely these fixed positions that have been “posted.” Consequently, there are no poles for the letter to travel between; they are only an effect of the letter. The indeterminate space of the letter is the space of sending where there is neither sender nor recipient as fully constituted and preexistent parties of the communication. The letter is not a consequence of the distance between poles; instead, the situation is the reverse. The supposedly discrete poles are themselves the abstractions of a prior distancing.

It is with this in mind that we should understand Derrida’s claims that non-arrival is always a possibility for what is sent. This is not a complaint against the accuracy of any particular postal system since no amount of security or vigilance can defend against this possibility. Non-arrival is always possible because the message itself is not wholly present. What is sent is already inhabited by non-arrival and non-belonging to such a degree that, even when it “arrives” safe and sound, its nature is not completely present. Consequently, a concept of complete arrival is contradictory, for it would indicate the complete assimilation of what was sent with its destination. If I receive something from someone, then it is precisely this “from someone” that separates me from the object received. The thing received still

maintains a connection with its sender, which prevents the message from ever being completely my own, or, rather, this inescapable remainder will condition all appropriation and owning. As long as the missive retains this connection with its sender, I cannot wholly possess it, but neither can the sender wholly give it. There is a withdrawal coincident with sending that forces the work of appropriation on both recipient and sender.³ Complete arrival is impossible. The message would have to be received in such a manner that both message and recipient would coincide with one another. There could be no space between them, not even a temporal one. Having received the message long ago would already disrupt this attempted coincidence. Both author and recipient must work at establishing themselves in their respective places in regard to the message. Neither is essential to the message "as such."

The postal principle is thus inherently upsetting and alienating. The appropriation and incorporation of something sent as something of one's own can never take the place of an innate quality or inherent attribute. We are faced with a self-constitution whereby the subject must appropriate its predicates (S is p). There is no identity, in other words, but only the owning up to one. This is indicated by the space between the subject and the predicate (S and p), which is yet another distance and yet another space of sending. There is a distance to every belonging and a postal effect across all such distances.

This is equally true of the temporal distance between heir and ancestor. Much of the correspondence in "Envois" concerns a postcard reproduced on the book's cover. Socrates, who wrote nothing but appears as a character in Plato's dialogues, sits at a writing desk and writes under the direction of Plato, standing behind him. The postcard depicts everything in the reverse of how it has been handed down, complicating the seemingly self-evident issue of legacy. For Socrates to establish a legacy across the generations, there must be a legatee who takes up that inheritance and makes it his or her own. The adoption of this inheritance is nothing that can ever be over and done with since, as we have seen, there is no complete transmission to be appropriated. Instead, the inheritance is always arriving. Further, by a taking up of the mantle of heir, the inheritor is kept at a step removed from the inheritance, and his or her life remains indebted to the other. This debt can never be repaid, especially since it has never been fully received.

Plato is not a legatee of Socrates unless he takes up his mission, but Socrates has no legacy if Plato does not take it up. If Plato needs Socrates to inherit from, Socrates needs Plato to receive his inheritance. Plato must be able to receive his legacy, and Derrida thinks of this as an activity; Plato "calls" for Socrates to send his legacy.⁴ With this, Plato assumes the active role in the transmission and Socrates the

position of recipient for the call to transmit. Derrida thus upsets the temporally linear transmission of inheritance and the chronological priority of ancestor over heirs, as postality puts Plato behind Socrates, and even Freud behind Plato.⁵

If the flow of time may be conceived as the transmission of new points and discrete moments, then the postal upsetting of chronology is similarly an interruption of such an effluence. Numerous temporal directions and dimensions now intersect and intercept the flow. Uni-directional time is a strategic arrangement to establish and maintain the lines of inheritance against the proliferation and detours of such alternate times. The past will be handed on to the present and this, later, to the future, as Derrida notes: “everything is constructed on the protocolary character of an axiom . . . : The charter is the contract for the following, which quite stupidly one has to believe: Socrates comes *before* Plato, there is between them—and in general—an order of generations, an irreversibly sequence of inheritance” (20). The uni-directional flow of time makes possible and is, in turn, secured by the causal determination of events occurring in time. Only in linear time can we guarantee that the effect will follow the cause, even to the point of a prediction of effects.

B. The Anti-Postal Shaun the Post

In *Finnegans Wake*, the postality provoked by Derrida is despised by Shaun the Post whose pained efforts to avoid it reveal the various contexts in which it operates. Shaun himself is not so much a character as a textual effect of the *Wake*.⁶ Traditionally, and perhaps in a somewhat caricatured way, the word “character” refers to a fixed essence that maintains itself across the varieties of literary experience. This is not to say that literary characters do not change in that they can certainly become whom they are intended to be or fail to live up to their potential, but, in either case, the same underlying character suffers the events: the I who can claim that it is not the same as it was before. The “characters” of the *Wake*, however, do not underlie anything; they are found right there at the words on the page.⁷

Setting the word “character” off in quotation marks in an attempt to postpone the postal effect unfortunately only serves to multiply the characters upon the page. As an effect of distance, postality cannot be put off in this manner, but the inability of these quotation marks to accomplish their assigned task is instructive. They would return order to the text, provide assurance, and allow us to admit our fears of applying an inappropriate term, while proclaiming our fearlessness of such impropriety. The quotation marks are able to function regardless of content. They carry their term, providing a *prima facie* assurance that they, at least, are not involved in the affairs that they

mention.

To bear a message and establish order: these are the roles of Shaun the Post, and he is those quotation marks. Their problem is his problem. Each attempts to contain postality and yet maintain separation, to envelope it and limit the extent of its effect. Insofar as character designates a steady presence persisting throughout the book, Shaun is not a character; he has already been torn apart by his message and surrendered to possibilities of non-return, misrecognition, and disconfiguration.

1. Shaun's Commission

Throughout the text and especially in book III, Shaun is a mediator:⁸ he is a postman charged with delivering a letter, a medium at a séance channeling the voice of HCE, Christ bearing God's message and "in reality . . . only" a barrel rolling down the Liffey.⁹ He is a receptacle, the vehicle for another. The meaning that he bears is the meaning that defines him, and it is not his own. He himself is "unwordy" (FW 408.10). To be true to his post, he must deliver a letter that would thereby arrive, but we have already seen that the constant arrival of what has been sent uproots any sense of a final destination and institutes a reign of appropriation and belonging.

Shaun, however, for all his injunctions to work, is unwilling to commit to this work of appropriation. He considers himself impotent in regard to the letter: "since it came into my hands I am hopeless off course to be doing anything concerning" (FW 410.17-19).¹⁰ His arrogance and pride conceal the inadequacy of his powers, and he begs for forgiveness of his debt and to be done with the never-ending labor of appropriation: "Forgive me, Shaun repeated from his liquid lips, not what I wants to do a strike of work" (FW 409.33-34). His post is a torment, he himself a "hastehater of the first degree" bearing "postoomany missive" for delivery (FW 408.11, 13). The message is so upsetting to Shaun because it is not his own. It is a rift in his being that divides him from himself, and it distances him from himself by interrupting his identity with himself.

In the first chapter of book III, Shaun discusses how he received his permit as a postman: "it was condemned on me premitially by Hireark Books and Chiefoverseer Cooks in their Eusebian Concordant Homilies [H...C...E, E...C...H] and there does be a power coming over me that is put upon me from on high" (FW 409.34-410.01). That Shaun sees the message as "condemned on [him]" provides a first clue as to how he relates to his postal profession as a burden he would rather not bear. The order has fallen upon him, saddling him with a debt that he is desperate to discharge.¹¹ The order's reception has dislodged him from house and home and set him adrift in errancy as

he is driven by divine messengers (angels) along random paths: "holy messenger angels be uninterruptedly nudging him among and along the winding ways of random ever!" (FW 405.07-09). He is underway among the ways, *unterwegs*, and "hopeless off course" (FW 410.18).

Shaun's assumption of his office irremediably separates him from the uninterrupted life he would rather lead. This interruption, however, is constitutive of his "character." Shaun is who he is, in effect, the Post, only because of the presence of another within him that he has to bear. His various attempts to claim authorship over it are just so many futile attempts to eradicate its alterity. Not only will he claim that the letter is a forgery ("Every dimmed letter in it is a copy and not a few of the silbils and wholly words"—FW 424.32-33) but also that it was plagiarized from him ("Ickick gav him that tooock, imitator!"—FW 423.10). He could have written it himself, of course, if only he had the time for that sort of thing (he is indulged by his questioners—"if only you would take your time so and the trouble of so doing it"—FW 425.07-08). He wishes to be rid of the foreign letter and to exist again in an untroubled and self-sufficient manner.

2. Shaun's Nationalism

Shaun's nationalism, evident throughout the text, is a direct response to his dislocated condition, and it is another symptom of his generally "antipostal" position that he seeks the solace of a natural home and the stability of a fixed identity (he is "dogmestic Shaun"—FW 411.23). Condemned to an uprooted and wandering existence by his reception of the message, he desperately attempts to ground and reattach himself, as a citizen, to the national soil: "I heard a voice, the voce of Shaun, vote of the Irish" (FW 407.13-14). For Shaun, identity must be something fixed and in place, not requiring any sort of dialectical severance and return in order to be itself; for him, it should be enough for identity simply to be itself naively. At the heart of Shaun's resentment of his brother is the idea that there can be no life apart from the home. Shem, Mercius, has not taken up his birthright (rendering it a "birthwrong"—FW 190.12) and thus fails to "fall in with Plan, as our nationals should, as all nationalists must, and do a certain office (what, I will not tell you) in a certain holy office (nor will I say where) during certain agonising office hours" (FW 190.12-15). Shaun, on the contrary, insists that a person should fulfill his or her obligation to the native land by taking up one's given place in it. This is what it means to be a citizen for Shaun—to belong to a nation, but not belong to it in any sense requiring the work of appropriation. Rather, Shaun wishes to belong so completely to the nation that he would literally be a part of it, just as much as its mountains and rivers. What he fails to see, however, is that the various actions he

undertakes, supposedly on account of his nationality, are ultimately so many moments in the construction of that identity. His Irishness does not precede these various acts but is constituted through them; such is the nature of belonging.

A nationalism of Shaun's sort, therefore, would be better termed isolationism, for it is more an anti-inter-nationalism than a nationalism in any positive sense. His position entails an elimination of the other or, at the very least, a denial of alterity. Shaun thus sets about a program of painting the postboxes green ("you have while away painted our town a wearing greenridinghued"—FW 411.23-24): a superficial attempt at grounding postality that fails to produce freedom. As Shaun says, "it just seemed the natural thing to do" (FW 411.26-27). Painting postboxes cannot eliminate their dangerous opening onto alterity, yet even with intra-national mail there is still the distance of postality and still room for errancy. The post is always an outlet onto the other, and the otherness of this other prevents her or him from receiving a national designation *a priori*.

This rejection of alterity on the part of Shaun is nowhere more clear than in his relationship with Miss Enders, Mrs. Sanders, P. L. M. Mevrouw von Andersen, and/or Miss Anders (FW 412.23, 413.05, 413.14-15, 414.02). As so many plays on the German word *andere* ("other, different"), what is most striking here is that Mrs. Sanders is dead (or "late"—FW 413.12). There are no others for Shaun. If he "acquired her letters," as he puts it (FW 413.09), then this again attests to an act of appropriation or acquisition operative at the origins of identity, an affirmation of the fact that there is no natural origin for the post, just as there is no final, ineluctable destination.

There is an important coincidence in Shaun's thinking about both nationalism and the natural. One is born into a nation, and this means that the channels of birth serve the nationalist agenda. Sexual reproduction must be monitored and controlled if the nation is to remain pure, but purity is equated with chastity and virginity. The land that Shaun loves is virgin (he plops down for a nap "upon the native heath he loved covered kneehigh with virgin bush"—FW 408.07-08), and his advice to the schoolgirls is also to maintain their chastity: "Keep cool your fresh chastity which is far better far" (FW 440.31-32). The problem is that, for the pure, virgin land to perpetuate itself, there must be a sully of that purity through intercourse. Sex after marriage does not change this fact; it only recreates an illusory purity of the nation through the legal fiction of marriage. This use of the artificial, or the legal, marriage, as necessary for the preservation and continuation of the natural, virginity, is also lost on Shaun. He consistently fails to see the role of what we might call the "supplement" in the constitution of the natural.

Sexual intercourse must be protected as the only route for the per-

petuation of the natural Irish bloodline, and corruption of the race must be prevented by any means necessary. Shaun cautions Izzy against all interactions and intercourse with foreigners and urges her especially to protect herself against all “affairs with the black fremdling” (FW 442.01). His desire to maintain identity in these matters leads to numerous threats of violence against the foreigner who would impose upon Izzy and against Izzy herself who might succumb to seduction. To insure the purity of the nation, Shaun even advises the girls in sex acts other than coitus should they find themselves unable to resist their own or their partner’s desires. Numerous references to anal sex, along with other modes of nonreproductive sexuality, are thus prevalent throughout Shaun’s chapters.¹²

When the four old men question Shaun (Yawn) in chapter 3 of Book III, it is suddenly St. Patrick who is being asked about the passing of another vessel, a ship. It is not just any ship, however, but is “the parent ship” (FW 480.07), which must be boarded if one is to take part in the steady passing of generations. Shaun would like to be born and live as an Irishman with never a thought or a question as to what that could mean, but this is impossible. To belong to a nation is to make oneself belong; it is never something innate but an achievement, a reception of the parent ship. In this, all ships are subject to drifting off course and to foreign overtaking, and what matters is how doggedly one remains aboard. National identity must be appropriated, and this fact already disrupts any claim to a natural national identity. As Shaun bemoans, in regard to his order, it is “becoming hairydittary” (FW 410.02). The biological national origin to which he so starkly clings is, from the outset, disrupted by postality. It is an origin that can only come after this appropriation, a *post*-origin.

3. Shaun’s Thrift

The text unflatteringly portrays Shaun’s thrift from his advice to the schoolgirls—“Deal with Nature the great greengrocer and pay regularly the monthlies”—to his condemnations of Mercius (FW 437.16-17). In Shaun’s eyes, Shem/Mercius suffers from a “horrible awful poverty of mind,” for he gives his money to “bearded jezabelles you hired to rob you” and saves nothing: “Where is that little alimony nestegg against our predictable rainy day?” (FW 192.10, 25, 32-33). There are two sides to Shaun’s own economic existence, one of intake and preservation, the other of expansion and growth, and both work together to insure the stability of Shaun’s identity. Even though he grows, he remains ever the same; he is redundantly himself.

The first moment of Shaun’s thrift concerns an emphasis upon intake and consumption, and his voracious appetite is a testament to this: “twentyfour hours every moment matters maltsight [in German,

Mahlzeit means meal time]" (FW 405.22-23). He is always eating—"Oop, I never open momouth but I pack mefood in it" (FW 437.19-20)—and his clothes are stained with food.¹³ When Shaun received his commission, the presence of the letter establishes a "gap" or "split" in his identity. Similarly, his grotesque consumption is an impossible attempt to fill that gap and return to wholeness. For Shaun to be whole, there would have to be no contact with an other, even in what he eats. His ideal would thus be to eat "home cooking everytime" (FW 455.31-32) and to achieve the self-identity of an HCE ("His hungriness will be done!"—FW 411.11). Shaun must support himself upon himself, in the same way that HCE—"Massa Ewacka"—was "secretly and by suckage feeding on his own misplaced fat" (FW 79.05, 12-13). Shaun, too, enjoys this same kind of cannibalism as he strives to be self-identical: the same at home in the same, sustained by and feeding on the same.¹⁴ This, in fact, explains Shaun's braggadocio ("Jaun the Boast"—FW 469.29), which is part and parcel of this emphasis upon intake. The self-satisfied subject views itself as complete and whole, and Shaun wants to be done with his obligation to the post in order to *be* himself as self-identical. He attempts to free himself from the responsibilities of his office and his duties to others, which makes him a particularly bad postman, to be sure.

Shaun's thrift also emerges in his concern with gain and economic growth. As he puts it in advising the schoolgirls, "mony makes multimony like the brogues and the kishes" (FW 451.12-13). What he retains may garner interest (multimony) but is itself only more of the same (more "mony"). The multimony will be compounded with the mony, and the new total will serve as mony for the production of still more multimony. Shaun does not use his money to purchase other things but instead uses it to make more of the same. That his money would only come into contact with more of itself and then, from that union, produce still more money could be seen as either another instance of his inability to produce something different (impotence) or as another image of his homo-sexuality (as absence of difference). Shaun's accrual of interest further entrenches him within his self-satisfied subjective position since his only growth is a growth of the same.

For Shaun's mony to earn interest, there must be a time across which it perdures. When the Gracehoper concentrates his charges against the Ondt into the single question, "*why can't you beat time?*" (FW 419.08), the point of attack is precisely the Ondt's self-imposed impotence before the unidirectional and linear time he requires for interest. The interest that Shaun would earn—his multimony—requires a regular and serially progressive time, one completely formal in character and operative independently of content. Shaun cannot beat this time. The content of such a time is made up of the events that are said to take

place within it. These in no way alter the form of the time, since the space between form and content is again regarded as free from postality. Each of these events is stamped by this time with a particular place (or, rather, time) according to which it is infinitely comparable with other points along this timeline, preceding some and succeeding others. Such a time conducts events in an orderly manner (if only chronologically so) and thereby guarantees progress. By its simple formality, chronological time guarantees that events will succeed one another and, in effect, that there will be succession, if not immediate success. This formal promise of chronological time (the assurance of success) issues in advance all “loans through the post” (FW 514.29) and makes possible the prediction of events. The success of succession (formal progression) is the essence of interest, simply put. When Shaun’s mony makes multimony, it only makes more of the same because what appears has been structured in advance by time. Time bears events like Shaun bears his letter—formally. Shaun cannot beat this time because it is impossible for him to achieve an outside position from which to strike it. Thus, Shaun’s demand for stability and fixity, his refusal to see in identity a matter of appropriation, and his fear of alterity all seek to deny the postal character of the world. In this, he remains opposed to Joyce himself, who accepts and negotiates with postality in *Finnegans Wake*.

C. Postal Meaning in *Finnegans Wake*

1. Language

The scholarship on *Finnegans Wake* and *The Post Card* focuses almost exclusively upon the ways in which Derrida’s work exhibits a structural logic embedded in Joyce’s book. Shari Benstock’s 1984 essay “The Letter of the Law: *La Carte Postale* in *Finnegans Wake*” shows how both texts “illustrate the various ways that the communication of desire can go astray, be lost, be delayed, or transferred.”¹⁵ Desire runs in an orbit around an absent center, and this is not only something played out in the postal systems prevalent in these texts but is also their “frame.” In “The Example of Joyce: Derrida Reading Joyce,” Murray McArthur does not find a frame so much as a “metonymic bit” that forms the hinge between “the part and the whole” for a reading of the *Wake*.¹⁶ McArthur’s “bit” is the place of the example, and his essay tries to come to terms with Derrida’s claim that Joyce’s writing provides a necessary example of deconstruction. Finally, Alan Roughley’s chapter, “Postcards to Joyce,” is largely a detailed summary of the previous two articles framed by a consideration of the “double structures” operating between Joyce and Derrida.¹⁷ Roughley finds deconstruction’s distance from metaphysics to be

an ironically doubled one, where the metaphysical would already prepare for its own deconstruction and the deconstructive can never assume a position completely outside the text.

In each of these cases, what is at stake is a structural matter between the texts. To be sure, postality as a “principle” is to be found in the *Wake*, but each of the above-named commentaries omits a treatment of postality in the language of the *Wake*. Without such a treatment, structural concerns merely serve to reiterate the metaphysical opposition between form and content, precisely the sort of rigid dualism that postality is to undo. *Finnegans Wake* must be taken literally and points to a tremendous difference between *Finnegans Wake* and *The Post Card*. Joyce takes postality literally, in fact, to the letter of his language, whereas it seems to operate largely as a structural concept for both Derrida and his commentators.¹⁸ For example, in *Of Grammatology*, Derrida stresses deconstruction’s internal position in regard to structure:

The movements of deconstruction do not destroy structures from the outside. They are not possible and effective, nor can they take accurate aim, except by inhabiting those structures. . . . Operating necessarily from the inside, borrowing all the strategic and economic resources of subversion from the old structure, borrowing them structurally . . . the enterprise of deconstruction always in a certain way falls prey to its own work.¹⁹

Despite these claims, Derrida does not take deconstruction to the interior of the text, in effect, to its language. It remains bound up with what are, for the most part, structural concerns. A similar oversight of what we might term a “literal postality” is found in *The Post Card*, where Derrida writes: “If I say that I write for dead addressees, not dead in the future but already dead at the moment when I get to the end of a sentence, it is not in order to play” (33). With Joyce, however, one need not wait until the end of the sentence for the posting of meaning to take effect; instead it already takes place in his language.

Thus, there is no better example of postality as it operates in literature than *Finnegans Wake*. And while *The Post Card* itself cites the *Wake* numerous times, Joyce’s own text is not simply *about* deferment, distance, and loss, but it is written in direct confrontation with these problems, as a consideration of the *Wake*’s use of the portmanteau word will show.

The portmanteau is a traveling word derived from a piece of luggage which, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, “opens like a book.”²⁰ A portmanteau word, then, is a case or box packed with letters. It is not, for all this, a mailbox, for it is not fixed to an address or destination. Rather, it is a piece of luggage to be carried, a satchel

full of letters, a postman's satchel. On every page of *Finnegans Wake*, there is a carrying of letters by the post. These letters that make up the portmanteau words would seem to jumble together and eliminate the distance separating one word from another, but this elimination of distance only serves to open up another contextual space of meaning.

The context can so determine a word that it is pigeonholed into a single meaning. Puns escape this fixity and operate meaningfully in two separate contexts in each of which the word's meaning is fully present. Derek Attridge makes this clear in his *Peculiar Language*, which provides an elegant treatment of the pun and portmanteau.²¹ To take Attridge's example of a pun from Alexander Pope (190), "When Bentley late tempestuous wont to sport/In troubled waters, but now sleeps in port," it is clear that, in one case, "port" refers to a harbor and in the other it refers to a wine.²² The two discrete meanings do not come into contact with each other, and each of them can be catalogued.

The portmanteau, however, undoes the stability of the pun since it has no fixed meaning and is not to be found in dictionaries. The delightful oscillation of the pun is set awl in the portmanteau. There is never one meaning that would be present in the portmanteau word but instead a constellation of meanings and echoes. The portmanteau does not *have* a meaning; it is not even the sum of the meaning of all its parts since, unlike a pun, the component meanings influence one another. Attridge views this as the creation of a "contextual circle" whereby "plurality of meaning in one item increases the available meanings of other items, which in turn increase the possibilities of meaning in the original item" (202), but we should take greater care in the location of meaning here. The portmanteau does not possess a meaning that would lie "in" it; instead meaning *touches* it at the site where the word affiliates itself into a context. Were meaning to continue to reside within the portmanteau, it would simply remain another word, ready for its dictionary entry, while, as Attridge himself points out, "[t]he portmanteau word is a monster, a word that is not a word" (196).

That the portmanteau must be understood in context is true of all words, but that it can only be understood in context is not. In collapsing the space between words, the portmanteau forces us to address the referentiality of language: for there to be meaning, we must abandon the thought of the word as a fixed reference (the portmanteau is not "in" a context like clothes are in a suitcase). Instead, meaning will occur precisely at the edge of the word, where it veers out onto its various constitutive relations. Meaning is the very stretching of the word out beyond itself, there being nothing any longer interior to the word but its own expulsion of itself onto the page. Meaning

in this case becomes a matter of limit, exposure, and interstices. By moving away from the word as a fixed point embedded in a context, the portmanteau presents us with a view of contextuality not as an enveloping linguistic field but as an extrapolated, exposed, and often disappointed conglomerate of interpretive directions. It is language in motion, where no word stands alone but is already itself only a movement out to another. Meaning cannot be found in the termination of this motion or in the arrival at a destination, for this movement is endless. Rather, meaning is located at the very entrance of the word onto its context, in the unique way that each word is both shaped by its exposure to context and reflectively constitutive of that context as well. Sending itself across the mediate space of context, the portmanteau word issues into postality.

2. Plot and Character

The language of the *Wake* requires that we read differently. As a counter to Shaun, Joyce's language is both international and uprooted as well as excessive and exposed. It is anything but nationalistic and thrifty. These transformations bring about a concomitant change in the traditional structures and structuring principles of the novel itself, interrupting both character and plot.²³ The two postal theses isolated from Derrida's *The Post Card* and shown to motivate the characterization of Shaun the Post—the impossibility of complete arrival and the reversibility of the time of inheritance—similarly provide us with clues as to how to read *Finnegans Wake* or how not to read it.

Shaun's unaccomplished nationalism offers a Joycean view of the postal whereby the separation from natural identity is experienced by Shaun as a situation in need of restoration. Postality will be denied in favor of pure presence. Shaun's appearance to Izzy as Christ is perhaps his most literal attempt to identify himself with the letter (the word) that he is forced to bear and thus to eradicate the division within himself that the letter inaugurates. Shaun's frustrations, however, make painfully clear the futility of any attempted flight from the post. How does one distance oneself from distance itself? The attempt is always in vain, especially when the distance of the letter already separates oneself from oneself.

This division of the self reveals the ideal of self-presence to be the greatest fiction, the same ideal that motivates traditional conceptions of character. When character is taken as an instance of literary subjectivity and this is understood as a fictional self-present identity, then it serves to name an object separable from its surroundings. Such a character could be isolated from its contexts without consequence to its integrity. Characters would be so many marbles in the box of the book. When the shell of character is no longer present to contain

its "contents," these are free to spill all over the page. The reader is confronted with a book of characteristics, containing no characters. Thus, there are no characters in *Finnegans Wake*, since the sending of language is a sending of character.²⁴

Joyce's literal deconstruction of character in the *Wake* has serious consequences for the reader. To read *Finnegans Wake* is to learn to read anew. Through the preponderance of portmanteau words, readers become habituated to reading differently, since words that would otherwise not seem portmanteau are now read and heard in this manner. This is more than to say that *Finnegans Wake* creates its own audience: it is to say that Joyce characterizes his reader. We adopt a new characteristic in our relation to this text. Its reader is as much (and as little) a character as Shaun.

If Shaun's nationalism stages for us the self-identity of the self-present subject, then his thrift provides us with insight into the temporal order of this subject. The time of the subject is the time of security, prediction, and justice (as revenge and equivalence), not the time of grace, hope, or mercy. Shaun's calculation opposes Shem's serendipity at a temporal level. The time of Shaun is the traditional time of the plot, which strings scenes together towards a culminating moment of recuperation and justification. Plot calculates time and uses it for the greatest effect (suspense, boredom, ecstasy, and so forth). *Finnegans Wake*, however, has no such plot. Those who are concerned with strategically guaranteeing the transmission of meaning are obligated to employ a linear time; it is itself the time of employment and use. Shaun's thrift and the temporal order it proposes are ways by which he again attempts to secure meaning and perfectly understand it, without loss or remainder.

The excessive language of *Finnegans Wake* ensures that there will be no reception of a message, and Joyce's move to characterize his reader is at the same time a move of deauthorization. The sending of language is not a transmission according to the channels of plot or the identities of character but a multivalent dispersal.²⁵ His words produce audible effects and accidental sparks, igniting other connections, other contexts for interpretation. The path through *Finnegans Wake* is not that of a pre-established plot. Instead, the reader is slowly characterized, while the author begins to recede. *Finnegans Wake* does not occupy the place of a book, between the author who wrote it and the reader who reads it. Instead, both of these poles of the literary relationship are subjected to the postal effect. Reader enters text, and text becomes the author. *Finnegans Wake* communicates through the formation of just this literary community. This mediate position of *Finnegans Wake* is the place of language and the letter. To suffer postality so thoroughly as to undo the supposed separation between us is not only what *Finnegans Wake* has to mean but also how it can mean

anything at all.

NOTES

¹ Jacques Derrida, *The Post Card*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1987), p. 3. Further references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

² The cards concern traveling to conferences, sending postcards to an unnamed recipient, examining a thirteenth-century fortune-telling book, considering the problems of inheritance, and constantly worrying about whether or not the entire correspondence should be burned. In a formal sense, there are no postcards here at all but rather the opening pages of a book authored by Derrida. It should also be noted that the cards are equally preoccupied with whether they will make up the preface of *The Post Card* or not—calling to mind Derrida's earlier analysis of the preface in *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (London: Continuum Press, 1981). All of these aspects play a role in Derrida's principle of postality developed in the text.

³ I have addressed this conception of a withdrawal inherent in sending through another reading of Derrida's *The Post Card*, this time in conjunction with *The Post Card's* critique of Martin Heidegger and the notion of essence in Heidegger's *Contributions to Philosophy: From Enowning*, trans. Parvis Emad and Kenneth Maly (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1999), in "The Extent of Giving: Sending in Derrida and Heidegger," *Spinoza: Desire and Power, Pli: The Warwick Journal of Philosophy*, 14 (2003), 89-105.

⁴ The situation is presented as follows in *The Post Card*: "Example: if one morning Socrates had spoken for Plato, if to Plato his addressee he had addressed some message, it is also that p. would have had to be able to receive, to await, to desire, in a word to have called in a certain way what S. will have said to him; and therefore what S., taking dictation, pretends to invent—writes, right? p. has sent himself a post card . . . he has sent it back to himself from himself, or he has even 'sent' himself S" (p. 30).

⁵ Derrida writes in *The Post Card*: "Plato, who is the inheritor, for Freud" (p. 28).

⁶ On the role of characters in the *Wake* and *Ulysses*, the panel "Character and Contemporary Theory" from the Ninth International Joyce Symposium is instructive—see Bernard Benstock, ed., *James Joyce: The Augmented Ninth. Proceedings from the Ninth International James Joyce Symposium. Frankfurt 1984* (Syracuse: Syracuse Univ. Press, 1988). Derek Attridge's contribution to this panel will be addressed in the concluding section below. In another contribution to the panel, "Some Prefatory Remarks on Character in Joyce," James A. Snead sees the characters of the *Wake* as reader-manipulable—"These fictional subjects have as their density the very act of recombination and not any one constellation" (p. 145)—which functions for him as part of a social critique. For Snead, Joyce "explicitly reveals that the reader's and author's capacity to arrange micro-units is the power of society, and that characters to some extent allow themselves to be manipulated, and let their individual characteristics fade precisely in order to merge with the power to array" (p. 146). This idea of Joyce's characters as merging with the power of arrangement will be taken to mean that the characters of the *Wake* blend with the operations of the text.

The difficulties of Shaun are the difficulties of the language of the *Wake*.

⁷ Attridge makes a similar claim in his *Peculiar Language: Literature as Difference from the Renaissance to James Joyce* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1988), p. 207: "Characters, too, are never *behind* the text in *Finnegans Wake* but in it." Further references will be cited parenthetically in the text. Nothing underlies the language of the *Wake*. For this reason, the intense scholarly effort currently devoted to Joyce's *Wake* notebooks is not directed at discovering anything beneath the *Wake* since there is nothing there to be found. Rather—and this is another postal effect—the notebooks will only serve to show the presence of the *Wake* in them, the expanse of its command and territorial effect. What is of concern, then, is not what contents of the notebooks have made it into the *Wake* but rather the opposite—how the *Wake* has made itself into the notebooks and beyond. The editors of the notebook project, Vincent Deane, Daniel Ferrer, and Geert Lernout, in their *The "Finnegans Wake" Notebooks at Buffalo: A Reader's Guide to the Edition* (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols Publishers, 2001), do not speak of the notes and drafts as behind, beneath, or underlying the *Wake*. They do, however, speak of "source material" (p. 3), and with this notion of a "source," already engage with transmission and sending. The notebooks are no genotype, the *Wake* itself no phenotype.

⁸ On the relationship between postality and the media, see Gregory L. Ulmer, "The Post-Age," *Diacritics*, 11 (Fall 1981), 3, 39-56.

⁹ See Joyce to Harriet Shaw Weaver (24 May 1924): "the copying out of Shaun which is a description of a postman travelling backwards in the night through the events already narrated. It is written in the form of a *via crucis* of 14 stations but in reality it is only a barrel rolling down the river Liffey" (*Letters I* 214).

¹⁰ Perhaps this noncreative nature of Shaun accounts for the presence of what seem to be numerous allusions to nonreproductive sex acts around him, especially anal sex (see endnote 14 below). We should note further, however, that the postal effect is itself something of a reversal whereby the predecessor comes to stand before the inheritor and the inheritor behind the forefather. There is a certain "sodomy" to postality and a turn away from established methods and lines of reproductive descent. This is another sense in which we might, with Jean-Michel Rabaté, speak of sodomy in Joyce's writing, though now as postal effect: "Joyce's purgatorial and comic sense of sodomy locates it primarily in language"—see Rabaté, *James Joyce and the Politics of Egoism* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2001), p. 172.

¹¹ For an analysis of the role of debt in *The Post Card*, see Samuel Weber, "The Debts of Deconstruction and Other, Related Assumptions," *Taking Chances: Derrida, Psychoanalysis, and Literature*, ed. Joseph H. Smith and William Kerrigan (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1984), pp. 33-65.

¹² After an injunction to "never lay bare your breast secret (dickette's place!)" and a description of "comepulsing paynattention spasms," Shaun advises the partners to "please sit still face to face" (FW 434.26-27, 28-29, 32), which I take as advocacy of the missionary position in intercourse. Oral-sex references can be found at FW 441.15-16 ("unless she'd care for a mouthpull of white pudding") and FW 415.35 ("Suckit Hotup!"), among others. The majority of references, however, point to anal sex as the preferred avenue of nonreproductive sexual activity. Shaun counsels, "Love through the usual channels," by which he means "not love that leads by the nose as I foreshmelt

but canalised love, you understand, does a felon good" (FW 436.14, 17-19); he later speaks of "your weak abdominal wall" (FW 437.10); there is talk of a woman standing behind a man (with him after her) in order to satisfy the *verge* ("the man to be is in a worse case after than before since she on the supine satisfies the verg to him"—FW 468.06-08); and there is a desire for a certain "back haul": "Well, I beg to traverse same above statement by saxy luters in their back haul of Coalcutter" (FW 492.14-15). We also find a description of an ejaculation related to the blowing of his postal horn ("blew off in a love-blast"—FW 471.13) which "narrowly missed fouling her buttress for her but for he acqueducked" (FW 471.17-18). In this context of antireproduction and identity, we should also consider his outrage over his homosexual encounter ("Homo! Then putting his bedfellow on me!"—FW 422.11). The advocacy of sodomy in these passages is a means of avoiding a contamination of the bloodline by the foreigner, thus adding a further wrinkle to Rabaté's treatment of hospitality and sodomy—see "Hospitality and Sodomy," chapter 9 of his *James Joyce and the Politics of Egoism* (pp. 153-78).

¹³ Shaun's overshirt has food "embrothred over it in peas, rice, and yeggyolk" (FW 404.29-30).

¹⁴ In this, he stands in opposition to Shem. Shem is covered with the writing of an ink composed of feces through which he expresses himself. The ink itself is composed of something given out, excreted, but Shaun neither gives anything back nor puts anything out; he only eats and takes in. If Shem is Jacob to Shaun's Esau, then Joyce expresses this reciprocal relation with the unsavory names "Jerkoff and Eatsup" (FW 563.24).

¹⁵ Shari Benstock, "The Letter of the Law: *La Carte Postale* in *Finnegans Wake*," *Philological Quarterly*, 63 (Spring 1984), 184.

¹⁶ Murray McArthur, "The Example of Joyce: Derrida Reading Joyce," *JJQ*, 32 (Winter 1995), 238.

¹⁷ Alan Roughley, "Postcards to Joyce," *Reading Derrida Reading Joyce* (Gainesville: Univ. Press of Florida, 1999), p. 32.

¹⁸ Certainly one might object that "Envois" presents many literal renderings of postality, from the prescribed number of spaces between omissions in the postcards to the strange series of abbreviations offered without a key. On the whole, even these remain formal expressions of postality, challenges to a traditional reading of the text, but not themselves very far from traditional challenges to that reading. Joyce's text may well be the "example" for Derrida, as McArthur argues, precisely because his text is weathered by postality like no other, all the way to the language. It should also be noted that all the tradition does, in fact, gesture to the importance of language in postality, but it never becomes a central concern.

¹⁹ Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1974), p. 24.

²⁰ See the first definition (1.a.) of "portmanteau": "A case or bag for carrying clothing and other necessities when traveling; originally of a form suitable for carrying on horseback; now applied to an oblong stiff leather case, which opens like a book, with hinges in the middle of the back"—*Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed., s.v. "portmanteau."

²¹ See especially chapter 7, "Unpacking the Portmanteau; or, Who's Afraid of *Finnegans Wake*?" in Attridge's *Peculiar Language* (pp. 188-209).

²² See lines 201-02 of the fourth book of Alexander Pope, *The Dunciad in*

Four Books, ed. Valerie Rumbold (New York: Pearson Education Limited, 1999), p. 301. Attridge discusses the pun in *Peculiar Language* (pp. 190-92) and compares it with the portmanteau word (pp. 201-02, 206).

²³ Attridge draws the connection between Joyce's revolutions in language and the understanding of character in his essay "Joyce and the Ideology of Character," in *Joyce Effects: On Language, Theory, and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2000), p. 57: "The disappearance of the word as a self-bounded, consistent, and unique entity marks the disappearance of language as the communicator of clear and distinct meanings; or rather, it puts in question that model of language, just as the disappearance of character in the other sense puts in question the model of the subject as consistent, undivided, unique, and immediately knowable and self-knowable." Sam Slote emphasizes the manner in which narratology fails before the "fundamental incompleteness to the work of the work in progress" in "Nulled Nought: The Desistance of Ulyssean Narrative in *Finnegans Wake*," *JJQ*, 34 (Summer 1997), 538. As he laments, "*Finnegans Wake* is still read as though it were *Ulysses*" (p. 531).

²⁴ Jed Rasula, in "*Finnegans Wake* and the Character of the Letter," *JJQ*, 34 (Summer 1997), 523, 524, carries this point to the letter of the text itself in his claim that "*Finnegans Wake* not only proposes but enacts a reunion between the two senses of the word 'character,' psychological and calligraphic," in order to claim that "[t]here is no character, no scene, no setting, no incident in the book not tainted by insinuations of the letter." The conclusion to be drawn from this, one omitted by Rasula, is that *Finnegans Wake* is not a book.

²⁵ In *Joyce Effects*, Attridge speaks of this in terms of "fireworks" (p. xiii). As he puts it in the essay "The Postmodernity of Joyce: Chance, Coincidence, and the Reader," included in *Joyce Effects*, "Rather than attempting to control the mass of fragmentary detail to produce meaning, Joyce's major texts allow meaning to arise out of that mass by the operations of chance" (p. 120).