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Footprints in the Labyrinth

A Study of Complexity in Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*
and Wallace's *Infinite Jest*

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Per te,
che mi conosci così bene.

INTRODUCTION	4
One asks a keener penetration than a herald's	4
FIRST CHAPTER	22
1.1) Mutations and Intensities	22
1.2) Chaosmos of Alle	38
1.3) Normative letters	45
1.4) Continuarration! You're not there yet	54
1.5) Dreams go by contraries	60
1.6) Balbaccio, balbuccio!	71
1.7) Empire of objects	79
SECOND CHAPTER	89
2.1) Alone in a foreign world	89
2.2) Empire of objects (2)	101
2.3) From detail to labyrinth	119
2.4) Voices without bodies	131
CODA	149
<i>Auctor</i>	149
BIBLIOGRAPHY	156

Introduction

One asks a keener penetration than a herald's

This thesis questions complexity in novels, understood as a characteristic that emerges from the interplay of various techniques employed by authors. Periodically, extremely long, intricate, and dense texts emerge, demanding a conscious and considerable effort from the reader, but more importantly, reworking the rules of the novel form by either amplifying or negating some of its core aspects. It is precisely this second aspect that captures my interest and draws my attention: when discussing complexity, a cognitive and subjective factor comes into play, as each reader perceives different degrees of difficulty, followed by a multitude of responses to the narrative obstacles¹. Most of the time, the path to be explored will set aside the reader and their experience, focusing instead on the formal processes that give the works in question their pronounced repulsive force. I prioritize the study of forms of expression because it reveals the concrete and specific workings of literary texts, allowing for the uncovering of the latent meaning condensed within their pages. Relying on the arsenal of stylistic force offers a dual advantage: on one hand, it allows for an in-depth exploration of the confined plane of structure, delving into the internal articulations of the text where its competitive peculiarities, relational nodes, and principles of operation are manifested. In short, it is a way to observe with keen

¹ Diepeveen, Leonard, *The Difficulties of Modernism* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 77.

eyes and refined tools the artifices crafted by the strings and pulleys these texts conceal beneath their surface. The second reason behind this strong choice – to proceed following a cohesive ideology – is the potential to use form as a social indicator, shedding light on what occurs elsewhere, beyond the scope of the texts to be analyzed, in the realm where suppressed content proliferates. The central principle upheld throughout this work is the conviction that form speaks, as sedimented content. I believe that identifying and connecting a series of literary phenomena within a shared horizon can help to understand other links and refer to phenomena that are not strictly literary².

Once the lines of force are defined, it becomes essential to focus on the literary object. When complexity is discussed, it refers to a specific sensation that arises as a reaction to an obstacle, a barrier – something that resists thorough exploration and remains enigmatic. The term, in fact, possesses a radial structure, as it proves difficult to conceptualize; it is often placed in quotation marks to encompass as many nuances as possible, being a slippery and ambiguous word that can be associated with "erudition," "obscurity," "difficulty," and, at times, "lack of meaning."³ For this reason, it was necessary to exclude the reader's cognitive experience from this study to make room for an analysis of the text's properties. This approach aims to delineate the possible uses of the term "complexity" and its allied concepts.

² This is not to suggest that direct and mechanical correspondences exist between cultural history and historical events, as every era in literature and society features diverse and conflicting voices. However, this will be discussed extensively throughout the course of this study.

³ Diepeveen, *The Difficulties of Modernism*, 47.

The material available to navigate the nebulous realm of difficulty in literature is rather sparse: George Steiner's essay *On Difficulty* (1978) serves as a starting point, offering a synthetic overview of various forms of difficulty⁴. Whereas classification is no more than an attempt to enhance available resources, his reflections focus on a specific historical moment in which poets operate within a space defined by two polarities: one that seeks to dismantle the mountain of the past – the canonical tradition – and another that excavates it, revealing a tendency toward reversion to examine the archaic nature of language. This historical stage to which it refers is known as modernism, a synthetically abstract term that will, for now, serve to delimit the beginning of complexity. Throughout this thesis, I will refer to a conceptual arsenal drawn from extraliterary fields – modernism, postmodernism, hypermodernism – only to momentarily acknowledge the cultural terrain from which certain texts sprout out. It is, in any case, a shifting threshold, one that cannot coincide with a precise date. Indeed, to reconstruct the genesis of certain processes

⁴ Steiner identifies four types of difficulty: epiphenomenal or contingent, modal, tactical, and ontological. The first is the most statistically prevalent in high-modernist texts such as *The Waste Land*, *The Cantos*, and *Ulysses*. This type of difficulty compels the reader to seek references outside the text, often relying on archaic terms. The second, modal difficulty, lies within the observer of the work. It arises after the reader has made sincere attempts to understand the text – where understanding aligns with the Greek term *legein* in its Heideggerian sense, meaning "to gather" or "to explicate." To comprehend, then, is to assemble something into a form imbued with meaning. The third type, tactical difficulty, arises from the tension between communicative intentions and performative means. The author may choose to obscure or conceal parts of the meaning to achieve specific stylistic effects. However, the language available to the author is rooted in common usage. Therefore, it must be polished, revitalized, driven by a desire to create a new syntax. The final type concludes the essay with a reflection on the status of humanity and its inauthentic condition within an environment eroded by discourse. Modernism, in its radical phase, performs a cleansing of common syntax to extract and preserve poetry in an arcane realm. It is an ontological difficulty because it questions the work as an artistic construct with meaning and necessity, independent of the reader's sensitivity or the author's creative uncertainty. Steiner, George, *On Difficulty*, *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Spring, 1978, Vol. 36, No. 3, *Critical Interpretation* (Spring, 1978): 263-276.

still unfolding, as I will explain in the conclusion, it will sometimes be necessary to move backward in time.

It is important to examine modernism in this research because it marked a cultural moment when difficulty was intrinsic to every cultural product, becoming an aesthetic that could be found everywhere. For some critics of high-modernist works, this difficulty even became a stylistic trait, a fashion, calculated and deliberate. Associating modernism with complexity does not imply excluding its presence in earlier texts; rather, it serves to highlight the widespread diffusion of this component among the works of that period, to the extent that it became one of its central features. Yet, it is not merely a feeling shared by an audience increasingly ensnared by the growing difficulty of works; in a review of a poetry collection for the *Times Literary Supplement*, T.S. Eliot asserts that:

[I]t appears likely that poets in our civilization, as it exists at present, must be difficult. Our civilization comprehends great variety and complexity, and this variety and complexity, playing upon a refined sensibility, must produce various and complex results. The poet must become more and more comprehensive, more allusive, more indirect, in order to force, to dislocate if necessary, language into his meaning⁵.

Here lies the difficulty Steiner identifies in various poets: the plastic nature of language makes form malleable, pliable to the point that it

⁵ Eliot, T.S., *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot*, (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1975) 153-160. First published in *Times Literary Supplement* (May 27, 1920).

can be separated from its corresponding content, which resides elsewhere. But even more important for continuing the discussion is the sense of transformation – which I will explore extensively at the beginning of the first chapter – that lies hidden behind this statement: form is no longer perceived as a transparent vehicle conveying content; rather, it should itself reflect the contemporary culture. It is precisely this awareness that will later lead authors to work in literary laboratories, continuing to experiment with form in order to achieve what Šklovskij described as "estrangement" – that is, the impression of encountering an object for the first time and observing it through "vision" rather than "recognition." Texts written according to more radical demands and expectations would compel the reader to shake off the lethal weight of habit. To enhance the perception of a work, however, it is necessary for it to possess a gradient of obscurity, thereby increasing its complexity and hindering its resolution⁶.

It is time to address the point of convergence of the various theoretical lines I have presented thus far. In a 1991 essay on post-Romantic poetry, Franco Fortini distinguished the concept of "obscurity" from that of "difficulty":

"Oscurità" sia dunque la condizione di un testo o di una sua parte che non consentano una rapida parafrasi capace di soddisfare le esigenze proprie della parafrasi stessa, cioè il massimo possibile di riduzione degli elementi autoreferenziali a favore di quelli referenziali. [...] Se si guarda poi alla funzione espressivo-stilistica e conoscitiva della (sempre relativa)

⁶ Rabatè, Jean Michel, *Una lingua straniata. Gli stili del modernismo* in Franco Moretti (edited by) *Il romanzo. La cultura del romanzo*, Vol. 1 (Torino: Einaudi, 2001), 750-772. I mention "resolution" because, for Šklovskij, a work of art must extend the perception of the beholder as much as possible; the "already completed" coincides with the end of this exchange between the individual and the work.

incomprensibilità o impenetrabilità di un testo o di una sua parte, si può dire che quella "oscurità" non può né deve mai (né può) essere "vinta" o "superata" perché la sua ragione è di essere, in definitiva, una particolare categoria di "figura" come la reticenza o l'eufemismo. Pena la scomparsa di una essenziale parte del "messaggio", tale "oscurità" deve permanere; mimesis, oltre tutto e come sappiamo, della "oscurità" delle relazioni infraumane.

"Difficoltà" è invece un tratto di oscurità che non si pone come costitutivo ma solo come momentaneo e che può essere risolto da un dato grado di competenza del lettore. Anche la "difficoltà" è un tratto stilistico, anzi è organizzata e intenzionale in molte tradizioni letterarie. Ma differisce dalla "oscurità" perché accetta anzi esige l'interpretazione e la parafrasi. [...] La "difficoltà" [...] si pone come enigma *provvisorio* risolvibile con determinati strumenti e quindi mediante esegesi critica o ermeneusi, manifestando la divaricazione (tipicamente allegoristica) fra oggetto linguistico infinitamente "traducibile" e sua provvisoria "traduzione" comunicativo-razionale». ⁷

It is a passage that sheds light on various gray areas left unresolved.

What Fortini identifies as "obscurity" operates on the "signifying" value of the text – that is, on assertions that can be understood in different ways. These assertions move within a Cartesian plane determined by the logic of propositions and the metaphorical and literal status of concrete language. Depending on the complexity infused into the text, different functions emerge. Commenting on Fortini's passage, Guido Mazzoni specifies that:

Naturalmente l'oscurità e la difficoltà non sono stati di cose che si escludono a vicenda, ma grandezze relative, legate al grado di competenza del lettore e comunicanti fra loro, come gli estremi di una scala graduata. Se è vero che entrambe sono sempre esistite [...], è altrettanto vero che la poesia moderna ha cambiato la loro natura e la loro incidenza, facendo aumentare la quantità delle allusioni private e scatenando la ricerca di immagini insolite.

⁷ Fortini, Franco, *Oscurità e difficoltà*, in "L'asino d'oro", Vol. II, No. 3, (1991), 87.

And in the following pages:

Benché l'oscurità e la difficoltà non si escludano a vicenda, ogni testo ha una dominante: esistono poesie prevalentemente oscure, poesie prevalentemente difficili e poesie che sfuggono a questa opposizione. Uno dei segni che contraddistinguono le prime è l'arbitrio con cui vengono usate le metafore. [...] La difficoltà, al contrario, non distrugge del tutto i nessi logici del discorso comune e lascia alla parafrasi il compito di restaurarli. Se è vero che queste due forme di incomunicabilità sono sempre esistite, è altrettanto vero che la lirica moderna le ha trasfigurate. Prima del romanticismo orfico, del simbolismo e delle avanguardie storiche, ciò che Fortini chiama oscurità era un'anomalia rara; adesso fa parte dell'orizzonte d'attesa con cui ci avviciniamo ai libri di poesie. Allo stesso modo la difficoltà d'origine privata, insolita nella poesia premoderna, è ormai la norma della lirica postromantica. Considerati insieme, questi due fenomeni significano una cosa sola: il trionfo dello straniamento soggettivo sulla mimesi, della dizione personale sulla parola pubblica, del talento individuale sulla tradizione⁸.

The dichotomy between difficulty and obscurity is overcome according to Mazzoni, or rather, it is left to the agency of the dominant in the text. What deserves attention, however, are the traits of obscurity he identifies: the intensive presence of metaphors, a defamiliarizing impulse, and the heightened subjectivism born of private experiences – all consequences of specific stylistic choices that can be found in both modernist prose and poetry. I will call this technique compression, as it signifies a rarefaction, a vertical compression of literary, cultural, historical, and philosophical references beneath the textual surface. It operates as a subtraction, fragmenting words and increasing the aesthetic deviation within the

⁸ Mazzoni, Guido, *Sulla poesia moderna* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2005), 169, 171.

works. Consequently, complexity grows in proportion to the literary allusions that conceal profound archaeologies. This phenomenon arises when a sentence is distorted, overloaded with tropes – essentially, when literary language becomes figurative. Compression is the result of a vertiginous increase in what Francesco Orlando has termed the "rate of figurality," (*tasso di figuratività*) that is, the relative density of figures understood as "alterations in the relationship of transparency between signifier and signified." It is here that the aesthetic gap I mentioned earlier comes into play – a splitting up "relative to a zero degree of expression."⁹ This fracture allows for a multiplicity of possible meanings, as the key to decoding has now been lost. One is reminded of the scene in Goethe's *Faust*, "A Great Hall," where the disconnect between the zero degree of expression and the total decision to interpret signs – no longer constituting a living connection to the past – is evident. The Herald, through his explanatory notes, takes care of identifying and describing the various figures of the allegorical masquerade entering the hall. Everything seems to proceed as it should, but suddenly the figurative meanings overlap without any control.

I'd like, as herald, to explain
What the devil these things mean,
But how explain the meaning of
Something you've no inkling of?
All of you must help me out! (vv. 5677-5680)¹⁰

⁹ Orlando himself acknowledges a certain ambiguity in the explanation of this "zero degree," which, however, still needs to be postulated. Orlando, Francesco, *Per una teoria freudiana della letteratura* (Torino: Einaudi, 1973), 59.

¹⁰ Goethe, Johann Wolfgang Von, *Faust. A Tragedy*, translated by Martin Greenberg (New Heaven and London: Yale University Press, 2014), 202.

The challenge of Boy Charioteer arises, pressing the Herald to proceed further in explaining the masks.

Herald, execute your function,
Come, before we leave, describe us
To the revelers, and name us.
As we are an allegory,
Our meaning's proclaimed plainly. (vv. 5700-5704)¹¹

“As we are an allegory. Our meaning's proclaimed plainly.” Yet, this is not the case: Franco Moretti dedicates a chapter of his book *Opere mondo* to the explanation of this passage, in which he identifies this scene as an episode that initially presents itself as the most programmatically allegorical moment of *Faust*, beginning in a complete climate of confidence in the Herald's interpretive abilities, but ending in utter perplexity. Although the Herald, pressured by the charioteer (Don't stop there, keep on, describe him / More exactly, top to bottom vv.), ventures some explanations, those signs have now turned into hieroglyphs that construct an enigmatic world, whose form is so varied that it allows for any interpretation.

Your understanding's good, I see, of masks.
But when it comes to what's beneath, one asks
A keener penetration than a herald's (vv. 5782-5784)¹²

Here lies the compression of meanings embedded beneath the masks
– an archaeology impenetrable to the ordinary gaze accustomed to the

¹¹ Ivi., 203.

¹² Ivi., 205.

univocality of the allegorical sign. "A great hall" is emblematic of what occurs in a text and within the reader when the rate of figurality increases hyperbolically, producing what Walter Benjamin called the "antinomies of the allegorical"¹³. For Moretti, as well as for Mazzoni, this insistence on the violation of norms, on the differential trait of literary expression compared to the common experience of the world, coincides with modern subjectivity. Gradually, the various analytical threads are progressing toward a unified direction.

Fragmentation, difference, deviation, alteration – the terms change, but the stylistic gesture remains the same as the one previously highlighted by Eliot when he spoke about the necessity to dislocate language. The presence of a dominant element, in this case the obscure one, does not lie in the use of linguistic elements different from those of ordinary communication, rather in their different formal organization – in what Federico Bertoni identifies as a "functional predominance"¹⁴ of certain aspects at the expense of others, within a space of tension between the stylistic energy of the text and what, in common language, would merely be inert material. Bertoni lucidly translates the divergence highlighted by Orlando and revisits Mazzoni's dichotomy, extending the concept of the dominant.

For now, the dehumanizing force of obscurity has been exorcised, and the theoretical lines of this work have been drawn. Although the focus of this first part is shifted towards poetry, it is with

¹³ Benjamin, Walter, *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels, translated as Origini del dramma barocco tedesco*, 1928 (Torino: Einaudi, 1971), 184.

¹⁴ Bertoni, Federico, *Letteratura. Teorie, Metodi, strumenti* (Roma: Carocci, 2018), 98-100.

the novel form that this study must ultimately engage. Starting from poetic components, however, allows us to illuminate dynamics akin to modernist prose¹⁵, particularly those of the first literary object I will analyze. *Finnegans Wake* (1939), Joyce's final novel, is the result of a wild manipulation of the text, aimed at coming as close as possible to the process of estrangement¹⁶. In the *Wake*, as I will explain in detail in the next chapter, everything is fragmented, and thus everything can be permuted. The dimension in which it unfolds is a space where temporality is nullified: past, present, and future coexist in a narrative of recurrences, events that repeat and have already happened. In this primordial and chaotic flow, the difficulty of the novel is constructed along two axes: on the vertical axis, the multiplicity of words, images, and references accumulates, thereby generating the phenomenon of compression; while the horizontal axis encompasses the events of the plot, however frayed and atomized they may be, forming a mosaic that resists an overarching vision.

¹⁵ Rabatè identifies in high modernism a moment of interpenetration between prose and poetry, particularly in the works of Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, and Marcel Proust. Their writing disregards the distinction between genres.

¹⁶ The words from Adorno's essay on lyric poetry inevitably come to mind: "For the substantive content [Gehalt] of a poem is not merely an expression of individual impulses and experiences. Those become artistic only when they come to participate in something universal by virtue of the specificity they acquire in being given aesthetic form, [...] by making manifest something not distorted, not grasped, not yet subsumed. [...] This is why the lyric reveals itself to be most deeply grounded in society when it does not repeat what society already knows, when it communicates nothing [familiar], when, instead, the subject whose expression is successful reaches an accord with language itself, with that which language would like to reach from out of itself." The linguistic fabric of *Finnegans Wake* appears deformed precisely to accommodate ever-new semantic possibilities, that is, to increase the tension between literal meaning and the figurative gradient. It is a novel that explores the potential of language to its furthest extremes, to the point of becoming repulsive and severing ties with its audience. Yet, as Adorno's passage suggests, language must transcend the concepts, beliefs, and perspectives that regularly circulate among individuals. In this work, however, the linguistic aspect of *Finnegans Wake* will not take center stage, aiming instead to highlight the deep structure of the novel and examine how the individual parts interact within the whole. Adorno, *Theodor W.*, "On Lyric Poetry and Society." In *Notes to Literature*, vol. 1. Translated by S. Weber Nicholsen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 37–54.

Although the question of "how much" plot can be traced along the horizontal axis remains a subject of debate among critics, it is still possible to outline a residual story. *Finnegans Wake* is often seen as the negative of *Ulysses*; while the latter recounts a single day in the life of Leopold Bloom, Joyce's final work describes the night of H.C. Earwicker, who, immersed in sleep, conjures the flow of universal history. The hero of this story is a tavern keeper from Chapelizod, a village bordering Dublin's Phoenix Park. He lives with his wife A.L.P. (Anna Livia Plurabelle), their twin sons (Shem and Shaun), and a daughter (Issy). Like every night, he goes to bed with his wife, has a sexual encounter with her, sleeps and dreams, is awakened by one of the children's cries, and falls back asleep. As essential as this plot may seem, the moment the reader approaches the text, it vanishes: this skeletal framework is overlaid with a dense interplay of narrative analysis and prolepses that opacify its comprehension. It will soon be revealed, however, that HCE is far from being a virtuous and respectable man. Stories of questionable morality linger around him, and his character is haunted by an incident in the park where he allegedly exposed his genitals in public to two girls and three soldiers¹⁷. Rumors of every kind circulate about this event, and these gossip-laden accusations will eventually become the subject of a trial. Moreover, the story is told of a Cad with a pipe in the park who asks him for the time, throwing him into extreme embarrassment – hence the suspicion that he may indeed have committed something

¹⁷ The combination of one, two, and three recurs obsessively throughout the novel.

disgraceful in the vicinity¹⁸. Thus begin the investigations concerning the crime in the park, featuring various interrogations, each more confusing than the last, from which no definitive conclusion can be drawn, except that something unsettling has indeed occurred. There is also the promise of a letter whose reading might shed light on these perplexing scenarios. Central to the narrative¹⁹ and a metaphor for the *Wake* in its entirety, the letter's acquisition is deferred until the very end of the novel due to its unreadability: all attempts to penetrate the textual surface remain "external," never reaching its actual content.

The choice of *Finnegans Wake*, however, was not dictated solely by its obscure nature. Its length, prolixity, density of notions and extratextual references, and obsessive richness of detail operate within a polychronic narrative governed by precise geometries. All these characteristics make it a remarkable example of a maximalist phenomenon²⁰. From this arises a comparative dialogue with the second novel that will support the other half of this thesis: *Infinite Jest* (1996) by David Foster Wallace. It is one of those works whose exegesis inevitably diminishes the sense of grandeur of the plot. Nevertheless, the storyline can be traced back to three major narrative

¹⁸ The episode recalls the one in which Bloom, in the thirteenth chapter of *Ulysses*, is subjected to a similar request by a girl and discovers that his watch has stopped, with its hands frozen at the exact moment when he was betrayed by his wife.

¹⁹ Later, in the chapter on *Infinite Jest*, I will use the term "total-object" to refer to those particular narrative objects upon which the architecture of such expansive novels rests.

²⁰ Although the term "maximalism" defines novels belonging to the postmodern period, *Finnegans Wake* shares many traits outlined by Stefano Ercolino in the archetypal description of this genre. Ercolino, Stefano, *The Maximalist Novel. From Thomas Pynchon's 'Gravity's Rainbow' to Bolaño's 2666* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014).

nuclei. The first focuses on a group of Quebecois terrorists called *Les Assassins des Fauteuils Rollents* (the “wheelchair assassins,” or A.F.R.) attempting to recover the “Master Copy” of the film “*Infinite Jest*”, whose viewing is said to render the spectator catatonic, ultimately leading to a vegetative state. The movie was created by the now-deceased Jim Incandenza, and his allegedly stars Joelle Van Dyne, the former girlfriend of Incandenza’s eldest son Orin. While A.F.R. attempt to kidnap Orin and locate the mysterious copy of “*Infinite Jest*,” Wallace introduces two additional storylines that unfold in two distinct settings – the Enfield Tennis Academy (E.T.A.) and Ennet House. At E.T.A., a boarding-school outside of Boston started by Incandenza and his wife Avril, middle-son Hal and a wide array of teenagers undergo a life of repetition, in an oscillation between the performance anxiety of needing to excel to gain access to “the Show” and the consequent anesthetic numbness provided by the salvific refuge of addictions. In a completely specular manner, across the street at the Ennet House, Van Dyne, former criminal Don Gately, and an even wider array of recovering addicts undergo the similarly monotonous routines that unfolds through group meetings coupled with strict rules of coexistence²¹. These three trajectories interact through references, affinities, and *leitmotifs*, but they never truly intersect. Everything unfolds outside the page, in the white space between fragments, giving life to the “composite omniscience”

²¹ No alcohol or drugs, of course, attending twelve meetings every weekend, performing community service to ensure one's continued stay in the house.

identified by Ercolino. *Infinite Jest* presents a significant challenge as it demands effort – a genuine commitment – from the reader: amidst the sea of details proliferating across its pages, a melancholic plot emerges; it seems to advance, but in reality, it conceals a false movement. Wallace's novel's viscosity is exacerbated by a substantial apparatus of notes that unfolds at the book's end, further multiplying the information to sift through. Clearly, prolixity and excess fully materialize within the maximalist form, but could there perhaps be something more to deduce from this behavior of the novel's structure? *Infinite Jest* does not engage in any form of compression; it is undoubtedly prolix, but its ambition to occupy as much textual space as possible evades any tendency to bury allegorical or symbolic artifacts beneath its expansive surface, waiting to be unearthed by the attentive and meticulous reader²². Thus, compression on one side and extension, dilation on the other. These are fundamentally different ways of conceiving complexity, which inevitably evolve with the changes in history and circumstances.

Yet, before delving into the heart of the research, there remains a misunderstanding that must be addressed: the issue of comparing texts so distant in time from one another, belonging to incredibly different conditions: Joyce's final novel belongs to a transitional

²² Among the strategies of control, Ercolino identifies the presence of semantic devices capable of organizing, regulating, and giving meaning to the vast material that constitutes the plot. He calls them “intertextual forms,” which establish themselves as “structural practice consisting in the use of rhetorical strategies, or of thematic sparks, taken from other literary texts”. These instances emerge on the surface, extensively reinforced by explicit references that seamlessly integrate into the narrative fabric. Certainly, as Ercolino emphasizes, they are substantial, but their transparency does not demand deep investigation from the reader approaching the novel. Rather, they frame a situation, an atmosphere, the conceptual ether in which the characters move in *Infinite Jest*, but they do not function as strong coordinate systems capable of organizing information. Ercolino, *The Maximalist Novel*, 93-96.

period between late-modernism and postmodernism²³, and *Infinite Jest* is a phenomenon that also straddles two cultural landscapes²⁴. However, this issue dissolves into the vast horizon of epic and novel. The structure of these novels systematically arises from the contamination between *epos* and novel, representing an exchange of codes, themes, formal choices, and totalizing ambitions. It is a long duration topic that traverses different historical thresholds, whose dichotomous status has been transcended by Massimo Fusillo's essay *Fra epica e romanzo*. Fusillo explains that the polarizing discourse surrounding the two genres is transcended when they are conceived as bundles of transcultural constants that, from era to era and work to work, can become more or less active or even transform entirely²⁵. What connects these novels is the intermittent and complementary interplay of interferences, interweavings, and crossovers between epic and novel. But there is also something more.

The texts I have chosen to engage with are “open systems that require the input of energy and information from the reader to be fully realized as works of art”²⁶. They correspond to what Umberto Eco

²³ Ihab Hassan, in his manifesto essay *POSTmodernISM*, grasped the prophetic and pioneering nature of *Finnegans Wake*. He acknowledges in Joyce's novel a turn on “a use of language that wavers between analysis and poesis, logic and myth. All the elements of postmodern literature crowd the “novel”: dream, parody, play, pun, fragment, fable, reflexiveness, kitsch, the gnosis of some ironic Logos on the edge of pure silence or pure noise.” Hassan, Ihab, *The Postmodern Turn. Essays in Postmodern Theory and Culture* (Chelsea: Ohio State University Press, 1987), 25-46.

²⁴ Wallace meticulously emphasized his distance from postmodern authors, considering himself part of a new generation of writers. Donnarumma highlights his ambiguous position, situated between the end of the postmodern experience and the onset of hypermodernity. McCaffery, Larry, *An Interview with David Foster Wallace*, in «Review of Contemporary Fiction», XIII, 1993, n. 2, pp. 127-150. Donnarumma, Raffaele, *Ipermodernità, dove va la narrativa contemporanea* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2014) 109.

²⁵ Fusillo, Massimo, *Fra epica e romanzo*, in Franco Moretti (edited by) *Il romanzo. Le forme* Vol. 2 (Torino: Einaudi, 2002), 5-34.

²⁶ Conte, Joseph M., *Design and Debris. A Chaotics of Postmodern American Fiction* (Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 2002), 31.

defines as *opera aperta*, whose “tendency toward disorder characteristic of the poetics of openness, must be understood as a tendency toward *controlled* disorder, toward a circumscribed *potential*, toward a freedom that is constantly curtailed by the *germ of formativity* present in any form that wants to remain open to the free choice of the addressee.”²⁷ The order underpinning *Finnegans Wake* and *Infinite Jest* – along with many other maximalist phenomena – is a function that synthesizes Eco's concept of the *opera aperta*: the function of the *chaosmos*²⁸. Fractures and intensities accompany the status of the novel form over time, and throughout this work, there will be repeated autoptic examinations of the parts that constitute it. However, what endures, what is perceived as significant, is the governing principle of the *chaosmos*, which never becomes a technique but rather a structure – a deep or latent organizing principle that governs the surface elements of the text and regulates its functioning through formal devices; and it is precisely toward the latter that my study is directed, attempting to peer into the literary workshop of the authors, observing how the construction of complexity takes place. In this sense, the discontinuities generated by

²⁷ Eco, Umberto, *Open Work*, translated by Anna Cancogni (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 64-65.

²⁸ The term "function" is central in *The Maximalist Novel* by Ercolino, where it is used to explain how the narrative techniques analyzed resonate with one another, creating a coherent system of seemingly disordered elements. This term is also significantly present in Chiara Lombardi's essay *Joyce e l'archetipo del chaosmos nella narrativa contemporanea*, which delves into the relationship between chaos and cosmos. Lombardi conducts a detailed etymological and semantic exploration of these notions, highlighting how they overlap in the concept of *chaosmos* – a dynamic balance between disorder and order. However, it is only in the conclusion that she hints at a possible comparison between the reading experience of Joyce's novels and that of postmodern maximalist novels. Ercolino, *The Maximalist Novel*, 114. Lombardi, Chiara, *Joyce e l'archetipo del chaosmos nella narrativa contemporanea in Massimiliano Tortora and Annalisa Volpone (edited by) La funzione Joyce nel romanzo occidentale* (Milano: Ledizioni, 2022), 15-55.

the temporal gap are symptomatic, revealing persistences and absences that deserve to be discussed, opening the path towards the architectural construction of the labyrinth.

First chapter

1.1) Mutations and Intensities

Studying his geography book, Stephen Dedalus reflects on its descriptions and seems unable to visualize the places illustrated or trace borders between countries. As he tries to connect them to an ever-expanding universe, his topographical understanding of the world leads him to realize how humanity can be classified according to its categories. He remarks this through a series a logical passage: “They were all in different countries and the countries were in continents and the continents were in the world and the worlds was in the universe” (P 15)²⁹. The consequence of this awareness is his imagined schema:

Stephen Dedalus
Class of Elements
Clongovwes Wood College
Sallins
County Kildare
Ireland
Europe
The World
The Universe (P 12)

²⁹ From this point onward, quotations from Joyce's books will be indicated using the initials of his works: (P) for *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, (U) for *Ulysses*, and (FW) for *Finnegans Wake*. Joyce, James, *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), Joyce, James, *Ulysses* (London: Penguin Classic, 2000). Joyce, J. *Finnegans Wake* (London: Penguin Books Ltd); translated by Enrico Terrinoni, Fabio Pedone and Luigi Schenoni, *Finnegans Wake* (Milano: Mondadori, 2017).

It is a tentative picture of a miniaturized form of encyclopedism, because all the world's knowledge is unified in a fixed order. Nevertheless, in the following page Stephen rereads his list and notices the limits of his totalizing attempt; he feels the urge to understand the possible extension of the universe, while evaluating its supposed confines, he imagines that a thin line defines its borders:

Then he read the flyleaf from the bottom to the top till he came to his own name. that was he: and he read down the page again. What was after the universe? Nothing. But was there anything round the universe to show where it stopped before the nothing place began? It could not be a wall but there could be a thin thin line there all round everything. (P 12)

The first reading of schoolboy Stephen proceeds from macrocosm to microcosm, from the bottom of the list to the top; by contrast, in his second approach, he reverses the direction, moving from his name to the universe. This change of paradigm in the reading process seems to encourage a different perspective of written text, as if hierarchical order could be reshaped and subverted. Since the *Portrait*, Joyce explores new modalities to alter the principle of cause and effect among the components of the novel. As exemplified by Stephen's chain of being, Joyce firstly confuses top and bottom, secondly "suggest[s] that the hierarchy itself is an arbitrary structure, deficient in its narrowing of reality, its lack of horizontal breadth, its failure to account for the complete labyrinths of reality"³⁰. On the whole, this

³⁰ Rice, Thomas Jackson, *The complexity of "Finnegans Wake"*, *Joyce Studies Annual*, Summer 1995, Vol. 6 (Summer 1995), 79-98.

passage can be read also as a symptom of the new structural changes brought by the rise of modernism.

In the second half of the XIX century, the paradigm of the novel emerged completely subverted by the changes of the literary forms; passing through a series of historical thresholds³¹, modernism reconfigures the map of the components defining the novel: the notions of narrator, plot, and character come out completely transformed. Yet, before exploring the changes that appeared in the field of the novel after the middle of XIX century, it is necessary to make some theoretical clarifications regarding the term “modernism”. Admitting the slippery nature of the term means to recognize the uneven archipelago of literary works published in the first four decades of the twentieth century. Due to the semantic inability of the term to synthetically illustrate the literary diversity, Peter Nicholls refuses the “monolithic ideology” surrounding the formation of this category; rather, he supports the pluralistic approach of “modernisms” because it encapsulates a better understanding of a highly complex set of cultural developments at the beginning of the twentieth century.³² Following Nicholls’ multifarious reading of the literary label, Douglas Mao and Rebecca Walkowitz propose new developments in modernist studies, expanding the field of research

³¹ Mazzoni, Guido, *Teoria del romanzo* (Bologna: il Mulino, 2011), 307. Regarding the partition of the historical phases of Modernism, Mazzoni elaborates a tripartite scheme. Between 1850 and 1890 there is the decline of the realist model, engendering the first fractures. Then, around 1910, starts the age of Modernism, which is characterized by a different perception about human psychology and a new idea of art. In conclusion, the last historical phase, from 1910 to 1940, changes completely the structure of the novel.

³² Nicholls, Peter, *Modernisms. A Literary Guide* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

beyond the traditionally privileged space of the West³³ and repositioning the temporal extremities³⁴. Taking in consideration the nagging issues adorning the categorization of this heterogeneous period, in this thesis the term modernism refers to the punctiform universe of literary works appeared in the first four decades of the twentieth century, which after the fragmentation of the nineteenth-century paradigm, share escape trajectories. Once defined the theoretical guideline, it is possible to proceed to examine the experimental revolutions characterizing modernism.

Firstly, in the realist model the narrator organizes, interprets, and controls the flux of information revolving around central characters. It has the omniscient objectivity to interpret the sequence of events, while shaping an authentic and autonomous world. However, between the second half of XIX and the first half of XX century, the narrating voice is under criticism: it recedes when the new literary *doxa* of “subjective realism”³⁵ declares the sacrifice of a panoramic gaze leading to a higher transcendence, in favor of a restricted point of view. Therefore, in modernism, the narrator is commonly stripped of its omniscience, becoming weakened and conforming to narrowness and finitude of subjective points of view.

³³ The geographical perimeter of modernist analysis increases. It includes spaces outside the western borderlands, such as Asia, Africa, and eastern regions, which express different modernist aesthetic.

³⁴ Canonical models focus on a narrower span of time of modernism, while Mao and Walkowitz extend its temporal duration, thus relocating it within a temporal frame that starts in 1850 and ends in 1950. Mao, Douglas and Walkowitz L. Rebecca, *The New Modernist Studies*, PMLA, 123 no. 3 (May 2008): 737-748.

³⁵ Mazzoni retrieves this term from Georges Blin, who published an article in 1954 on *Stendhal et les problèmes du roman*. According to Blin, Stendhal brings the narrator’s perspective closer to our daily conduct, thus creating a fragmented point of view, intersected by lines of force, distorted by interest and passions, centered on our ego. Mazzoni, *Teoria del romanzo*, 313.

Secondly, the cornerstones of the nineteenth-century plot mutate, starting to incorporate a massive quantity of irrelevant details. Thomas G. Pavel claims that from Richardson to naturalist authors, novelists had always used superfluous details to affect the reader's mind through pivotal events and their corresponded meanings, thus helping the individual to comprehend the atmosphere, the environment, the characters, and the moral thesis supported by the book³⁶. Conversely, during modernism, novels emphasize the extraordinary proliferation of independent dialogues from the development of characters and plot, which implies that the accumulation of sentences in a list deprived of causal and final nexuses, along with an anarchic mixture of narrative fragments, destroy any hierarchy of sense. Given these premises, the main centripetal action constituting the narrative flow is continuously interrupted by small centrifugal movements, namely secondary events packed with perceptions and feelings having no relationship with the primary episode. Moreover, the causal connection between the parts of the novel and their inner organization is compromised. Thus, novels start to implement vast disconnected areas occupied by a plethora of casual details hindering or ignoring the development of the story, while the plot starts to break up into little pieces.

Thirdly, in the realist novel, heroes still preserve a *charakter*, which etymologically refers to a mark or a stamp defining a whole of programmatic psychological factors that establish the individual's

³⁶ Pavel, Thomas, *Le vite del romanzo. Una storia* (Milano: Mimesis edizioni, 2015), 379.

temperament. Hence, there is a principle of predictability pulling the strings of the inner life of characters and advocating a hierarchy between the psychic unit and the minor passions³⁷. Nevertheless, gradually, towards the end of the nineteenth century, the image of the “enigmatic psyches”³⁸ becomes atomized to the extent that authors acknowledge the complexity of portraying plausible images of characters’ inner landscape; from this difficulty stems the novel’s dilation of analytic areas delving into individuals’ mind, attempting to unfold the hidden psychological wrinkles and connect them logically.

These formal strategies mirror the changes of the surrounding world: there is the awareness that life and world are wide, fringed, complex, and transcend isolated individuals and their illusion to be in the foreground. Lurking behind the rift of nineteenth-century novel, a new perception of life plunges its roots in the cultural fabric. In her essay *Modern Fiction*, Virginia Woolf intercepts this shift in the experience of daily life:

Examine for a moment an ordinary mind on an ordinary day. The mind receives a myriad impressions - trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel. [...] Life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged; life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end. Is it not the task of the novelist to convey this varying, this unknown and uncircumscribed spirit, whatever aberration or complexity it may display, with as little mixture of the alien and external as possible? We are not pleading merely for courage and sincerity;

³⁷ Mazzoni, *Teoria del romanzo*, 267.

³⁸ Pavel, *Le vite del romanzo*.

we are suggesting that the proper stuff of fiction is a little other than custom would have us believe it.³⁹

Thus, to summarize: modernism tears apart the conventional structure of the realist novel, intended as a plausible story suffering from a compulsion to repeat the same widespread and rigid writing styles, even if it does not negate its mimetic project. Gregory Castle claims that “to de-realize realism is to make it more real as a style, an anti-mimetic style that resists vulgar and conventional “novelistic custom.””⁴⁰ Insisting on an element of continuity, Guido Mazzoni explains that for many modernist authors the task of literature still aspires to accurately narrate the ordinary existence of individuals. As exemplified by the passage above, writers attempt to integrate a new mental attitude, where a dusting of minute impressions, unconscious and preconscious⁴¹ cross the individual’s mind. Therefore, “experimental modernists, who explore the creative and critical potential of anti-mimetic literature, do not abandon realism so much as transform the field of what is representable in a realist style [...]. The point is not to achieve resemblance but rather to register in language and literary form the lived experience of the present in a flash of being”⁴². By contrast, the paradigmatic fracture notches the order of novel’s subject, altering the parameters which divide what is

³⁹ Woolf, Virginia, *Collected Essays*, (London: The Hogarth Press Ltd, 1966), 103-110.

⁴⁰ Castle, Gregory, *A History of the Modernist Novel* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 2.

⁴¹ Moretti, Franco, *Opere Mondo. Saggio sulla forma epica dal Faust a Cent'anni di solitudine* (Torino: Einaudi, 1994), 154.

⁴² Castle, *A History of the Modernist Novel*, 7.

deemed substantially relevant from what is not, or better, what is essential from what is contingent.

Having considered the subversive effects irradiated by the avantgarde movement of the first decades of twentieth century, let us return for a moment to Stephen's encyclopedic list. The capsizing of the conventional reading process from top to bottom reveals a new glimpse into an unpredictable element of fiction. Thomas Rice discusses the distinction between modern and premodern literature according to their degree of predictability⁴³: he claims that "classical models, representing relatively simple systems governed by the natural laws, the "rules" or "conventions" of their genre", accustom their readership with a "generally high degree of predictability"⁴⁴; instead, modern and postmodern literature disregard the laws of the genre, denying a proper working of the principle of cause and effect. Rice's concept of predictability seems to coincide with what Umberto Eco in *Le poetiche di Joyce* (1962) calls an open causal chain: he states that in the traditional novel, there are narrative relationships where event A must be seen unequivocally as the cause of a series of events B, C, D. An example will make this clearer. In Alessandro

⁴³ Nevertheless, it is possible to argue that even before modernism literature had complex works. Through this definition Rice does not want to obscure the literary importance of premodern authors who defy or manipulate the conventions of their forms, such as Shakespeare, Sterne, Emily Brontë. His distinction involves the relatively conventional models of earlier authors, who admit few degrees of freedom into the systems of their works, and the complex model of modernist works, which unfold into a wide range of freedom of choices. Rice is not alone in marking modernism as a period where complexity systematically leaks into literary production: Leonard Diepeveen argues that difficulty and impenetrability of texts begin to become distinctive traits in works appearing in the first four decades of the twentieth century. This does not mean that it was absent before, but rather that it starts to become a defining feature for modernist authors. Rice, Thomas Jackson, *The Complexity of "Finnegans Wake"*, 79-98. Diepeveen, Leonard, *The Difficulties of Modernisms*.

⁴⁴ Rice, *The Complexity of "Finnegans Wake"*, 90.

Manzoni's *I promessi sposi* (1827), Don Rodrigo's greed (A) generates a series of events such as the couple's flight (B), Lucia's abduction (C), and Renzo's exile (D), without attributing the cause of the popular uprising involving Renzo to the initial greed.⁴⁵

Thus, violating nineteenth-century novel's norms, modernist works demand from the reader a simultaneous focus both on diachronic and synchronic dimension, negating the simple satisfaction of mastering its complications. Superimposing Rice's category of premodern literature to the nineteenth-century novel illuminates other grey areas of continuity and fracture between realism and modernism. Moreover, he suggests that Joyce's novels share that destabilizing modernist features, which supplant the rules of the genre in favor of a new structure: the network.

Joyce uses every available strategy to frustrate the reader's expectation for a "narrative happiness"⁴⁶, namely the absence of digressions and meditations, which fosters authorial intrusion with the purpose of leading the storyline towards its dissolution.

⁴⁵ Eco, Umberto, *Le poetiche di Joyce*, (Milano: Bompiani, 1962).

⁴⁶ Rizzante, Massimo, *Non siamo gli ultimi. La letteratura tra fine dell'opera e rigenerazione umana* (Milano: Effigie edizioni, 2009), 47.

In *Ulysses* (1922) he already partially declined the idea of a “go-ahead plot”⁴⁷, but in *Finnegans Wake* he enhances this trait reaching the extreme limit of representation⁴⁸; accentuating the labyrinthine webs of lateral associations for the sake of multiple interaction, the novel prohibits a clear delineation of causality integral to the plot, while its counter-teleological distortion of time and space jeopardizes the notion of *charakter*. A further instance of this radical approach is Joyce’s rebellion against the notion of “type”, which describe characters with stories and developments crystallized into fixed and programmatic units⁴⁹; he is more inclined towards “a linguistic excess working against nominal containment”⁵⁰, whose byproducts are characters dissolving in constantly mutating consciousness. Lastly, the notion of time is disarticulated in an infinite “noughttime” (FW 349.06), which pulverizes the concept of space, *milieu*, and environment⁵¹ in a story that occurs “nowhere and everywhere.”⁵²

⁴⁷ In a letter to Harriet Shaw Weaver dated 24 November 1926, Joyce writes: “One great part of every human existence is passed in a state which cannot be rendered sensible by the use of a wideawake language, cut-and-dry grammar and go-ahead plot”. *Ulysses* partially fulfills this attempt: the urban pilgrims of Leopold and Stephen are repeatedly interrupted by thoughts, recollections, worries, hopes, desires, crowding their minds and overflowing in a disordered stream. Thus, the timeline of events gathers temporal wanderings about dreams, imagined future, and memories.

⁴⁸ Despite the opaqueness and restrictedness of the term “representation”, here it is referred to the serious *mimesis* of ordinary life, which is theorized by Erich Auerbach during his explanation of a new modern way to narrate stories in the nineteenth-century. It is a form of serious realism aiming to represent the development of an individual included in a concrete and permanent overall reality, which is characterized by political, economic, and social spheres. Auerbach’s paradigm extends the scope of what can be represented: broader and socially lower classes become subjects of problematic and existential depiction. Mazzoni, *Teoria del romanzo*, 237.

⁴⁹ In the first half of the eighteenth century, realist novel endorses a set of predicable behaviors or psychological profiles to organize its characters. For example, the inner life of “the noble”, “the official”, “the hedonist”, “the socialite”, or “the adulterer”. Ivi., 267.

⁵⁰ Kimberly J. Devlin, *Wandering and Returns in Finnegans Wake: An Integrative Approach to Joyce’s Fiction* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 68.

⁵¹ The nineteenth-century authors discover the agency of environment: the realist novel exhibits the connection between the individual and the world to which belongs, whereas this welding conceals the range of effects determined by external circumstances. Mazzoni, *Teoria del romanzo*, 269.

⁵² Rice, *The Complexity of “Finnegans Wake”*, 95.

Therefore, employing Rice's concept of predictability and unpredictability elucidates the critiques addressed towards a broad portion of works emerged in the first half of twentieth century. Since the public's reception of modernist novels highlighted this rampant aesthetic of difficulty, the canonical texts of high modernism were labeled as complex, elitist, obscure⁵³. However, their gradient of resistance to a comfortable reading, partially relies on the density of unpredictability in relation to the reader's expectations based on the rules of the genre. To put it differently: modernist authors do not want to problematize the reading process, instead they strive to train the readership to a different perception of the world, devising through their texts a different idea of culture. As a consequence, promoting difficulty signifies the only possible path to hinder the lethal burden of habit⁵⁴. Seen from this lens, *Finnegans Wake* systematizes and radicalizes the modern formal innovations, leading to a densification of unpredictability; through its "proteiform graph" (FW 107.8) it alleges a "geodetic" architecture (FW 114.15), that "generates progressively higher degrees of complexity."⁵⁵

Before delving into the textual analysis and exploring the chaos-cosmos function, there is one last point that needs to be addressed: the historical background that enabled the paradigmatic shift of the novel and that allowed complexity to fluidly integrate in different spheres of knowledge. Clarifications on the method are a

⁵³ Diepeveen, *The Difficulties of Modernism*.

⁵⁴ Rabatè, *Una lingua straniata. Gli stili del modernismo*, 750-772.

⁵⁵ Rice, *The Complexity of "Finnegans Wake"*, 90.

necessary first: this approach does not want to eclipse the specific autonomy of literary genre, or, in this case, of singular works. Pavel elucidates that despite the connections between artistic genres and the contemporary socio-intellectual life, the firsts do not mirror in every single detail the world in which they born⁵⁶ and Mazzoni strengthens this perspective, assuming the existence of a divorce between symbolic metamorphosis and the history of politics and civilization. The latter can be sudden and traumatic, while the first is mostly inert and viscous, maintaining a partial autonomy from abrupt changes⁵⁷.

Even so, from my point of view, it is necessary to engage other fields of knowledge in dialogue because together they provide a clearer picture of the cultural revolution that is shaking Europe at the beginning of the twentieth century. In his historiographical development of complexity, Edgar Morin lingers over the crisis of the simplified knowledge, which assumes the form of two main scientific revolutions⁵⁸; I will touch upon only the first, since it has a higher temporal proximity to my discourse and opens new perspectives on the issue of the network structure characterizing the *Wake*.

The first pocket of disorder appears in thermodynamics in 1877, when Ludwig Boltzmann redefines heat as chaotic molecular agitation, a theory that will pervasively encircle the entire universe as Edwin Hubble demonstrates in 1930. The evidence of the continuous expansion of space reveals and corroborates a series of collateral

⁵⁶ Pavel, *Le vite del romanzo*, 40.

⁵⁷ Mazzoni, *Teoria del romanzo*, 308.

⁵⁸ Morin, Edgar, *La sfida della complessità* (Firenze: Le Lettere, 2017).

discoveries: the explosion of stars, the consuming black hole, and the collision of galaxies are examples of the enduring and initial role played by disorder in our universe. In the meantime, in 1900, Planck introduces the notion of quantum of energy in the microphysics debate, thus enlarging the basin of controversy surrounding the scientific research for the primary and indivisible element in the subsoil of matter. Therefore, thermodynamics, microphysics, and cosmological disorder compete and overlap with other emerging awarenesses: Einstein and Bergson reformulate the concepts of time and space, Marx and Freud pinpoint invisible forces influencing individual and collective life. Thus, this swirling cultural motion conveys the disruptive idea that arts in general, especially literature, need to follow analogous paths in order to describe the essential shape of reality, which is opaque, conflicting, often driven by centrifugal forces, often not reducible to simple and pure rationality⁵⁹. A shared refusal of the reassuring modelling looms beyond the macroscopic differences marked by each singular discipline and school of thought.

Whereas the “will of simplification” had driven classical science at the end of nineteenth century, spilling over other areas of culture and material life⁶⁰, the twentieth century is marked by a “complexification of what appeared to be simple.”⁶¹ This process is set in motion also by the unpredictable, uncontrollable, and apparently incomprehensible nature of public events, such as the first

⁵⁹ Manferlotti, Stefano, *James Joyce*, (Soveria Mannelli: Rubbettino Editore, 2012), 14.

⁶⁰ Ceruti, Mauro and Bellusci, Francesco, *Abitare la complessità. La sfida di un destino comune* (Milano and Udine: Mimesis Edizioni, 2020), 30.

⁶¹ Bachelard, Gaston, *Il nuovo spirito scientifico* (Milano and Udine: Mimesis Edizioni, 2018), 124-131.

world war, the subsequent rise of fascism, and colonial issues. It is therefore possible to imagine *Finnegans Wake* as one of the possible reactions to the uneven development of self, nation, and empire, or to put in Eco's word: Joyce's works have initiated a confrontation with a dissociated world that recognizes itself as such, but cannot find internal modes of organization⁶².

However, the reflected image of literature inverts and distorts reality: Joyce's novel is but one representative in a "parallel" network of highly individual works produced in the interwar period, books that record an increased awareness of the complexity of physical and social systems. The proposal made by Jed Esty in his *Unseasonable Youth* grafts in this trajectory because it weaves together the contemporary historical-cultural background and the literary reaction, which started to appear in the first decades of twentieth century. According to his analysis:

With the semicollapse of the universalist and evolutionist discourses of the Western Enlightenment, with the faltering of historical positivism, with increased political recognition of anticolonial struggle, with the obviously strained resources of European hegemony in the tropics, and with the rise of anthropological concepts of difference, it becomes difficult to imagine, at the turn of the twentieth century, a realism that could in any straightforward way conform to evolutionary or teleological models of world history. But it is not impossible to imagine a critical realism — call it modernism — that registers a heterochronic model of world-historical temporality, one that combines underdevelopment, uneven development, and hyperdevelopment across the global system.⁶³

⁶² Eco, *Le poetiche di Joyce*.

⁶³ Esty, Jed, *Unseasonable Youth. Modernism, Colonialism, and the Fiction of Development* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 37.

To conclude, it is possible to see modernism as the emblematic site for cultural resistance, due to its devotion to the renewal and transgression of formal conventions. I believe that *Finnegans'* structural direction sprouts from this cultural turmoil and reflects prismatically the conceptual ether both of savage experimentations and the ambitious attempt to project on its textual surface the ideological warfare ravaging in the world. Eliot's words on the "mythical method" implied in *Ulysses* coalesce around this theme: "[I]t is simply a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history."⁶⁴ I will return to this passage later in my work; for now, I am interested in Eliot's frame of reference. His essay is pervaded by a deep confidence about the potentiality of the mythical method, which assumes the same reach of Einstein's scientific discoveries, to the extent that, after Joyce, "others must pursue" the same paradigm. Eliot continues: "the novel is a form which no longer serve; it is because the novel, instead of being a form was simply the expression of an age which had not sufficiently lost all form to feel the need of something stricter." Indeed, it is a problem of form, or more precisely "unconscious dissatisfaction with the form" that afflicts him, Joyce, and other contemporaries. Eliot's sharp observation on the fallen possibilities of the novel betrays his cynicism, as the analysis of Franco Moretti acknowledges in *Segni e stili del moderno*, yet it is possible to enucleate the cultural landscape

⁶⁴ Eliot, T.S., *Ulysses, Order and Myth*, in "The Dial", 1923.

at the turn of nineteenth century. It is not the literary development's inner logic that withers the nature of the novel, rather the age that had seen this form born and thrive, now is in a critical phase. In the premodern age still towers a cohesive idea of order, which consequently provides a form to the literary phenomenon without resorting to other cultural products as regulation systems. The novel, then, is the manifestation of the established order. Consequently, the system that governs society itself provides the coordinates for organizing its form, which Moretti refers to as the "manifestation of an underlying form"⁶⁵; for this reason, Eliot calls it the "expression of the age".

Therefore, the decentralization of the European monolithic perception of culture feeds the centrifugal forces animating Joyce's last world-text, thus providing to the novel a specific functioning. The following sections reveal the mechanisms behind *Finnegans'* narrative economy, highlighting how this structure generates hierarchies, complexity, and violences.

⁶⁵ Moretti, Franco, *Segni e stili del moderno* (Roma: Del Vecchio Editore, 2020), 269.

1.2) Chaosmos of Alle

In the third chapter of *The Aesthetic of Chaosmos: the Middle Ages of James Joyce* (1982), Umberto Eco introduces Joyce's last novel in this way:

It may seem that *Ulysses* represents the most arduous attempt to give physiognomy to chaos, but *Finnegans Wake* defines itself as *Chaosmos* and *Microchasm* and constitutes the most terrifying document of formal instability and semantic ambiguity that we possess.⁶⁶

He associates the terms *Chaosmos* and *Microchasm* with an unstable and ambiguous reading experience that evokes terror due to the formless amalgam of references condensed in the language of the dreamer within the novel. For this reason, I believe this passage is a good starting point for examining the “cultural” rationale of the *Wake*, which is the compulsive permutation of the world of myths, traditions, ancient fragments, and the words with which individual has designed and made sense of his experiences, in order to disassemble, merge, and aggregate them to create a new original freedom, a new constellation free from traditional constraints. This suggests that *Finnegans Wake* rises above a magnetic field whose fluctuation band is defined by the intensity of two forces, which are channeled by Joyce in his “ultimate portmanteau word”: *chaosmos*. This unique compacted term appears in the following passage:

⁶⁶ Eco, Umberto, *The Aesthetic of Chaosmos: The Middle Ages of James Joyce* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), 61.

every person, place and thing in the chaosmos of Alle anyway connected with the gobblydumped turkery was moving and changing every part of the time: the travelling inkhorn (possibly pot), the hare and turtle pen and paper, the continually more and less intermisunderstanding minds of the anticollaborators, the as time went on as it will variously inflected, differently pronounced, otherwise spelled, changeably meaning vocable scriptsigns (FW 118.21).

Joyce made-system outlines a world permeated by a sense of shared destiny, which touches every single individual⁶⁷, encircled by an endlessly mutating and changing order. Everything flows in a primordial and disordered flux, everything is its opposite, everything can be connected to everything else; in this new order of reality no event is new, something similar has already happened, a recurrence, or a relation is always possible, everything is dismantled and therefore everything can be permuted. This, however, is only possible if the reader stops looking at the tip of the arrow of the timeline and instead adopts a circular view of it, which alternates recurring cycles (*ricorso*). Indeed, Joyce in this vision of history, is profoundly influenced by his careful reading of Giambattista Vico's *The New Science* (1725), which encourages him to seek to extract an order of the world not outside of events, but within them, in the midst of their unfolding in the progress of civilizations. Therefore, the cosmos fractures into the facets of a virtually unlimited number of possibilities, where everything allows for observing the universe from a different perspective and, at the same time, is a contraction of it.

⁶⁷ *Alle* is a German admittance meaning “everyone”.

In these terms, the *chaosmos* function⁶⁸ seems to have similar properties to the *edge of chaos*, namely a balance point where “the components of a system never quite lock into place, and yet never quite dissolve into turbulence, either. [...] The edge of chaos is the constantly shifting battle zone between stagnation and anarchy, the one place where a complex system can be spontaneous, adaptive, and alive.”⁶⁹ Undermined by instability, this totalizing architecture is the archetypal notion innervating the pages of *Finnegans Wake*. Despite the multilayered experimental dimension of Joyce’s last novel⁷⁰, this function establishes a dynamic movement of centrifugal and centripetal forces, organising the massive quantity of narrative and descriptive elements. Though one of the critiques that are often moved towards the experience of this book is that “it is all about complexity”, I would tentatively suggest that approaching the novel through this frame of reference can provide possible explanations for its enchanting difficulty, and shed light on the formal choices allowing Joyce to increase the resistance of his text to a clear overarching meaning. Therefore, to understand how the *chaosmos*

⁶⁸ Tortora, Massimiliano and Volpone, Annalisa, *La funzione Joyce nel romanzo occidentale* (Milano: Ledizioni, 2020), 15-54.

⁶⁹ Waldrop, M. Mitchell, *Complexity: The Emerging Science at the Edge of Order* (London: Penguin Books, 1994), 12.

⁷⁰ *Finnegans Wake* is surrounded by arguments about its “novelistic fallacy” since it rejects the realist epistemology of the traditional novel dominating the prose fiction since the eighteenth century. Ian Watt in *The Rise of the Novel* (1967) locates the philosophical roots of the novel in the subjectivism of the eighteenth-century thought, which means that the individual can learn the truth and the knowledge of the surrounding world through his or her senses. The outcome of this belief is the novelistic plot where the main character’s experience is the testing ground of reality and thereby justifies the exploration of everyday life in literature. Despite *Finnegans Wake* violates all the basic principles of the genre, we can still definite it as a novel owing to its ambitious attempt to accurately applicate the “imitative form” fulfilling the mimetic anarchy of peculiarity. This idea stems from the first chapter of *Teoria del romanzo*, where Mazzoni remarks the wide spectrum of possibilities of the novel to narrate any story in any way.

structure works in *Finnegans Wake*, I must define the basic principles of its narrative engine: the centrifugal and centripetal impulses.

To assemble a story means establishing a hierarchy between its events. In his reconstruction of the narrative skeleton, Seymour Chatman recovers and develops the barthesian analysis of the novel's structure, which distinguishes two main elements underlying the plot: cardinal function and catalysts⁷¹. Reworked by Chatman respectively in kernels and satellites⁷², this division helps to explain macroscopically the frame supporting the *Wake*, while exploring in detail its minutiae. So, while kernels clarify the turning point of destiny, namely changes conducting the plot towards specific directions, satellites act as marginal episodes enriching the story without modifying its flow.

From the definition of these units sprouts the juxtaposition between dispersive and condensed plot, which are identified by Mazzoni in their archetypical structures: the centripetal organization arranges few characters on the scene, establishing intense ties of cause and effect between its segments and limiting digressions, while it tends to sort out the narrative thread; conversely, the centrifugal configuration can virtually use an illimited number of elements, wallowing in detours and denying the conventional idea of a clear

⁷¹ Barthes, Roland, *L'analisi del racconto* (Milano: Bompiani, 1969). The narrative units identified by Barthes are basically four: cardinal functions, catalysts, clues, informing parts, but for my analysis will be considered only the first two.

⁷² Chatman, Seymour, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1978).

final⁷³. Hence, in *mega-novels* the first serves as a control device to avoid the complete deflagration of the plot and tries to forge an organic sense of the whole implementing recognizable patterns, while the latter defines narrative entropy and constitutes the primary cause for the furious accumulation of textual material.

Through the use of redundant subplot, random stories within stories, excessive digression, obsessive presence of details, and asymmetric identities, spanning over the entire length of the novel, Joyce can freely aggregate new parts to his work. According to the definition provided by Moretti, this process of compulsive addition of new elements can be defined “mechanical”⁷⁴. Talking about the structure of the modern epic, Moretti highlights the difference between organic and mechanical forms, which dwells in the presence of constraints delineating and inhibiting the potentiality of the single parts. For instance, massive works like *Faust*, *Bouvard and Pécuchet*, and *Moby Dick* possess an epic form, which allows their authors to cut and add new sections arbitrarily. Corroborating a sensation of monumental nature of the epic textual space, this mechanical process of narrative accumulation justifies writers to experiment with single parts of their works; through *collage*, juxtaposition, montage

⁷³ In the literature of the second half of the eighteenth century, the rejection for a clear final becomes a common solution and it will be inherited by modernist writers. This type of ending settles the perception that absolute, tragic, or culminating events do not exist, or rather, they can no longer stop the flux of impersonal accidents. Mazzoni, *Teoria del romanzo*, 319-320.

⁷⁴ Looking at the genetic story of *Finnegans Wake*, the term “mechanical” is highly suitable. Joyce intentionally avoided any “making up” process for his novel, rather the building blocks of his work are bits and pieces of prose and poetry, snippets of songs, technical terms and alien words, names. His creating process is akin to a *bricoleur*.

technique, they reveal the prolific growth of the “encyclopedic aggregate”⁷⁵.

To counterbalance this violent production of textual material, the novel needs a centripetal force capable of configuring an uneven galaxy of information according to a regulatory system. In the *Wake*, the backbone of this rigid scheme is based on a series of patterns which can be categorized in three main types of reference⁷⁶: mythical, sacred, and literary. Intuitively, the reader may sense that these notions avoid providing a continuous series of illustrative correspondences for Joyce’s “meandertale” (FW 18.22, “meander” and “tale”, plus the assonance with Neanderthal, which would take us back to the origin of human being and the beginning of language), which implies the need for narrative anchors. Albeit Margot Norris defines the *Wake* as a “decentered universe”⁷⁷, it still preserves opaque fixed points of reference, which take the appearance of recurring stories where the main characters are interchangeable, although the core remains unaltered. This compulsive repetition of the same tales produces a multitude of altered versions with unmistakable structural and linguistic similarities, establishing a fabric of symmetries that “extend by now one thousand and one

⁷⁵ Frye, Northrop, *Anatomia della critica. Quattro saggi* (Torino: Einaudi, 1969).

⁷⁶ This compartmentalization stems from the two main models that have dominated attempts to define *Finnegans Wake*’s structure. Provided by Campbell and Robinson’s *The Skeleton’s Key to “Finnegans Wake”*, Gordon’s *“Finnegans Wake”: A Plot Summary*, and Epstein’s *A Guide through “Finnegans Wake”*, we can label the first model as “linear”, since it digs up a linear progressive plot from the entangled web of connection; owing to Beckett’s reflections upon *Scienza Nuova* of Giambattista Vico, the second model is the “circular”. The “commodious vicus” (FW 3.2) is the frame chosen by Joyce to display the cyclical recurrence of events.

⁷⁷ Norris, Margot, *The Decentered Universe of Finnegans Wake: A Structuralist Analysis*, (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2019), 7.

stories, all told, of the same” (FW 5.28). In the light of this Joyce could have created complexity combining and recombining essentially simple algorithms, which in the text correspond to few narrative nodes with a limited cast of characters. Therefore, I designate as “cosmos” all those centripetal characteristics capable of extracting order from chaos through symmetries and analogies.

Far from portraying a transparent system to codify the plot⁷⁸, or reveal its turning points to provide a complete guidance in *Wake*'s oneiric maze, my attempt is to outline both the formal strategies adopted by Joyce in welding together fragmented parts and bringing out the homology of substance under their surface, and his mechanical process of addition, which pushes out of axis the narrative center of his novel.

⁷⁸ *Wake* criticism has adopted a position of denying that there is a basic narrative but does not give up the plaintive hope that one exists. David Hayman, Bernard Benstock, John Bishop, and Margot Norris, for instance, have all recognized the absence of a linear plot unraveling through the novel, thus they have developed different approach to deal with the nagging issue.

1.3) Normative letters

HCE are the three initials hauntingly recurring throughout the novel, which always compose different words. Except for the geographical indication in “Howth Castle and Environs” (FW 3.3), the significant examples are “Here Comes Everybody” (FW 32.18) and “Haveth Childers Everywhere”, because they identify the main character⁷⁹ of the *Wake* as an “everyman” and universal father. Within the narration the reader gets to know him as Humphrey⁸⁰ Chimpden⁸¹ Earwicker, and in the first four chapters Joyce describes his protean figures and incarnations. As well as in other characters of the novel, in HCE resonate mythological, popular, and biblical echoes⁸². In this section of my thesis, I would like to reflect on the creation of his last name, which is discussed extensively by Joyce at the opening of the second chapter: “Now (to forebare for ever solittle of Iris Trees and Lili O’Rangans), concerning the genesis of Harold or Humphrey Chimpden’s occupational agnomen” (FW 30.01-03).

⁷⁹ The *Wake* is a difficult text to approach for many reasons, one of which involves intellectual candor. From here comes the arduous choice in selecting an entrance point, since there is no accessible passage at all, or it can be slightly misleading without an exegesis. Although it is challenging, I believe that the introduction of HCE and his agnomen can be a valid portal since it explains the dream’s prolific replacement of conventional characters. For further discussion on the theme of the entrance point see Kimberly J. Devlin, *Attempting to Teach Finnegans Wake: Reading Strategies and Interpretative Arguments for Newcomers*, Joyce Annual Studies, 2009, 159-187.

⁸⁰ “Harold or Humphrey” (FW 30.02).

⁸¹ “Chimpden or Chivychas” (FW 30.14).

⁸² Though the “official” presentation of HCE occurs in the second chapter, in the first we can identify him through other incarnations. HCE can be associated to Tim Finnegan, the giant Finn MacCool, Bygmaster Finnegan, and the Irish Duke of Wellington. This intricated system of cross references explains why one character cannot be “one” unique character, allowing Joyce to coagulate a crowd of figures around isolated names. To oversee this gallery of characters distant to each other in terms of space and time, there is the temporal plane of the *Wake*. Influenced by Viconian cycles, the events of the novel can be positioned before the history of human beings and across all the centuries, assuming then the shape of a plot-genesis and source its material from myths, tales, religions, literature.

An agnomen is a moniker bestowed on a person to reflect something that the individual has famously or infamously done, freezing his or her identity in a past accomplishment or activity. Furthermore, others use agnomens to describe subjects, which are objectified in a role that he or she may no longer choose to assume. In this case the agnomen “Earwicker” is conferred by the “king” (FW 31.04, 31.11), who, according to the tale, is wandering along with his foxhunting entourage until he encounters HCE. The temporal reference marking this scene is characterized by a “prefall paradise peace” (FW 30.15), namely the moment before the Fall of Adam and Eve from the Edenic garden since this scene, like much of the first chapter of the first book, is described as if it was a legend from ancient times, whose energies are still present and reach into the present. The initial information concerns his role: he is apparently a turnpiker – a guard of the turnpike along which the king is traveling – and the reader sees him peacefully “jingling the turnpike keys and bearing aloft amid the fixed pikes of the hunting party a high perch atop of which a flowerpot was fixed earthside” (FW 31.01-03), which are the devices used to trap “thon bluggy earwuggers” (FW 31.10-11) and that caused all the potholes in the road. Upon the arrival of the sovereign and his entourage, Humphrey’s activity triggers the joking comment of the king: “we have for suretrusty bailiwick a turnpiker who is by turns a pikebailer no seldomer than an earwigger!” (FW 31.26-28). This is the moment in which “[c]omes the question are these the facts of his nomengentilisation” (FW 31.33-34), meaning

these are the facts concerning the origin of his *nomen gentile*, or ancestry name. It follows that at the end of the same chapter, as if Joyce wants to confirm and conclude the episode, Earwicker is identified as an earwig in “The Ballad of Persse O’Reilly” (FW 44), whose title recalls the French term *perce-oreille*, that is “earwig”; moreover, the content of the song refers to an unknown, evanescent person, whose essence is a whispered rumor.

As a result, the mythical origin of the name stems from this episode, providing sense to the three “normative letters” H.C.E. (FW. 32.18); to understand what is at stake here, it is necessary to look closer at the term “earwigger” and its double meaning: literally it refers to earwigs, which are insects that, according to popular belief, burrow into the brain through the ear; alternatively, the other acceptation is metaphorical and opens new fields of discussion. Jim Leblanc notices that the word’s figurative sense refers to “garrulous rumormongers who [...] give rise to his [HCE] alienated identity through word whispered from ear to ear”⁸³.

Returning to the story and acknowledging that Humphrey is caught up in a storm of rumors about something that he did, the reader is allowed to see an overlapping correspondence between him, the earwig, and the gossip. Yet the apparently disgraceful act committed by the protagonist is not announced, rather it will remain cryptic throughout the whole novel, since the clues linked to his deed are

⁸³ Edmund Epstein reinforces this connection: the word *earwig* is a Dublin slang for a gossipy barfly. See Epstein, Edmund, *A Guide through “Finnegans Wake”* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2009), 37.

going to be ambiguous, and vague, distancing possibilities for transparent evidence⁸⁴.

From the beginning pages of the novel, it is possible to track the first explicit reference to an event that captures public attention: “What then agentlike brought about the tragoady thundersday this municipal sin business?” (FW 5.13-14). The term “sin” intercepts an array of meanings⁸⁵, among which there is the theological theme of the fall, which here contaminates other mythical episodes: the drunken fall of Tom Finnegan, the ambitious fall of Ibsen’s Masterbuilder Finn (FW 4.18), and the fall of the Babel tower are just few examples of “associative substitution”⁸⁶. This is a theme I will revisit at the end of this section; for now, it is relevant to understand the extremely malleable nature of this character. According to Devlin, this Wakean logic supports HCE’s envisioned identity as merely one in a series of ever-expanding of fictional self-figurations which can be projected on the abundant gallery of mythic characters or events haunting the *Finnegans*. More importantly, the oscillating “highlyfictional” (FW 261.18) expansion of HCE’s personality,

⁸⁴ In the first chapter of the *Portrait*, Joyce deploys a similar narrative construct, where students discover that some older boys at Congloves had committed a sin, therefore their punishment was the expulsion. Due to the juxtaposition between the prays to God to keep the school safe from “the snares of the enemy” (P 18) and the transgressive behavior seen as a sin, within the expulsion resonates the biblical echoes of the fall. The similarities dwell in the mysterious outline veiling the cause of the fall: like other boys, Stephen ends up being surrounded by various theories, without ever being able to grasp the truth of the matter. Devlin comments this passage as a landmark of Joyce’s writing style: “stories of sin in Joyce’s works are hopelessly obscured by speculative fiction.” Devlin, *Wandering and Return*, 90.

⁸⁵ The myths that contribute most to the thematic structure of the *Wake* include Oedipus myth, that will be largely discussed further, Old Testament stories, Irish legends of Finn MacCool, Egyptian myths of Isis and Osiris, Greek and Roman myths, the modern biography of Charles Parnell. Under the surface of each there is a crime, an act of trespass over a forbidden boundary.

⁸⁶ *Ivi.*, 63.

branching out towards other figures, unravels the recurring patterns that connect them: the theme of the fall is part of the circular structure of the novel, in which the incidents described are to be considered as happening repeatedly: Satan fell, Adam fell, Parnell fell and so many other heroes. The equivalence of events conveys the idea of the original story's repetition, according to Gianbattista Vico's order, or as Joyce suggests: "Teems aftimes and happy returns. The scim anew Ordovico" (215.22).

Even if the sin of HCE remains a mystery, from varying details of many hypothetical versions and allusions, a basic configuration of the event emerges. The Wakean actors on the scene are always the same: an old man-representative of Humphrey, two girls, and three soldiers symbolizing Earwicker's children. The setting is Phoenix Park, and they interact in an elementary way: the girls tempt the old man to commit assorted obscenities that the three men witness; sometimes Joyce changes the episode adding the act of rebellion of the three observers against the old man, but the primary organization remains unvaried. There are voyeuristic and exhibitionist aspects to this event, since the girls tempt the old man by exposure while urinating⁸⁷ and his peeping brings his downfall: "the besieged bedreamt him stil and solely of those lililiths undeveiled which had

⁸⁷ "the two quitewhite villagettes who hear show of themselves so gigglesome minxt the follyages" (FW 8.03-04). We have two options for the "two villagettes": first, the washerwoman of chapter 1.8, or, more likely, the two girls of the incident at Phoenix Park. The term "minxt" may originate from the Latin *minxit*, which means "she urinated". Therefore, in order to provoke HCE, the two girls urinate in the bushes ("follyages"), while Humphrey is watching them. Later on, there is a line which clarify more this situation: "How they wore two madges on the makewater" (FW 420.07). Literally "madges" is a barn owl, a magpie, but according to OED it could refer also to woman who is considered sexually experienced or viewed as a prospective sexual partner, perhaps a prostitute; moreover, it may refer to woman's genitals, which are connected to the girls' "makewater", namely urinate.

undone him” (FW 75.5), whereas the “lililiths undeveiled” are the two girls at the park who “undone” HCE. Through the event at Phoenix Park, Joyce deploys a control agent to guard the development of his novel’s structure, consequently, from its elementary configuration, he can superimpose a wide range of thematic implications and articulate his formal strategies, suggesting that the episode stands as a narrative anchor. It is a relatively unified core, which slowly splits into an autonomous cosmos of subplots, resembling an evolutionary process through differentiation: while the arrangement of the main elements remains simple to ensure solidity of the whole, the surrounding fabric evolves and complicates. However, before introducing new concepts to expand my analysis, I should continue collecting fragments connected to the event.

The description of the incident takes a more serious tone: “a baser meaning has been read into these characters the literal sense of which decency can safely scarcely hint” (FW 33.14-15) and a compulsive exchange of information starts to spark public interest among people since it “has been blurringly bruited by certain wisecrackers” (FW 33.16), where “blurringly” is the uttering of words abruptly and heedlessly, while “bruited” stems from *bruit*, which is “rumor” in French. Then a sequence of doubts, accusation, and questions consume the following pages, in an attempt to unveil the truthfulness at the core of the episode: “To such a suggestion the one selfrespecting answer is to affirm that there are certain statements which ought not to be, and one should like to hope to be able to add,

ought not to be allowed to be made” (FW 33.18-21), “mended their case by insinuating” (FW 33.25), “ludicrous imputation” (FW 33.26), “you blondy liar, Gob scene you in the narked place” (FW 34.10, God saw you naked in the park or in marketplace, moreover “nark” means informer, therefore we can interpret “narked” as the action to watch, to observe), “Slander” (FW, 34, 12). Clearly the ones responsible for the “municipal” turmoil are the three “woodwards or regards” (FW 34.15 *le regarde* recalls the French word for gaze), who move the first accusations towards HCE⁸⁸, explaining that he “behaved with ongentilmensky immodus opposite a pair of dainty maidservants in the swoolth of the rushy hollow whither” (FW 34.19-20, Humphrey behaved in an ungentlemanly manner doing something improper, indecent, or unchaste towards two delicately female servants). Once delineated the key elements of the “municipal sin”, it is possible to see another aspect of the character of Humphrey and his value of protagonist in the economy of the book; in addition to his allegorical charge and his role as the dreamer in the *Wake*, it is possible to identify him as the main speaking subject. Whilst his speeches form only a small portion of the dreamtext, he represents the main discursive subject of the various utterances, leading to the collapse of the distinction between speculations and certain facts. Even though the excessive chatter adumbrates the imprecise and obscure nature of

⁸⁸ At the time of his supposed transgression, HCE is unaware about the presence of three “annoying Welsh fusiliers”, who will reveal themselves among the accusers of Humphrey: “Hay, hay, hay! Hoq, hoq, hoq! Faun and Flora on the lea love that little old joq” (FW 33.27-28) According to Leblanc identifies in “Faun and Flora” the two girls and overlaps “the little old joq” with HCE as an old shameful joke.

HCE's elusive transgression, which flickers across the surface of the dream in an endless array of forms, it is still possible to recover two significant aids from the magmatic flow of information. Firstly, it is precisely the rumor surrounding the sin that brings out supplementary details around the cause of the fall, secondly it tells something more about HCE and his function as narrative anchor. I started this paragraph showing how the three initials in arbitrary three-word sequences identify Humphrey in most passage of the *Wake*, however, as long as there are other characters talking about him, it is necessary to adopt a different perspective. Norris observes that these initials are indeed "cluekey" (FW 100.28), or guideline through the maze of the *Wake*, where such sequences as "Haveyou-caught-emerod's" (FW 63.18), the transposed "coal at the end of his harrow" (FW 127.8), "hears cricket on the earth" (FW 138.26), or "Heinz cans everywhere" (FW 581.5), tell us not who HCE is, but merely where he is present⁸⁹.

To conclude, these are the components at our disposal, clothed by a thick shadow of uncertainty; correspondently, Joyce glosses over the concrete causes of Humphrey's fall, strews some clues, and creates confusion with conflicting iterations, but watches out for any spills of content. Yet it is possible to reflect on the consequences. In the following sections, I will often refer to this event, as it intersects with very large flows of narrative particles scattered throughout the novel. The incident at Phoenix Park is at the center of this analysis

⁸⁹ Norris, *The Decentered Universe of Finnegans Wake: A Structuralist Analysis*, 60.

because it partially assumes the function of starting point in order to explain the decentralization of language and plot in the *Wake*.

1.4) Continuarration! You're not there yet

At this juncture things get more complicated: leaving behind the centripetal control system of HCE's sin, Joyce deploys a formal centrifugal strategy to dizzyingly multiply the satellites. The scandal's transition from private to public activates universal concern among Dublin's inhabitants, funneling all their conversations towards hectic research for the real fact. Norris remarks that in the *Wake* "speakers are ever seeking something, asking questions, investigating a mystery, gossiping, or speculating about this and that" (28). Tension rises, a threatening aura descends upon the narration, instilling paranoid thoughts of being watched: "bushes have eyes, don't forget" (FW 522. 12-13), and there "were treefellers in the shrububs" (FW 420.08, three fellows in the shrubs), who were "watching the watched watching" (FW 509.02-03), making clear reference to the episode of HCE and the two girls in the park. Precisely because the event is deprived of its true account, it opens an epistemological quest, leading the Wakean figures to chase the incident's hidden core. In the fourth chapter of the first book, the matter of the incident at Phoenix Park branches out until the inhabitants of Dublin decide to settle a trial. At this moment of the novel, it is generally accepted that Earwicker is dead and buried in an Irish pyramid, yet their sense of safety is shattered when an individual who strongly resembles HCE suddenly appears in public. As the suspect is arrested, four judges preside the trial to establish guilt, while a group of witnesses is called to give testimony, among which there is someone who displays a

concerted effort to establish the facts and determine the truth. Thus, the witness makes his entrance in the scene takes the floor, and announces to possess the clear evidence, but, with peremptory inevitability, his attempt proves to be in vain: the commentary veers off into trivialities, digressions and qualifications, until the matter at hand is virtually lost. It unfolds in this way:

Remarkable evidence was given, anon, by eye, ear, nose and throat witness, whom Wesleyan chapelgoers suspected of being a plain clothes priest W.P., situate at Nullnull, Medical Square, who, upon letting down his rice and peace green coverdisk and having been sullenly cautioned against yawning while being grilled [...] and one thing which would pigstickularly strike a person of such sorely tried observational powers as Sam, him and Moffat, though theirs not to reason why, the striking thing about it was that he was patrified to see, hear, taste and smell, as his time of night, how Hyacinth O'Donnell, B.A., described in the calendar as a mixer and wordpainter. (FW 86.32-87.13)

Although it is not necessary to understand the meaning of every detail, name, or element in the witness' discourse, what I want to emphasize is precisely the magnetic force that attracts and include them. Suddenly, the announcement that is going to reveal the "remarkable evidence" about the sin actually becomes a discourse that compulsively incorporates stories, constructing a digression that continues for several pages. Though the witness' self-confidence seems grounded on "eye, ear, nose and throat", it is unable to overcome the epistemological boundaries protecting the truth of the sin, with the consequence of generating a trivial narrative taking on a

whirling motion and losing its core in a multitude of new details. This is Joyce's first centrifugal device: deferral.

Outside the Derridean use of the term, this is the key technique of Joycean writing style, which is introduced in an embryonic form in the short story *The Sisters* and will remain relevant for the author. Enrico Terrinoni explains the mode of operation of the "deferral"⁹⁰ as a device aimed not at distancing the meaning of the text, but at manipulating the spatial and temporal dimensions, thus coinciding with strategies of temporization⁹¹. The main Joycean strategy postpones not so much the understanding, rather the realization of where to localize the focal epicenter of the story, the core around which the potential message of the text revolves. What the witness is doing now becomes clear: his evidence is subjected to deferral, which distances and dismembers the turning point, dangerously adding a quantity of useless and superfluous information. However, deferral does not work alone, or rather, it is a solution to keep the reader away from the content or the resolution of the plot through agnition, but the textual matter absorbed through this process has a specific nature. In attempting to grasp the meaning of this deferred content, Norris identifies the common denominator in idle talk, which is a term borrowed from Heidegger⁹², whose use and context illuminate large

⁹⁰ Terrinoni, Enrico, *Joyce e la fine del romanzo* (Roma: Carocci, 2015), 33-35.

⁹¹ Other temporizing techniques are for instance the *entrelacement* or the informative delay theorized by Pavel. The first creates tension interrupting the story in the moment of *Spannung*, with the purpose to leave the reader anxious about the fate of the heroes. The second applies a delay effect to the plot, allowing the reader to understand the story's premises only at a later point. Mazzoni, *Teoria del romanzo*, 160-161.

⁹² The German term is *das Gerede*.

portions of the novel, uncovering its internal dynamics. In *Time and Being* he writes:

Because this discoursing has lost its primary relationship-of-Being towards the entity talked about, or else has never achieved such a relationship, it does not communicate in such a way as to let this entity be appropriated in a primordial manner, but communicates rather by following the route of gossiping and passing the word along. What is said-in-the-talk as such, spreads in wider circles and takes on an authoritative character. Things are so because one says so.

Here Heidegger refers not only to the literal sense of the word, rather he enlarges the issue to all discourse that is unoriginal, a passing along of the thoughts and opinions of others, a use of dead expressions, worn out idioms, clichés - in short, everything that falls within the passage that was previously presented. Furthermore, Joyce seems to fully unfold the possibilities implicit in this technique: whereas in *Ulysses* the use of cliché has the role of supporting the architecture of the stream of consciousness sections⁹³, in the *Wake* it wears out and submerges every attempt to get closer to the truth, extending the boundaries of the narratable world. Therefore, the result is a strongly karstic and irregular imagine of the story, which is capable of bestowing to the novel an extreme potential of prolixity.

“Where did I stop? Never stop! Continuarration! You’re not there yet” (FW 205.15-14) perfectly summarizes the idea of an

⁹³ In *Ulysses* each paragraph is a miniaturized digression, able to extend endlessly its textual area due to the absence of organic constraints. In *Opere Mondo*, Moretti recognizes in these completed and independent worlds an underlying mechanical logic that could potentially produce an infinite form. Yet in these paragraphs there is something capable of reducing what is unknown to what is known, or something that could encompass the world around Bloom into a closed and familiar dimension. Thus, the role of cliché is to provide defense and reassurance, drawing the metropolitan world near Bloom, and building his framework of free associations.

immeasurable form achieved through the technique of addition, and ironically Joyce seems to be aware of it. This additive process employs many different episodes, which can be aggregated together without the risk of disrupting the narrative cohesion. Although they have a rather weak connection to the main action, they extend the scope and dimension of the story, slowing down its normal progression. It is the practice of the many small independent worlds that Moretti analyzes in the second part of Goethe's *Faust*: the planetary ambition of Faust to incorporate the entire world simply serves as a pretext to engage the planet's multifaced nature, thus, the episodes aim to geographically expand his choices⁹⁴. *Finnegans Wake*, on the other hand, lacks this planetary breath of conquest. Geographical or spatial notions do not hold the same Faustian significance, as there is no hegemonic drive to take control of the world system. The many small satellites that orbit around the *Wake* are covered with a different mantle: they are voices leaking from characters, claiming their right to speak and a portion of the text. Joyce does not aim to expand the narratable surface of the world, rather he seeks to quantitatively increase the narration itself, extending the possibility for every single character in the novel to participate in the story. It does not matter whether these events are catalysts or satellites, what is important is to include, absorb, bring together these small independent worlds despite their frayed and jagged form.

⁹⁴ Moretti, *Opere Mondo*, 40-44.

The gargantuan narration of the *Wake* depends mainly on the lust for knowledge, which is rooted in the form and theme of every chapter in the novel, leading to a degeneration of all language into gossip, pedantry, tales and slander. Sometimes the idle talk is frankly acknowledged, as when, at the end of the first book, the washerwomen qualify their tales of Anna Livia with “I heard he [...]” (FW 197.20), “I can’t rightly rede you that. Close only knows. Some say she had three figures [...]” (FW 210.27), “Ay, you’re right. I’m epte to forgetting” (FW 208.4), or in a similar way to witness’s announcement, an official investigation disintegrates into blatant hearsay and storytelling:

But before proceeding to conclusively confute this begging question it would be far fitter for you, if you dare! to hasitate to consult with and consequentially attempt at my disposal of the same dime-cash problem elsewhere naturalistically of course, from the blinkpoint of so eminent a spatialist. (FW 149.14-19)

However, these are neither isolated cases nor anomalies. It is, in fact, a condition that belongs to all human beings and that Heidegger recognizes as a fall, or *Verfallen*, which is not a traditional moral lapse, but a falling away from one’s authentic self into a state of “otherness” or inauthenticity.

1.5) Dreams go by contraries

Up to this point, I have described the catalytic event of the story, namely HCE's sin and fall, along with one of its centrifugal consequences; to close the circle of this dynamic, however, there is the need for the causes explaining the shared sensation of "otherness". The analysis of Humphrey's agnomen reveals the hidden meaning behind Earwicker, forcing the narrative to introduce a set of disembodied voice traversing the pages of the novel. However, Heidegger's passages provide a significant contribution: the quest for knowledge that triggers and animates the Wakean characters is an ontological condition extendable to everybody. In other words, HCE's sin has universal significance, both because it occurs within a recurring temporal structure governed by Vico's circularity, and because he represents allegorically the entire humanity.

Norris recognizes the Wakean talk as an attempt to conceal, censor, and divert attention from a guilty self, which is the outcome of the incident at Phoenix Park or our narrative anchor. Moreover, the shift of the sin from the private to public sphere constitutes the premise for bringing the myth system closer to HCE's fate: although it is not monomythic, *Finnegans Wake* uses the Oedipal myth "to plumb the conflict of the individual, confronted by primordial guilt, who is tempted to deny and confess, to evade and embrace responsibility for an involuntary, nonvolitional sin."⁹⁵ Thus, Eliot's

⁹⁵ Norris, *The Decentered Universe of Finnegans Wake: A Structuralist Analysis*, 39.

words on the mythic system as a structure able to organize the formless amalgam of the novel, resurface to follow closely *Wake*'s thematic and formal development. Whereas the Daedalus myth and the Odyssey framework govern respectively *Portrait* and *Ulysses*⁹⁶, *Finnegans Wake* combines the involuted patterns of the Oedipus myth. Interestingly, Eliot's comment on the mythic form covers only part of what is at stake here: it is possible to rely on its ability for symbolic condensation making it an interpretative tool for creating perceptive order⁹⁷, but it is also necessary to recognize its centrifugal potential. It behaves in a bimodal manner: on the one hand, it reinforces the narrative center of gravity, while on the other, it constitutes the primary cause for the decentralization of language and plot. A reference to the Oedipus myth, then, helps to clarify the significance of this intricate fusion of form and content.

Oedipus, in his quest for the murderer of Laius, seeks to close a discrepancy or gap that exists between what he knows and what he recognizes. He knows all the essential facts at the outset: the prophesy, his deeds, the events at Thebes just prior to his coming. Yet, the possibility of putting together this information is undermined, resulting in his inability to establish a configuration that can hold together these two souls: knowledge and the consequent identification. Failing to see the correspondence between events and

⁹⁶ According to Norris, the Daedalus myth of *Portrait* signifies the schism of the artist, suspended between the sightless humanity of the labyrinth and the blinded deity of the soaring angel, while the Ulyssean dilemma of Bloom depicts the conflict of the exile torn between forgetful surrender to alien forces and the conquest of those psycho-logical obstacles barring the repossession of home. *Ibid.*

⁹⁷ Moretti, *Opere Mondo*, 104.

external circumstances, Oedipus does not recognize himself as the murderer whom he seeks, thus violating the incest taboo and those laws that ensure the peaceful succession of the son. Insofar as the individual is defined through parental relationship, Oedipus' quest breaks the bond that safeguard family stability, jeopardizing the certainty of identity. However, Bernard Knox has effectively shown how Oedipal task depends largely on the interplay between identity and language of mathematics, particularly the root terms for equation and mensuration:

Oedipus is the equator and measurer, and these are the methods by which he will reach the truth; calculation of time, measurement of age and number, comparison of place and description —these are the techniques which will solve the equation, establish the identity of the murder of Laius.

Commensuration is for Oedipus the key to relationship and even identity, but when he plunges into a world where there is no distinction or division, then the chaos of indifferentiation appears not simply as incest, rather as riddles where things are and are not themselves. His actions raise questions about a specific crime or guilt, leading to the ultimate one "Who am I?"; this identitarian wound, that arose from the discrepancy between knowledge and recognition, also illuminates landscape in the *Wake*.

Previously, in the analysis of the "normative letters", I briefly discussed the allegorical charge of HCE's downfall and guilt; now another superstructure emerges: whereas the episode in Phoenix Park constitutes the sin and substantiates Humphrey's ruin, the myth of

Oedipus and the Edenic fall intertwine. I will address the theme of the fall in the next section; for now, I will examine what happens after the incident's transition from hidden to collective because, similarly, in the Oedipal myth there are elements subjected to change of sign: private acts have public consequences, personal crimes assume the scope of civic infractions, parricide coincides with regicide, and the quarrels between brothers-in law threaten to result in civil war. Correspondently, a whole grid of schematic analogous appears in *Finnegans Wake*, where the mass quest for the truth after the "municipal sin business" profoundly alters the Earwicker family's relationships, tearing their bonds apart and creating internal conflicts through guilty sexual and aggressive involvements. Father versus son/sons, brother versus brother, father and son competing for sister/mother, and brothers competing for sister/mother: these familial scars plough through the conventional model, eroding the certainties about one's identity, which lump around an individual alienated from himself and from others.

Thus, the model of the myth is transposed and superimposed onto the Earwicker family; what interests me, however, are the violent consequences it generates, namely how thematic elements like guilt, sin, and alienation project onto the surface of the text. In the proliferation of multiple centrifugal trajectories, I will follow two main directions: the first examines the "monstrous confusion"⁹⁸

⁹⁸ Meisel, Martin, *Chaos Imagined: Literature, Art, Science* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 126

raging after the identitarian fragmentation, while the second is the paradox of language, which in the search for knowledge and truth reveals an upper and lower boundary.

Contemplating the idea of the subversion of roles, one of the probable reasons behind *Wake's* high level of complexity is the overwhelming fluidity of identity, which is pigeonholed by Martin Meisel as a form of embodied chaos.

It is enough for chaos-as-inversion that the one become the other in the ordinary course of time, whereby the child may be father to man and perhaps the eldest shall be first. They must appear to be each other *at once*: beggar *and* king, king and beggar, child and adult, in a kind of monstrous composite or chimera, where the true source of the sense of chaos lies in the assault upon relational logic.⁹⁹

Now Devlin's insight, according to which Joyce seems to take position against "nominal containment", gains greater intensity: character's name are metonymies intercepting, from time to time, floating phrases, thoughts, trivial stories. Unable to define their relationships within the family, nor their own, the dreamlike mode allows these unconscious streams to flow freely, crossing the physical boundaries of the body; thus, the principle of "relational logic" collapses, denying any possibility for the reader to relate to these characters. To support the architecture of this system with its inner dynamics there is the dream, which is a tool that certainly aids Joyce in dissolving the conventional form and imposing his idea of chaos, or in Meisel's version:

⁹⁹ Meisel, *Chaos Imagined: Literature, Art, Science*, 119.

Chaos represented through the dream world [...] lies in the phantasmagoria, where the dissolution of stable forms, the distortion of scale, the compromise of identity in combinatorial liberty, produce a shifting and vertiginous mental landscape. Systematic inversion in the dream representation creates paradoxes of identity within an apparently stable alternative world.¹⁰⁰

Hence, it is the dream reality that allows the interference of identity to assume the role of second nature, with the purpose of creating a system of voices within voices or voices without bodies. Yet, this “heavy dose of auditory phantasmagoria”¹⁰¹, promoting indifferentiation among Wakean figures, does not serve only a centrifugal function.

In *Ulysses*, during the chapter “Circe”, the prostitute Florry defines a solid principle, perfectly adaptable to *Finnegans*’ world: she announces that “Dreams go by contraries” (U 571). Since the dream provides a privileged glimpse beyond ordinary reality¹⁰², those long areas of deferral, which occupy many pages of the *Wake*, harbor a sensitive and timid core, which fears being discovered. Accordingly, the failure to accept the complex truth and the consequent human condition is shared among Wakean individuals, making the fall of man and the issue of identity an ontological matter above all¹⁰³. Therefore, the predominance of idle talk, lying, plagiarizing, evading straight answers, and faking innocence, suggests that characters need

¹⁰⁰ Meisel, *Chaos Imagined: Literature, Art, Science*, 147.

¹⁰¹ John Bishop, *Joyce’s Book of the Dark. Finnegans Wake* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1986), 297.

¹⁰² Meisel, *Chaos Imagined: Literature, Art, Science*, 147.

¹⁰³ Norris, *The Decentered Universe of Finnegans Wake: A Structuralist Analysis*, 73-79.

to shield themselves from the truth, to avoid the ultimate and direct confrontation with their own guilt. At the heart of the problem of Heidegger's inauthenticity lies the paradox of language, which becomes the conflicting "instrument of man's simultaneous communication with and alienation from himself, others, and his world."¹⁰⁴

The paradox, however, bifurcates into an extroverted and extensive device, namely Heidegger's *das Gerede*, and an introverted and primitive form, riddles. Both are set to guard the truth about the Phoenix Park's incident, and emphasize its epistemological impenetrability. The first device constitutes the upper boundary of the search for truth, as it is more cogent and holds hegemonic power over the text: it is the realm of superficial discourse, words of contact, opinion on what is unknown, the chatter of voices without bodies. The discursive redundancy overflowing from the guilty and alienated subjects is manifested in a language which is devious, which simultaneously conceals and reveals secrets. The second boundary, the lower one, assumes the form of riddles, which have a pronounced Oedipal ancestry. Following the path of Bernard Knox' mathematical reading of Oedipus' fate¹⁰⁵, Meisel illustrates the connection between riddles and knowledge, in particular the last he must resolve: "that *a* is indeed equal to *a* and that he is equal to himself". Meisel continues his analysis:

¹⁰⁴ *Ivi.*, 81.

¹⁰⁵ Knox, Bernard, *Oedipus at Thebes. Sophocle's Tragic Hero and His Time* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1988).

The first such riddle of identity was that put by the Sphinx, before the events of the play. Oedipus's success here is the rock upon which the chorus founds its confidence in his heroic efficacy. Even in the very end, when all is known, when the chorus proclaims the name and identity of Oedipus, it is as "Oedipus, who knew the famous riddles," with a play on the name and the verb for knowing and with "riddle" (*ainigmat'*) now in the plural. The riddle of the Sphinx, herself a biform anomaly, is not repeated in the play in so many words, though it is in effect recapitulated in the whole. Doubtless it was well enough known. It is a riddle of identity, put in arithmetic terms: how can three be equal to one? How can something be and not be equal to itself? "What is the creature which is two-footed, three-footed, and four-footed; and weakest when it has most feet?" [...] The oracles are facts as well as factual statements, data to be reconciled with other data, including events. It is the job of the plot, with Oedipus as its propelling force, to find an equation that includes all the data, to make it all work out. As with the riddle of the Sphinx, Oedipus's problem is not too little information but too much. It makes finding the inclusive equation all the harder.¹⁰⁶

"[F]ind an equation that includes all the data" is the horizon of expectation towering over *Wake's* world: as long as the primordial guilt prompts evasion, and the search of guilt in "others" through "wickedgapers" (FW 366) and "peerson" (FW 60), Wakean characters will continue to live the conflicting hiatus between recognition and information available to them. This discrepancy it is shaped by Joyce in the primitive form of riddles, such as the Prankquean's "why do I am alook alike a poss of porterpease?" (FW 21.18), Shem's "when is a man not a man?" (FW 170.5), the heliotrope riddle of the game colors, and the question "where was a hovel not a have!" (FW 231.1) which dot the book, to the extent that

¹⁰⁶ Meisel, *Chaos Imagined: Literature, Art, Science*, 92-94.

he builds chapters around the exchange of enigmatic questions between characters¹⁰⁷.

Defined as “descriptions of objects intended to suggest something entirely different”¹⁰⁸, riddles are based on analogies between things in nature or words. Since they are clad in an armor of ambiguity, the same words that denote one object are also valid for another; for Joyce, the use of these verbal tools is marked by a precise line of force: the limits of knowledge. It is a device particularly dear to him, appearing in both *Portrait* and *Ulysses* and maintaining the same underlying grammar, namely characters’ inability to answer correctly to riddles. It is the young Stephen who first acknowledges that he “is not very good at riddles” (P 25), after failing to answer Athy’s one¹⁰⁹, and inevitably his adult version in *Ulysses* inherits this trait¹¹⁰; subsequently, Wakean characters exhibit a similar informational short-circuit, due to which they are unable to formulate a valid response: in the Prankquean’s riddle, Jarl Von Hooter does not

¹⁰⁷ In the first book the sixth chapter is structured like a quiz show between Shem and Shaun, while in the third book both the first and third chapter there are a series of embarrassing questions.

¹⁰⁸ Archer, Taylor, *English Riddles from Oral Tradition* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Octagon Books, 1951), 51.

¹⁰⁹ Athy, a friendly boy whom Stephen meets in the infirmary at Clongowes, asks “Why is the county Kildare like the leg of a fellow’s breeches?” pointing out that it is “an old riddle” (P 20). In failing to answer, Stephen does not have the knowledge to overlay the information at his disposal with the questions being asked to him, thus remaining perplexed and frustrated by names, words, relationships. This division leaves room for his future feelings of alienation and incomprehension of Ireland.

¹¹⁰ In *Ulysses*, Stephen encounters various riddles, but the significant difference from *Portrait* is that in one instance, he himself proposes them, thereby reversing the terms of the equation. The riddles about the “seeds to sow” (U 31) and the Lenehan’s “brandnew riddle” (U 166) about “What opera resembles a railway line?” (U 167) are announced by others, while the one regarding “the fox burying his grandmother under a hollybush” (U 32) has a different set up. This time, at the close of his lesson in “Nestor”, Stephen’s students ask for a ghost story, so he provides them an unsolvable riddle. By proposing a puzzle that shows no analogy between nature and language, Stephen positions himself as a false oracle, a dispenser of non-knowledge.

reply to Grace O' Maley's three questions¹¹¹, when Shem teases his brothers and sisters with "When is a man not a man?" in "the first riddle of the universe" (FW 170.4) situation, their answers - which include references to loss of life, faith, virility, and consciousness - are all incorrect, and Shem fails three times to guess the Issy's color, mirroring then Jarl's defeat.

In short, I believe it is quite clear that no one ever manages to understand puzzles, let alone come closer to a correct answer. Moreover, the emphasis is not so much on the question itself, but rather on the dialogic exchange between questioner and questioned, which positions are internally problematized. *Wake's* action consists of confrontations between two characters, in which the posing of questions, often misunderstood, plays a prominent part¹¹², as I will show in the next section in the dialogue between Mutt and Jute. However, what I want to address at the end of this section is how the problem of guilt, which actualizes itself in the dissolution of intrapsychic bonds, constructed in different overlapping layers of issues related to expressive forms. Riddles require no outside or new information, and generally do not venture beyond the perimeter of the familiar or the obvious, yet they do require the ability to see the connections between ordinary things. Therefore, that profound

¹¹¹ According to Michael H. Begnal the identity of the Prankquean is divided between a literal and allegorical level. The first draws from history, identifying this elusive individual with the Elizabethan pirate Grace O'Maley who actually kidnapped the children of the Earl of Howth, or can be Grania Ni Maille, the wife of Finn MacCool. On a symbolic level she may be Eve or ALP. Begnal, Michael H. "The Prankquean in 'Finnegan's Wake.'" *James Joyce Quarterly* 1, no. 3 (1964): 14-18.

¹¹² Swinson, Ward, "Riddles in Finnegan's Wake", *Twentieth Century Literature*, Jul., Vol. 19, no. 3 (Jul., 1973): 165-180.

Oedipal rift emerges forcefully again, whereas riddles presuppose knowledge, but require recognition. The epistemological importance Joyce places upon puzzles is not corresponded by Wakean characters, “precisely because they lack the power of recognition, or because they are blind to their own conditions.”¹¹³ “*Hirp! Hirp! for they Missed Understandings!*” (FW 175.27) writes Shem in his revised version of the “Ballad of Perce-Oreille”, in which he acknowledges the inevitability to reach the truth, to penetrate into the authentic core of guilt and recognize it as such, in order to restore the molecular bonds between individuals.

¹¹³ Norris, *The Decentered Universe of Finnegans Wake: A Structuralist Analysis*, 92.

1.6) Balbaccio, balbuccio!

This section is ancillary to that of the technique of *das Gerede*, insofar as it cannot be treated as a true centrifugal device, as it lacks the organic solidity that allows the creation of satellites and substantially restraints the plot. However, it needs to be put into perspective: the foundations of this section are rooted in the themes of the fall and guilt, which I have explained partially in the previous paragraphs. Therefore, this part of my thesis can be seen as a peripheral extension of idle talk, with the purpose to accentuate the importance of central episodes in the novel. The nucleus that I will examine more closely is stuttering, a linguistic deformation affecting various characters, which serves to increase the difficulty of the text, but also silently reveals the hidden depths of their psyches.

The *Wake* opens with a window looking out onto a scene set before time and space, even before the beginning of history, where the arrow of time is not oriented in a single direction, but follows all of them in an explosion of different historical planes. The opening chapter of the book, variously referred to as “The Fall of Man”¹¹⁴, “Finnegan’s Fall”¹¹⁵ or “The Wake and the Giant’s Howe”¹¹⁶, is an *ouverture* in which the fall of Adam merges with that of the giant Finnegan, which is punctuated by his first word: “The fall

¹¹⁴ Tindall, Y. William, *A Reader’s Guide to Finnegans Wake* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1969).

¹¹⁵ Joseph Campbell and Henry M. Robinson, *A Skeleton Key to “Finnegans Wake”* (London: Faber & Faber, 1964).

¹¹⁶ Adaline Glasheen, *A Third Census of Finnegans Wake, An Index of the Characters and Their Roles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977). In Glasheen’s title, “Howe” stands for “mound”, but it also evokes the archaic echo of the term that refers to the concepts of anguish and anxiety.

(bababadalgharaghtakamminarronkonnbronntonnerronntuonnthunn trovarrhounawnskawntooohooorderenthurnuk!)” (FW 3.15-17). The sound of Finnegan’s fall morphologically transforms into a long compound, which in turn is composed of a fragmentation of lexemes from different languages for the word “thunder”. The thunder from Giambattista Vico’s *Scienza Nuova* that appears in the first pages of *Finnegans Wake* holds together two souls: the first defines it as a barbaric and primitive language, composed only of onomatopoeias, while the second overloads it with culture, given the multiple foreign synonyms for the word “thunder”.

In addition to being the voice that Vico assigns to God, here the thunder is distorted by verbal hesitation through the repetition of the monosyllable “ba”, thus suggesting that the form of expression of the divinity is subjected to stuttering. Moreover, the iteration of “bababa” may refer to stuttering via the Latin words *balbus* (stutterer), which appears in various guises within words like “balbulos” (FW 4.30), “balbly” (FW 37.16), “Balbaccio, balbuccio!” (FW 45.34), “Tribalbutience” (FW 309.2), and Shem’s “Tower of Balbus” (FW 467.16), or to the Hebrew word *balal*, namely “confusion”, “the operative word for God’s linguistic intervention”¹¹⁷, which is reinforced by the linguistic pun on Babel. Therefore, the image of a stuttering God crystallizes into a communication problem imbued with limitations, which inevitably evokes the Tower of Babel. So, the linguistic impulses devoid of an

¹¹⁷ Meisel, *Chaos Imagined: Literature, Art, Science*, 80.

overwhelming “auditive force” produce the confusion of barely intelligible languages, which are identified by Meisel among his embodiments of chaos. This communicative contortion is described as a post-lapsarian plane of reality where “the word loses its pristine identity with the universe of things.”¹¹⁸

The significance of the fall of the tower of Babel, however, depends on its positioning within the work. It is an episode that appears in the very first pages, echoing perhaps the Genesis, whose consequences permeate the entire novel and the language used to tell it. The dialogue between Jute and Mutt shows the ruins of the tower, what remains after the structures of signifier and signified collapse:

Jute.—But you are not jeffmute?
Mutt.—Noho. Only an utterer.
Jute.—Whoa? Whoat is the mutter with you?
Mutt.—I became a stun a stummer.
Jute.—What a hauhauhauhaudibble thing, to be cause! How,
Mutt?
(FW 16.14–19)

Representing respectively hearing and speaking, Jute and Mutt never truly manage to communicate; misunderstandings dominate their awkward dialogue, since they are both impaired. Annalisa Volpone claims that “Jute cannot properly hear while Mutt cannot properly speak”¹¹⁹, thus they are deeply affected by stuttering at the level of both the signifier and signified: when Jute asks Mutt “Whoa? Whoat is the mutter with you?”, namely “What is the matter with you?”, he

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Volpone, Annalisa, “‘[The] Buzz in His Braintree, the Tic of His Conscience’: Consciousness, Language and the Brain in *Finnegans Wake*”, in *Cognitive Joyce*, Sylvain Belluc and Valérie Bénééjam, (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 234.

is not referring only to a casual question like “What is wrong with you?”, but also in the sense of “What is the matter of your utterance?”. Taking a term coined by Norris, this dialogue unfolds on a double level, that of “double talk”¹²⁰, which is the oneiric ability to simultaneously conjure up different thoughts at once. Here the term “matter”, which is implicitly embedded in “mutter”, echoes the Latin *materia*, the substance from which something is made. Significantly, the response given by Jute is “I became a stun a stummer”, where stutter is the signified or the “semantic substance of Mutt’s speech and a stutter is what Jute can hear and reproduce phonetically as a signifier”¹²¹ when he replies, “What a hauhauhauhaudibble thing, to be cause!”.

However, the danger of stuttering particularly afflicts HCE, the character who more than anyone else exhibits linguistic issues, since the moments when his insecure stuttering come to lights are when he fears being discovered as the culprit of the Phoenix Park incident. From this point of view the proliferation of textual evidence in the *Wake* gives the dream a decidedly paranoid atmosphere, where guilty language does not simply betray HCE, but also turns against him by his imagined detractors¹²². HCE lives in the shadow of the terror of accusers, private documents, public media, in a way that inverts “the ancient punitive flood from the Bible into a modern downpour of

¹²⁰ Norris, *The Decentered Universe of Finnegans Wake: A Structuralist Analysis*, 102.

¹²¹ Volpone, “[*The*] Buzz in His Braintree, the Tic of His Conscience”: *Consciousness, Language and the Brain in Finnegans Wake*, 234.

¹²² Devlin, *Wandering and Returns: An Integrative Approach to Joyce’s Fiction*, 37.

scandalous textuality”¹²³, or in Joyce’s words “the ran that flooded the routes” (FW 580). This is the other side of the dream: a dimension highlighting the dangers of living in a textual society, where the slanderous potential of language in the hands (or mouths) of others is capable of inciting and shaping public opinion. Consequently, the network of communal information and misinformation has such a widespread and simultaneously hegemonic influence that it crushes the substance of facts under what it strives to assert.

For HCE living in this world means to suspect that “all rogues lean to rhyme” (FW 96), implying that he needs a way to shield himself, escape, and deflect attempts of physical¹²⁴ and verbal aggression. It is precisely this second type of attack that Humphrey receives and that interests me, as it sediments relevant content. I return once again to the space of Phoenix Park, but not to its most significant event, rather to what happens shortly thereafter, namely the first enigmatic encounter with the Cad. The meeting between HCE and this new character is repeated obsessively throughout the book, but here appears in a relatively straightforward way: the Cad asks a garbled question “How are you, my dark (or blonde) sir?” in many one of a large number of fractured, foreign-sounding languages, which HCE is unable to understand, thus marking him as an invader o enemy. Then, it is twelve o’clock, noon or midnight, church bells

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Cumpiano, W. Marion, “The Multifarious Cad in “*Finnegans Wake*”; Recurrent Elements in his Encounter with HCE” *Studies in the Novel* vol. 16 no. 1 (Spring 1984): 101-110. Norris, *The Decentered Universe of Finnegans Wake: A Structuralist Analysis*, 32-33.

strike the hour, and the Cad asks the time, a crucial, frightening question for Humphrey, who reacts nervously to the apparently innocent demand, as if it were a statement of his guilt. He tries to remain calm, but is betrayed by the stuttering that renders his response incomprehensible:

Shsh shake, co-comeraid! Me only, them five ones, he is equal combat. I have won straight. Hence my nonation wide hotel and creamery establishments which for the honours of our mewmew mutual daughters, credit me, I am woowoo willing to take my stand, sir, upon the monument, that sign of our ruru redemption. (FW 36.20–5)

It is clear how guilt, when provoked by unexpected approaches like that of the Cad, emerges and reveals itself in the surprising plasticity of language. The basic word “comrade” becomes “co-comeraid”, a compound expression that contains the verb “to come”, assuming a sexual connotation, and “raid”, which is a totally unexpected ambush. Further, as the analysis of Volpone suggests, “the possibly incestuous nature of HCE’s crime is revealed by the expressions “mew mew” which echoes the crying sound of a cat, in this case of “pussycats” [...] and “woowoo”, which means “to court, to make love” or, remarkably, “to invite with importunity, to solicit love.””¹²⁵

These passages are particularly useful data points, as are those related to the phenomenon of idle talk, with the difference that the stuttering manages to provide a reading angle that isolates, from the content of the broken message, the hidden conflict of HCE. In other

¹²⁵ Annalisa Volpone, *[The] Buzz in His Braintree, the Tic of His Conscience*: *Consciousness, Language and the Brain in Finnegans Wake*, 238.

words, Cad's harmless question constitutes the emotional point of view, disclosing important aspects of Humphrey's reticent personality. Thus, the great function of stuttering phenomena is to provide a cognitive approach to the core consciousness of characters. For example, when HCE prays to ALP, his wife, to hide his sexual urges toward Issy, his daughter, it is again evident how the stuttering conceals a deeper shame and a guilty self:

On my verawife I never was nor can afford to be guilty of crim
crig con of malfeasance trespass against parson with the person
of a youthful gigirl frifrif friend chirped Apples. (FW 532.18–
21)

Once again there is a process where four judges accuse HCE of compromising behavior towards a young girl or "against parson with the person of a youthful gigirl frifrif", and the *Wake* sets in motion its obscurantist programmatic mechanism that I have previously outlined: the threat appears, guilt is about to emerge from the deep within the conscience, but it is arrested by a wave of idle talk, over which a layer of misunderstanding due to stuttering is cast. Interestingly, the associative nature of thought travels madly down trails of similar sounding signifiers, unable to halt the fluidity of linguistic dynamics of unconscious mind, as also occurs in:

Ten men, ton men, pen men, pun men, wont to rise a ladder.
And den men, dun men, fen men, fun men, hen men, hun men
wend to raze a leader (FW 278)

Although this passage does not exhibit examples of stuttering, it provides the guidelines necessary to outline the linguistic chains that

Joyce condenses in sentences where messages appear obscure and continually interrupted, as in HCE's explosion of hysterical, stuttering self-defense. In search of a common denominator for these complex fragments, Devlin understands that "[r]ather than containing themselves in a complete, harmonious, and radiant presence, unconscious thoughts are hopelessly proliferative, with one piece of textuality relentlessly generating more."¹²⁶ In conclusion, despite their low centrifugal force, stuttering episodes are indicators of truth, that is to say that they are moments when characters lower their psychological shields, allowing for identifiable patterns within the novel.

¹²⁶ Devlin, *Wandering and Returns: An Integrative Approach to Joyce's Fiction*, 42.

1.7) Empire of objects

In the pages of *Mimesis*, one of Eric Auerbach's brilliant literary theses about the representation of reality concerns a literary turn that occurs between the 1830s and 1840s. His proposition revolves around the achievement of certain writers who obtain not so much the freedom to introduce in literature all the everyday, practical, ugly, and vulgar attributes of life, which previously was considered indecent or insignificant, but rather in the ability to take them fully seriously, or even tragically, thus avoiding the compensation for their lack of dignity with a comic or satirical detachment¹²⁷. The thought that branches out from Francesco Orlando's taxonomy of *Gli oggetti desueti nelle immagini della letteratura* starts right here, constituting itself as the resource for exploring, sifting through, and closely observing a shift in meaning which permeates the literary objects accumulating within the narrative walls. Piercing through the layer of objects animating the descriptions, Orlando notes the presence of formal constants, more precisely of syntax, and thematic constants, that is, of content, which are linked together. The form that emerges is that of the list, while what is shown to the reader possesses a homology of substance: in the progression of Auerbach's thought, the objects that occupy the descriptive areas are always useless, aged, or unusual. However, this nucleus organizes just the initial nature of

¹²⁷ Auerbach, Eric, *Mimesis. Il realismo nella letteratura occidentale* (Torino: Einaudi, 2000), 253.

Orlando's method, since his analysis incorporates the postulate that sees literature as the imaginary locus of the return of the repressed¹²⁸.

In attempting to establish a relationship of equivalence between literary discourse, the return of repressed, and the real world, Orlando provides his most comprehensive definition of this literary phenomenon as the locus of socially institutionalized return of the repressed¹²⁹, which is made accessible to a social plurality of individuals but rendered harmless through sublimation and fiction¹³⁰. These delicate passages need to be introduced at this moment to precede my analysis of an important scene in the *Wake*, namely the *Inkbottle House* of Shem in the seventh chapter of the first book. At the end of the path traced by *Gli oggetti desueti* beats the pulsating heart of this hermeneutic framework: when Orlando synthesizes his idea of literature as the negative photographic image of the positivity of the cultures from which it emanates¹³¹, it is crucial to emphasize how he immediately refers to the general scope of such postulate.

¹²⁸ Orlando's theory is laden with Freudian notions, starting from the "return of the removed", which is rendered by the "return of the repressed".

¹²⁹ Orlando, *Per una teoria freudiana della letteratura*, 26.

¹³⁰ Orlando, Francesco, *Due letture freudiane: Fedra e il Misanthropo*, (Torino: Einaudi, 1990), 28.

¹³¹ Orlando, *Gli oggetti desueti nelle immagini della letteratura. Rovine, reliquie, rarità, robaccia, luoghi inabitati e tesori nascosti* (Torino: Einaudi, 2015), 8.

Correspondently, Orlando is interested in seeing how a correlative concept of repression is specified in different transgressions, which contradict various imperatives¹³². In *Gli oggetti desueti*, for example, his research concerns functionality: if in social reality, which is regulated according to the performance principle and the imperative of utility advanced by the capitalist system, every object must necessarily have a function, then literature is called upon to host all those heaps of useless, broken, purposeless things that find no space in the dominant reason.

Now, the thread of Orlando's theory must intertwine with the extended fabric of objects that overwhelms Shem's house. In the novel, it often happens to see characters confronting and relating to large aggregates of objects, such as, for instance, when in their search for a valid evidence to accuse HCE of the transgression, the Wakean citizenry investigate all forms of textual proof, such as "museums, monuments, letters, textbooks, dirty laundry, legal testimony, journalistic reports, family trees, rubbish heaps, mastabas of the dead and other archeological ruins" that provide a sort of "photography in mud" (FW 277)¹³³. I have chosen the *Inkbottle House*, however,

¹³² The return of the repressed, which can be understood in Orlando's words as a logical, or anti-logical model, or *a priori* paradigm devoid of content, adapts to different antinomies and various bilogics. This is how he manages to extend the scope of his theory to the dimension of literary history, from the particular and the infinitely small of works to the general and the infinitely large of epistemes. For Orlando, it is possible to read literary history as an ideological-cultural becoming, in which certain strong logics, coming from recognized authority, are contradicted by analogous weak logics, coming from the aesthetic phenomenon; in the midst of this conflict arises great literature, those works that manage to contain the two opposing forces through a compromise managed by a series of rhetorical settings borrowed from the language of unconscious. Orlando's perspective is drastically formal: Western literature is understood as a succession of different rhetorical codes, expressive-figural dynamics, at times devoted to repression and at times to the repressed, at times to the consolidation of dominion and at times to sedition.

¹³³ Devlin, *Wandering and Returns: An Integrative Approach to Joyce's Fiction*, 90.

because it represents the most elementary technique of addition, namely a list that stretches over a wide textual area, where everything is swallowed up. Moreover, the density of objects gives the paragraph a strong centrifugal force, as “the multiplicity of the elements and the diversity of the recurrences are more than the mind can hold in a comprehensive pattern, and all at once it is experienced as chaos.”¹³⁴

But now it is time to look at the *Inkbottle House* through the eyes of the deprecating narrator, who perhaps is Shaun:

The warped flooring of the lair and soundconducting walls thereof, to say nothing of the uprights and imposts, were persianly literated with burst loveletters, telltale stories, stickyback snaps, doubtful eggshells, bouchers, flints, borers, puffers, amygdaloid almonds, rindless raisins, alphabeticformed verbage, vivlical viasses, ompiter dictas, visus umbique, ahems and ahahs, imeffible tries at speech unasyllabled, you owe mes, eyoldhymns, fluefoul smut, fallen lucifers, vestas which had served, showered ornaments, borrowed brogues, reversibles jackets, blackeye lenses, family jars, falsehair shirts, Godforsaken scapulars, neverworn breeches, cutthroat ties, counterfeit franks, best intentions, curried notes, upset latten tintacks, unused mill and stumbling stones, twisted quills, painful digests, magnifying wineglasses, solid objects cast at goblins, once current puns, quashed quotatoes, messes of mortgage. (FW 183.08-23)

Just as the passage about Stephen’s geography book that I presented at the beginning, in its relatively dissonant brevity, this heterogeneous list condenses the effects of the great metamorphosis that European literature underwent between the second half of the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century, conveying to the reader the vivid impression of change and the image of its violence.

¹³⁴ Meisel, *Chaos and Complexity: Literature, Art, Science*, 84.

The *Ink bottle House* is not an anomaly but rather an example of Joyce's obsession with completeness and the voracity of words, which formally translates into his style of excess. Consequently, this anarchic flow of elements erects a barrier of complexity that also infects other lengthy lists in the *Wake*. This style permeates various sections of *Finnegans Wake*, such as the "museyroom," the title-filled letter of "mamafesta," or the rivers' names that help shape Anna Livia Plurabelle's identity. The structure of these descriptive models is defined by a specific syntactic choice: they are lists, inventories, long chaotic catalogs that consume the novel's pages, embodying the totalizing ambition to represent the vastness of the world, subjecting the elements within it to a process of permutation and re-permutation. Umberto Eco refers to this phenomenon as the "vertigo of lists"¹³⁵: a descriptive technique that overwhelms the reader with a hypertrophic quantity of elements, virtually infinite in its ability to mechanically add new material, ultimately manifesting in what he calls the "poetics of etcetera."¹³⁶

The list continues for another sixteen lines, evoking a claustrophobic atmosphere, where Northrop Frye's theories about the epic form can no longer be considered valid¹³⁷. Although it can set guidelines for reading Joyce's obsession with completeness, Frye's analysis fails to encompass the encyclopedic extent of this list, which is characterized by the aesthetic of excess, or by "the toomuchness,

¹³⁵ Eco, Umberto, *La vertigine della lista* (Milano: Bompiani, 2009), 7.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ Frye, *Anatomia della critica. Quattro saggi*.

the fartoomanyness” (FW 122.36) of the *Wake*. I believe that encyclopedic categorizations lose their power when one considers the possibility of reading the description of Shem’s living space as an anti-encyclopedic insert, since it resembles the language of waste. Seen through Orlando’s lens, this series of objects is enveloped in an anti-functional aura, because, upon closer inspection, they are decayed, obsolete, derelict, therefore the kinetic energy that nurtures encyclopedic knowledge dissolves in the presence of a list, which absorbs any debris, obscuring the possibility of deriving wisdom from passages like this.

Furthermore, this dangerous expansion has profound consequences for the reader: the sensation of being surrounded by objects does not remain fixed to Shem’s experience, but overflows and crystallizes into a hermeneutic anxiety. This seems to be mimicked in the scene where the narrator encounters Biddy Doran’s famous letter and wonders “where in the waste is the wisdom?” (FW 114.20), rendering the reader “implicated in the act of hoarding.”¹³⁸ To increase the impenetrability of the text, Hugh Kenner takes a similar stance when he states that it “leaves us forever uncertain what possibilities we can safely discard”¹³⁹, thus creating a dense opacity around the value of each individual object, leading the reader to question which element to focus on in order to extract meaningful content for understanding the text. Once again, Meisel provides an

¹³⁸ Moran, Patrick W. “An Obsession with Plenitude: The Aesthetics of Hoarding in ‘Finnegans Wake.’” *James Joyce Quarterly* 50, no. 1/2 (2012): 433-452.

¹³⁹ Hugh Kenner, *Shem the Textman*, in Bosinelli, Barengo and van Boheemen (edited by) *The Languages of Joyce* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1988), 150.

image of chaos that can be perceived as an overarching meaning to the expanse of debris that overwhelms the page, whereas “every addition demands a more complex awareness and a more divided attention, until suddenly it all collapses.”¹⁴⁰ Yet, one must find a way to move away from this gravitational center of white light that nullifies the particularity of objects. The landing point is again Orlando’s theory.

Literature is not only the return of the repressed, but also a process of compromise: hence the narrative microcosm contemplates a phenomenon baptized by Orlando as “recovery functionality”¹⁴¹, which involves attributing a secondary use to repressed and segregated objects as useless; for example, an abandoned house due to damage can no longer fulfill its original purpose, but it can certainly acquire monumental and artistic value when viewed from an aesthetic perspective. Now, overlaying Orlando’s vision onto the objects surrounding Shem, it is understood that they are certainly useless in the functional logic of capitalism, but in a broader economy of the text, they become repositories of an explosive latency of meanings. The language of *Finnegans Wake* allows for the construction of multidimensional networks of possible connections. Eco, in particular, develops a Joycean ontology that demonstrates how from any point in the textual universe chosen as a sample, one can reach through multiple and continuous paths any other point¹⁴². It is

¹⁴⁰ Meisel, *Chaos and Complexity: Literature, Art, Science*, 84.

¹⁴¹ Orlando, *Gli oggetti desueti. Rovine, reliquie, rarità, robaccia, luoghi inabitati e tesori nascosti*, 12.

¹⁴² Eco, Umberto, *Dall’albero al labirinto. Studi storici sul segno e l’interpretazione* (Milano: Mondolibri, 2007), 79.

precisely this characteristic that gives the novel its tortuous, labyrinthine nature, while simultaneously bestowing a kind of iridescence upon the words. I move on to the example that will make this reasoning clearer.

The term “fallen lucifers” denotes an object of little utilitarian value in the disjointed chain examined previously, yet for a careful reader of *Ulysses*, it recalls the scene in “Circe” where Stephen, rummaging in his pocket for coins, drops something. Leopold observes this, sees that it is a matchbox, and picks it up. Stephen thanks him and refers to the matches, exclaiming “Lucifer” (U 665). This exchange of words sheds light on moments when other matchboxes appear, as in “Aeolus” in the description of J.J. O’Molloy’s matchbox, in “Wandering Rocks” with the clergy man, and recurs in “Ithaca” where Bloom ignites “a lucifer match by friction” (U 780). Although the associations with *Ulysses* do not end here, in the *Wake* it is possible to construct a similar network of allusive connections. For instance, as Patrick W. Moran suggests, the “falling” of the lucifers immediately evokes the theme of the falling bodies: “the fall of Tim Finnegan, Humpty Dumpty, Alice Liddell, Isaac Newton’s apple, pins, rain, snow, sleet, Icarus, the Tower of Babel, Henrik Ibsen’s Master Builder, Finn MacCool, and so forth.”¹⁴³ Moreover, as matches, the fallen lucifers are associated with

¹⁴³ Patrick W. Moran, *An Obsession with Plenitude: The Aesthetic of Hoarding in Finnegans Wake*, 441.

the “sphoenix spark” (FW 473.18), which implies HCE’s sin at Phoenix Park.

Schematizing this dynamic results in the following configuration: the chain of associations possesses a space that is articulated into a radiant structure with a center and periphery, where the nucleus is constituted by the object under analysis, in this case the “falling lucifers”, while what radiates are the plausible direct or indirect references. In a single, seemingly useless object, a dense network of connections condenses, which the reader could continue to find, and all would be possible and realizable. One could follow a different and possible path by substituting the center. For instance, Annalisa Volpone¹⁴⁴ constructs a semantic associative chain starting from "amygdaloyd almonds”.

To conclude, if, as Massimo Fusillo says, relating to objects is a lesson in otherness¹⁴⁵, the capitalist logic demands that the consumer interacts with merchandise through an act of abuse, violence, and total submission, since commodities are merely tools to be consumed to satisfy one’s needs. Nevertheless, Joyce presents a scenario removed from this vision of modern civilization’s productivity: the object, stripped of its functionality and exposed to the erosion of time, becomes a skeleton of the reality in the absence of meaning. Consequently, Shem recovers scraps and debris and imbues them with lost meaning, or rather, through a process of re-

¹⁴⁴ Volpone, *[The] Buzz in His Braintree, the Tic of His Conscience*: *Consciousness, Language and the Brain in Finnegans Wake*, 243-247.

¹⁴⁵ Fusillo, Massimo, *Feticci. Letteratura, cinema, arti visive* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2012), 18.

functionalization, or the “recovery of function”, he creates reality with the ruins of existence. Orlando's theory offers a way to recover the aesthetic function of these objectual vertigos, which would otherwise create a “blockage”¹⁴⁶ condition in the reader: unable to retain the totality of accumulating details, the reader’s mind would no longer be able to process them, ultimately leading to a collapse. I will revisit the concept of “blockage” in the next chapter as well, where vertigo reappears within the maximalist phenomenon. Specifically, *Infinite Jest* is a novel that radicalizes the use of lists yet encounters significant challenges in doing so.

¹⁴⁶ Levey, Nick, *Maximalism in Contemporary American Novel. The Uses of Detail* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 44.

Second Chapter

2.1) Alone in a foreign world

The analysis that follows in this second part of the work speaks to a very different historical height from the first, and as often happens, many things change, but others remain the same, in a virtual chain of breaks and continuities. Indeed, the novel I will examine here is *Infinite Jest* by David Foster Wallace, a work that does not hide its difficulty, presenting itself as an arduous challenge given its colossal dimensions. But the complexity does not stop at its immense length. The novel is built around a diverse and extensive gallery of characters who are often engaged in dialogues on topics ranging from theoretical mathematics to advancements in physics applied to futuristic technological lens, and encompassing a profound knowledge of pharmacology. To this is added a substantial section of notes, forcing the reader to review the annotations at the end of the book in order not to miss crucial information necessary to construct a plausible picture of the story. Commenting on the irksome reading of Wallace's novel, Marshall Boswell, with a touch of irony, states that "owing to the book's super-sophisticated vocabulary and its complex syntax", the reader "should also keep handy an OED and perhaps even a pharmaceutical encyclopedia."¹⁴⁷

Yet my task will change slightly: while for *Finnegans Wake* it was still possible to configure a schema in which one can organize

¹⁴⁷ Boswell, Marshall, *Understanding David Foster Wallace* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2020), 69.

the different formal devices adopted by Joyce depending on their centrifugal or centripetal force, in *Infinite Jest* the analysis of ordering and subversive forces of the novel has precedents. What I call chaos-cosmos function is a term borrowed from *The Maximalist Novel* (2014), where Stefano Ercolino provides the necessary coordinates to form the literary posture on how approach postmodern encyclopedic novels. According to his considerations, the archetype of this genre is based on ten categories¹⁴⁸, which refer to formal devices creating an internal dialectic:

Length, encyclopedic mode, dissonant chorality, and diegetic exuberance on the one hand; completeness, narratorial omniscience, and paranoid imagination on the other: seven characteristics of the maximalist novel we have come to know. Seven characteristics which play different roles in the *internal dialectic* of the genre. In particular, the first four are responsible for an increase in the narrative entropy, expressing what we could define as a *chaos-function*, while the remaining three work in the opposite direction, toward a containment of the complexity of the diegesis, executing a *cosmos-function*. In other words, the paroxysmal accumulation of narrative materials enabled by the length of the novels in question, the anomalous cognitive openings made possible by the encyclopedic mode, the amalgam of chorality and polyphony, and the systematic use of fragments and digressions would generate a guaranteed deflagration of the maximalist novel if a series of countermeasures were not provided for: rigid structural practices, a capillary control of the narrative material through a super-omniscient narrator, and a holistic construction of the plot. Even though each of these categories is provided with a strong specificity and autonomy, within the structural dialectic of the genre, they split into two monolithic and opposing camps: anarchy versus order, centrifugal forces versus centripetal forces, chaos versus cosmos. Two camps exercising antithetic functions to ensure the delicate *equilibrium* of the maximalist novel as a genre-system. An internal equilibrium as necessary as it is indispensable to enable the maximalist novel to

¹⁴⁸ There are ten elements that define it and as a genre of contemporary novel: length, encyclopedic mode, dissonant chorality, diegetic exuberance, completeness, narratorial omniscience, paranoid imagination, intersemioticity, ethical commitment, hybrid realism. Ercolino, *The Maximalist Novel*, xiii-xiv.

fulfill its fundamental symbolic need: to relate the complexity of the world we live in, by providing a totalizing representation of it.¹⁴⁹

It is a passage dense with notions revealing and summarizing the workings of the individual components within the maximalist mechanism. Yet, what is interesting to note is the return of the function itself, the one Joyce called *chaosmos* in the first chapter, as if a background radiation has persisted over time. This is what deserves attention: the survival of the two impulses animating the maximalist novel. Therefore, taking into consideration *Infinite Jest*, I will attempt to explain why Wallace, like other postmodern authors, employs this organizational stratagem to develop his work, because the form that the novels listed by Ercolino¹⁵⁰ take on contains sedimented content, which, once uncovered, provides an essential version of the anthropological mutation, change of perspective, and historical events¹⁵¹ in postmodernity¹⁵².

¹⁴⁹ Ivi., 115.

¹⁵⁰ In *The Maximalist Novel*, Ercolino confronts seven novels: *Gravity's Rainbow* by Thomas Pynchon, *Infinite Jest* by David Foster Wallace, *Underworld* by Don DeLillo, *White Teeth* by Zadie Smith, *The Corrections* by Jonathan Franzen, *2666* by Roberto Bolaño, *2005 dopo Cristo* by Babette Factory.

¹⁵¹ Although I focused on emphasizing the autonomy of art in the first chapter, what I mean by “sediment content” refers not only to Adorno’s *Aesthetic Theory*, rather it addresses towards Walter Benjamin’s philosophy of history. Due to its plastic strength, the structures of narrative evolve slowly because they express the profound transformations of human history within a long-term temporal framework. This perspective is elaborated by Benjamin in *Il narratore. Considerazioni sull’opera di Nicola Leskov*, in *Angelus Novus* (Torino: Einaudi, 1962).

¹⁵² It is necessary to clarify some terminologies. I refer to the distinctions synthesized by Raffaele Donnarumma in *Ipermodernità*, in which he draws boundary lines between postmodernity, postmodern, and postmodernism. The first term refers to the historical epoch that began in the mid-1950s and has not yet ended, although it has reached a turning point due to the new socio-political phenomena that the world is experiencing. The second term defines artistic and cultural production that never achieves the coherence and organization typical of a movement. However, this wave born in United States in 1965 and aimed to surpass the aesthetics of modernism, until it exhausts its energies and is replaced in 1995, at least in literature, by what Donnarumma identifies as a new realism, which has a different approach to contemporary issues compared to the practices of postmodernism. The last term describes the cultural epoch that, with a multiplicity of attitudes and without developing common practices, has responded to the problems posed by postmodernity. Donnarumma, *Ipermodernità*, 25-26.

Nevertheless, in maximalism, alongside the chaos-cosmos function, there is another constant that takes shape in a blazing nucleus, which radiates a series of aporias increasing the resistance of the novels. This core is the subject of analysis by Benjamin Bergholtz in *Swallowing the World: Globalization and Maximalist Novel* (2024), which represents my starting point, since a different manifestation of complexity is implemented, one that does not depend only on the centrifugal and centripetal forces governing the novel; although these impulses are inherited, incorporated, and employed by the maximalist novel, as demonstrated by Ercolino, they do not entirely cover the stakes involved. Bergholtz sees maximalism as a literary phenomenon that can be understood through the dense network of relationships emerging on the surface of the planet, which takes the name of globalization. From this perspective, the genre identified by Ercolino is redefined in a space that is simultaneously aesthetic and geopolitical. It is true that society and culture consist of relatively autonomous fields, each endowed with its own logic and internal time, but it is equally true and worth repeating that in a geographical space held together by real and symbolic exchanges, contemporary cultural systems tend to intersect with each other, or to be influenced by the great material systems that support them, such as the economy, politics, and social hierarchy, and consequently to produce a kind of synthesis that is mutable as it is objective¹⁵³. Therefore, despite the relative autonomy of art forms, the formation

¹⁵³ Mazzoni, *Sulla poesia moderna*, 15.

of maximalism as a genre is firmly linked to the evolving relationships between nation-states on a global scale, which characterized the postmodern epoch.

In this first section, I will follow Bergholtz's footsteps to define the concept of globalization and show how maximalism harnesses the emanation of invisible planetary wars plaguing the contemporary world. The linguistic use of "globalization" betrays a multiplicity of competing meanings, which trace back to different historical phases and, when applied synchronously to the relationship between various nations, establish ambiguous connections. Nonetheless, if the individual issues regarding the term's chronicle are left in the background, they dissolve and weaken, allowing a resultant understanding to emerge:

For some, 'globalization' is what we are bound to do if we wish to be happy; for others 'globalization' is the cause of our unhappiness. For everybody, though, 'globalization' is the intractable fate of the world, an irreversible process; it is also a process which affects us all in the same measure and in the same way. We are all being 'globalized' – and being 'globalized' means much the same to all who 'globalized' are.¹⁵⁴

Zygmunt Bauman begins his book *Globalization: The Human Consequences* (1998) with this basic definition of globalization, which is far from being prosaic. He describes it as a system that intercepts anthropological factors, such as happiness and "unhappiness", which are universally relevant. Moreover, this system

¹⁵⁴ Bauman, Zygmunt, *Globalization: The Human Consequences* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 1.

enacts effects that favor some individuals while condemning others. This discrepancy is the first point of interest, as Bauman illustrates a dynamic within our world, which seemingly maintains a state of homeostasis. According to his explanation, the framework of this system is structured as follows:

Globalization divides as much as it unites; it divides as it unites – the causes of division being identical with those which promote the uniformity of the globe. Alongside the emerging planetary dimensions of business, finance, trade and information flow, a ‘localizing’, space-fixing process is set in motion. Between them, the two closely interconnected processes sharply differentiate the existential conditions of whole populations and of various segments of each one of the populations. What appears as globalization for some means localization for others; signalling a new freedom for some, upon many others it descends as an uninvited and cruel fate.¹⁵⁵

The precarious equilibrium of the planetary system is exacerbated to the point of revealing the power dynamics and violence silently produced by society. Although ideally, globalization assumes a neutral stance, in material and historical reality, it generates irregularities and rivalries that extend beyond political and economic life, penetrating intrapsychic bonds. Likewise, Lacan’s words describe the opposing forces within the individual when, in 1968, he spoke about the effects that “universalism”, which is his version of globalization, produces on psychic life. These forces generate wounds that tear, divide, and essentialize the bonds of mental and political space, establishing the imperative of enjoyment. Thus, what

¹⁵⁵ Ivi., 2.

characterizes our era is a branching, reinforced segregation that intersects at all levels and multiplies barriers.¹⁵⁶

Lacan's choice of the term "universalism" instead of "globalization" acts as an epochal seismograph, which registers a fracture: the idea of "universalization" was coined on the rising wave of the capabilities and resources that modern powers deployed and the ambitions that modern cultural elite harbored. Bauman recalls this divergence through a series of other terms, which align with Lacan's thought: "Just like the concepts of 'civilization', 'development', 'convergence', 'consensus' and many other key terms of early- and classic-modern thinking, the idea of 'universalization' conveyed the hope, the intention, and the determination of order-making."¹⁵⁷ Correspondently, he highlights that this set of terms simultaneously proclaimed the will to change and improve the world, to spread change and progress to a global dimension, that is, to all of humanity. In the light of this, when compared to the earlier definition at the beginning of *Globalization*, a different atmosphere is perceived, especially due to the paradigmatic shift shaping the new global vision.

¹⁵⁶ Lacan, Jacques, "Nota sul padre e l'universalismo", *La psicoanalisi*, no. 33, (2003): 9.

¹⁵⁷ Bauman, *Globalization*, 59.

As a result, the intentions to make the living conditions and chances of everyone, everywhere, similar, or perhaps even to make them equal do not survive in the meaning of the term “globalization”, at least in the sense attributed to it in the discourse undertaken by Bauman, or by observing the definitions provided by Colin Crouch¹⁵⁸, or by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri¹⁵⁹. What remains coincides with what maximalism observes, studies, maps, and introduces into its works: irregular development, contradictions, crises in relationships between individuals, “explosive aporias”¹⁶⁰.

The postmodernist works analyzed by Ercolino manifest a desire to expand their reach beyond any barriers. Clearly, this culturally colonizing temptation leads them to frenetically incorporate a vast array of encyclopedic knowledge fragments, but what characterizes this process of addition is the heterogeneity of what is drawn into the maximalist mode. Whereas globalization thrives and spreads pervasively, maximalism expands its scope and mimetically reproduces this behavior, showing “figures of postmodern dispersal”, such as “the limitless connection of the rhizome, schizophrenia as a breakdown of the

¹⁵⁸ For Crouch the term “globalization” refers primarily to the development of relatively unrestricted economic relationship across much of the planet, but this process carries broader social and political implications. People from different cultures find themselves side by side, and national systems of economic governance are put to the test. Various disruptions —economic, cultural, and political— accompany globalization, producing a violent backlash from those who feel disadvantaged by the process, not so much on economic grounds, but because it threatens the traditional sources of their cultural and social identity. Crouch, Colin, *The Globalization Backlash* (New Jersey: John Wiley and Sons Ltd., 2018).

¹⁵⁹ Differently from Crouch and Bauman, Hardt and Negri invert the terms of the discourse: it is not the globalization that creates social asymmetries, but rather the Empire, the new world order, which encompasses powers by weaving a new, inclusive, and encompassing network, exploiting the web of connections that envelops the planet. Hardt, Michael and Antonio Negri, *Empire*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000).

¹⁶⁰ Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, 19.

signifying chain, [...] browsing on the Internet, multiculturalism, [...] global economy, and the telecommunications nexus.”¹⁶¹ Therefore the genre’s interest shifts towards a representation of these complex dynamics, as Leni Pökler in Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow* explains to her “cause-and-effect man,” Franz Pökler: “It all goes along together. Parallel, not series. Metaphor. Signs and symptoms. Mapping on to different coordinate systems.”¹⁶² Yet the maximalist novel does not merely thematically reproduce the “coordinate systems”, namely the undesirable effects of globalization; it instead internalizes the dialectic animating them.

According to Bergholtz “while maximalist novelists thematically *map* some of the most insidious effects of globalization, these effects also bleed into the structure and style of their books, which come to formally *mimic* the problems mapped on their pages.”¹⁶³ From this point of view, the contradictions of the external world innervate the structure of this genre, while they are molded by the authors to establish a dialectic that consciously generates a “series cognitive states that are in contradiction with one another.”¹⁶⁴ In the novel examined by Bergholtz¹⁶⁵, the dialectical component lies in the lack of resolution of the issues, which are left suspended in the conceptual ether of the novel and projected “in the consciousness of the readers” in order to “encourage them to develop

¹⁶¹ Conte, *Design and Debris*, 11.

¹⁶² Pynchon, Thomas, *Gravity’s Rainbow* (New York: Vintage, 1998), 159.

¹⁶³ Bergholtz, Benjamin, *Swallowing the World. Globalization and the Maximalist Novel* (Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 2024), 13.

¹⁶⁴ Ivi., 14.

¹⁶⁵ Bergholtz mainly focuses on Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* (1975), Zadie Smith’s *White Teeth* (2000), Marlon James’s *A Brief History of Seven Killings* (2014), Zia Haider Rahman’s *In the Light of What We Know* (2014), and Namwali Serpell’s *The Old Drift* (2019).

a dynamic and ongoing form of thinking, which is particularly germane to confronting globalization's most deleterious effects."¹⁶⁶ This way of thinking, specifies Bergholtz, is not Hegelian but Adornian: this genre does not offer solutions to the problems being scrutinized within its pages, yet in the effort to understand and frame them, they bleed onto the "formal organization", namely "the structure, size, scope, style, pace, and narrative perspective of the novel."¹⁶⁷ For Adorno, it is crucial to maintain this bilateral aspect as it determines the "negative" component of reasoning, which is structured around two souls that could be termed critique and self-critique¹⁶⁸. Distancing from Hegel's conciliatory vision, Adorno's negative dialectic goes in the exact opposite direction: it does not aim to order and classify, or to establish causal connection that allow operation and manipulation, but rather it wants to highlight the cracks, the contradictions of reality, the unease and instability that make it precarious. Therefore, it keeps open the awareness that a different reality is possible, and towards it pushes the unreconciled contradictions that make the given world antagonistic. But Adorno's dialectic is negative also in a self-critique sense because it is aware that the critical work in which his performance consists is carried out using those same categorial tools that developed alongside the false totality being questioned. Since it relies on the same categorial apparatus, even as it subjects it to critique, negative dialectics is itself a moment of that totality. For Adorno, art cannot disregard this contradictory nature; in fact, it is

¹⁶⁶ Ibidem.

¹⁶⁷ Ivi., 37.

¹⁶⁸ This distinction is the product of Petrucciani, Stefano, *Introduzione a Adorno* (Bari: Laterza, 2007).

precisely what allows a work of art to be what it is: “The unsolved antagonisms of reality return in artworks as immanent problems of form” recite a famous sentence from his *Aesthetic Theory* (1970). In other words, the critical stance that art must take toward the irreconcilable state of society allows for the vision of an alternative horizon of possibilities¹⁶⁹, “the dignity of art is measured not according to whether or not it evades this antinomy through lack or skill, but in terms of how it bears it”¹⁷⁰, as he describes this guiding principle in his essay on Beckett.

So, my task in this second chapter is to uncover the workings of negative dialectics in *Infinite Jest*: I will examine specific portions of the text that directly highlight the irregularities within the system, while in others, I will demonstrate the impact that the persistence of these planetary contradictions has on formal components. The background of this part of my work will remain constant: complexity and the *chaosmos* function of Joyce in the maximalist novel, which is the legacy passed on to postmodern literary phenomena. Consequently, tracing the evolution of this function in novels separated by a considerable temporal distance sheds light on a series of reflections that is possible to can about the organization of materials and their different types within the works. Resorting to this function, in fact, means recovering a novel's architecture capable of managing a vast number of

¹⁶⁹ Rebentisch, Juliane and Trautmann, *The Idea of the Culture Industry*, in Felix, Gordon, Hammer, and Honneth (edited by) *The Routledge Companion to Frankfurt School* (New York and Oxon: Routledge, 2019), 22.

¹⁷⁰ Adorno, W. Theodore, *Notes to Literature*, Vol. 2, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 250.

narrative lines, characters, subplots, details—in short, the elements that define the maximalist phenomenon.

2.2) Empire of objects (2)

The study of the objectual world within *Infinite Jest* provides a valuable starting point for bringing out the extremes that define negative dialectics. Additionally, it offers a way to explore the evolution of materiality in comparison with sections of *Finnegans Wake*, acting, therefore, as an epochal seismograph and unearthing what Bill Brown calls the "material unconscious"¹⁷¹, namely, the capacity of the figurative arts to register and silently accommodate the transformations of the material world, even when they are not intentionally represented or expressed. Therefore, this section aims to explore some of the anxieties of the 21st century, structured around the relationship between individuals and objects, illustrating the layered content embedded within the form of *Infinite Jest*, a novel that both reflects and distorts a globalized maximalist culture, which materializes in the prevailing imperative to excessively produce and consume. Two contemporary world-system issues cast their shadows over the literary phenomena under examination: the atrophy of the object and the hypertrophy of the objectual world, both fears crystallized in the transition from a capitalist system to a late-capitalist one. In this phase of transition, one of the major shifts perceived and noted by Remo Ceserani is the lost centrality of heavy industry¹⁷², with the subsequent replacement of tangible possessions by shares, data, information—elements that thicken the dense web of

¹⁷¹ Brown, Bill, *Other Things*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015), 9.

¹⁷² Ceserani, Remo, *Raccontare il postmoderno* (Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 1997), 24.

the infosphere. Initially noted by Baudrillard¹⁷³, it is precisely the growing and menacing hegemony of "immaterial capitalism"¹⁷⁴ that causes the atrophy of the object, a victim of dematerialization triggered by the increasingly rapid and global circulation of goods, intertwined with a mediated perception in the digital age. Simultaneously, the second fear arises from the reverse, an opposite and complementary fate to the first: the paroxysmal accumulation of goods is seen as an overwhelming proliferation of merchandise, transfigured into its deteriorated and worn form – trash¹⁷⁵. Wallace's work intercepts these currents of thought, refines them, and manipulates them, showing how the evolution of material entities encapsulated within his novel aligns with the shifting perception of the world of objects.

Every November 8th, the students of the Enfield Tennis Academy celebrate Interdependence Day. Through a puppet show, Mario Incandenza narrates to the reader the supposed backstory of the futuristic scenario of O.N.A.N., the new configuration of the United States, reshaped in the aftermath of environmental injustices under the Clean U.S. Party (C.U.S.P.) led by the new president Johnny Gentle:

¹⁷³ Baudrillard, Jean, *Il sistema degli oggetti*, (Milano: Bompiani, 1972).

¹⁷⁴ Quintarelli, Stefano, *Il capitalismo immateriale* (Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 2019).

¹⁷⁵ Other American postmodern novels have also explored the theme of objects, particularly that of trash. Although preceding *Infinite Jest*, *The Country of the Last Things* (1987) by Paul Auster specifically investigates this theme in a dystopian setting, while a year after Wallace's novel, *Underworld* (1997) by Don DeLillo is released, whose sections are filled with discourses and reflections concerning the presence of debris and the stories that condense within them.

TINE: places two large maps (also courtesy of Ms. Heath's crafts class) on Govt.-issue easels. They look both to be of the good old U.S.A. The first map is your more or less traditional standard issue, with the U.S. looking really big in white and Mexico's northern fringes a tasteful ladies'-room pink and Canada's brooding bottom hem a garish, almost menacing red. The second North American map looks neither old nor all that good, traditionally speaking. It has a concavity. It looks sort of like some person or persons have taken a deep wicked canine-intensive bite out of its upper right bit, in which an ascending and then descending line has its near-right-angle at what looks to be the historic and now hideously befouled Ticonderoga NY. [...]

SEC. STATE: A kind of ecological gerrymandering?

TINE: The president invites you gentlemen to conceive these two visuals as a sort of before-and-after representation of 'projected intra-O.N.A.N. territorial re-allocations,' or some public term like that. *Redemise-ment's* probably too technical.

SEC. STATE: Still don't see why not just retain cartographic title to the toxified areas, relocate citizenry and portable capital, use them as our own designated disposal area. Sort of the back of the hall closet or special wastebasket underneath the national kitchen sink as it were. Hammer out systems for delivering all national refuse and waste into the area, cordon it off, keep the rest of the nation edible-off as per Johnny's platform. (IJ, 403,405)

What is subtly referred to as "ecological gerrymandering" is the brutal practice of detachment and removal of waste generated by the new geopolitical order, leading to a quarantined contamination confined by borders decided in the president's office. National boundaries shift, maps are redrawn, and a new element emerges on the surface of Canada, in Quebec: the Great Concavity, a vast chasm in the earth capable of housing the immense amount of debris produced by the inhabitants of the newly unified state.

The stakes of Mario's Hamlet-inspired puppet show are incredibly high and revealing. The cracks running through the new system are exposed: the violence from which the current state of

affairs was born and on which it continues to rely solidifies around a power dynamic that condemns and has condemned the people of Quebec to suffer the toxic consequences of the Concavity. Yet, the ecological barbarism upon which the O.N.A.N. is founded remains largely absent from the conversations crowding *Infinite Jest*, relegated to the narrative arc of the dialogue between Steeply and Marathe. The other characters go about their lives, dedicating themselves to their private spheres, pushing aside the tragic political event from their thoughts and activities. This tragedy is obscured and confined to the phonosphere through the sounds produced by the E.W.D. (Empire Waste Displacement or sometimes I.W.D., which could be International Waste Disposal) devices at the edges of the Enfield Tennis Academy or in the streets of Boston¹⁷⁶. Here, it is possible to see a sharp overlap: Wallace adds to the eco-environmental relativity an economic relativity linked to factors of exploitation and subjugation, which he names *experialism*, a new form of "disposal" that emerges from the convergence of circumstances, locations, and institutions that define the status of the Concavity. The interaction of these few elements reveals the contradictory nature of *Infinite Jest's* world, which mirrors the

¹⁷⁶ I will present some passages: "From the street outside came the sound of a dumpster being emptied into an E.W.D. land barge" (IJ, 25), "as they stand watching and hashing matters out, Hal and Pemulis, there's the thud and sprong of an E.W.D. transnational catapult off way below to their left and then the high keen sound of a waste-displacement projectile" (IJ, 217), "and the rustle and jut of limbs from dumpsters being sifted by people who all day do nothing but sift through I.W.D. dumpsters" (IJ, 221), "what the Québécois call *les trebuchets noirs*, spectacular block-long catapults that make a sound like a giant stamping foot" (IJ, 241).

discrepancies brought about by the imperative of progress in the contemporary world that had been previously brought to light.

In summary: a maximalist culture ushers in a phase of material prosperity that manifests in a hedonism of consumption, removing from the psychic and geographical perimeter the debris, decay, and ruins of objects upon which time leaves its strongest mark. Consequently, this psychological removal manifests through some of the neurotic behaviors of the characters at ETA or Ennet House: Hal swallowing the mold and the reaction of his mother Avril, President Gentle's germophobia, Orin's terror of cockroaches, and the association between addiction and the spider among the counselors of recovering addicts; these are just a few scattered fragments that contribute to constructing a reality, that of O.N.A.N., which has become deeply repulsed by filth or anything connected to it. Therefore, whenever something foreign comes close to the characters, it is seen as a threat capable of contaminating them. Banning the detritus of civilization from the state turns into a broader exclusion of waste from their visible spectrum.

This brief overview of the futuristic American society is a synthetic gesture, which compels reflection on what has emerged: I refer to the irregular forces at work in the novel as critical components, as they register and reproduce dynamics that mirror the extra-textual world, highlighting their dissonance with the fictional reality constructed by Wallace. Following the dialectical approach I initially adopted as a theoretical resource, it is possible to uncover the

antinomic extreme of *Infinite Jest*, its antagonistic thrust against the established order. Nevertheless, the thematization of the dystopian future, which acts as a dissection of consumer ethics, spills over from the boundaries of this critical component and contaminates other structures of the novel, revealing the opposite extreme: self-critique. In other words, the subversive force represented by the ecological question, itself the result of geopolitical choices, is only the first part of the negative dialectic; self-critique emerges when the dominant structure under initial scrutiny breaks into the text, binding the form to its rules and transforming into a rhetorical and discursive strategy. From this point onward, my task will be to isolate these areas of correspondence.

I return once again to Umberto Eco's *Vertigine della lista* to continue. Maximalism draws on both of Eco's poetics, the one called "everything is here" and the "poetics of etcetera." While the latter was introduced in the first chapter through the reading of Shem's *Inkbottle House*, the former has yet to be discussed, so I will now provide an example. In the eighteenth book of the *Iliad*, Homer describes Achilles' immense shield, forged by Hephaestus after Thetis requests new weapons for her son. The shield contains a multitude of scenes, making it difficult to imagine the object in all its intricate detail. Yet, as Eco explains, accepting its existence within a realistically reproducible structure leads one to believe that nothing exists beyond its perfectly circular form. It is a self-contained, finite description, perfectly centered on what it intended to express, its core lies there

and nowhere else¹⁷⁷. I believe this poetics resides in those parts of the text that define what Ercolino calls “encyclopedic mode.”¹⁷⁸ One of the characteristics of this form is the heterogeneity of the encyclopedic knowledge it manages to absorb.

As Ercolino points out, the “maximalist mode”¹⁷⁹ doesn't limit itself to incorporating a single discipline but rather engages with multiple fields of knowledge¹⁸⁰. However, what might be misleading in this analysis is the distinction between the exhaustive and synthetic capacities of the encyclopedic insert. While the description of Achilles' shield imparts an impressive exhaustiveness to the object, what defines the poetics of "everything is here," in the case of Hephaestus' forged weapon and even more so in the novel's form, is the ability to present a passage that is centered, focused on a single element. Let me explain further. The synecdochic function of the

¹⁷⁷ Eco, *La vertigine della lista*, 12.

¹⁷⁸ Ercolino, *The Maximalist Novel*, 39-47.

¹⁷⁹ I will clarify this term. Ercolino identifies an encyclopedic mode because “It is not possible to establish a series of traits on the basis of which a novel could be considered to be or not be encyclopedic, because encyclopedism is not identifiable with an existing literary genre, nor is it conceptually assimilable to one.” Levey, in turn, views maximalism as a “mode of inquiry”, an approach the text takes toward details, toward their irresistibility, despite being dangerous and intrusive. By defining it as a 'mode,' Levey performs an act that redefines the analytical scope of texts: the maximalist mode becomes a technique that can be employed in novels that do not share the archetypal characteristics identified by Ercolino. In fact, Levey is quick to specify that, “There's no necessary relationship between length and maximalism, at the very least.” Precisely because it becomes an elastic and reproducible notion, it can be identified in other literary phenomena that are not maximalist by genre but in their expository and representational mode. Examples include *The Crying of Lot 49* (1965) by Thomas Pynchon or *The Mezzanine* (1988) by Nicholson Baker. The mode provides us with a flexibility and versatility that genre does not. Ceserani specifies that modes are forms of organizing the imagination – an assemblage of rhetorical-formal processes, cognitive attitudes, and thematic groupings, historically concrete elementary forms of the imagination that can be used across various codes. In my study, the term *mode* refers to specific stylistic choices: the vertigo of the list, attention to detail, the externalization of *disposition* – these are some of the techniques I highlight. Ultimately, I agree with Levey's choice to adjust the terminology, but these elements must resonate with one another; isolating them individually to identify areas of correspondence in texts that do not belong to the maximalist genre risks obscuring the deeper articulations of this phenomenon.

Ercolino, *The Maximalist Novel*, 39; Levey, *Maximalism in Contemporary America*, 6; Ceserani, Remo, *Guida allo studio della letteratura* (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 1999), 131-134.

¹⁸⁰ Ercolino, *The Maximalist Novel*, 45.

encyclopedic insert is conferred by the synthetic ability of the passage:

The detail is taken for the greater system, and it becomes the substitute for an intensely desired totality, but one that is understood as being impossible to represent. [...] statistics, toxicology, painting, genetics, organic chemistry, marine biology, myth are certainly not the only encyclopedic breaches present, respectively, in these maximalist novels: they represent only a *part* of the fields of knowledge they take into consideration¹⁸¹.

Achilles' shield, by its very nature, does not encourage us to imagine anything beyond what it represents; similarly, the encyclopedic insert exhausts the concept it appropriates through its detailed explanation. In this way, both offer a complete and self-contained depiction. A similar instance can be found in the footnotes section:

a. Tenuate's the trade name of diethylpropion hydrochloride, Marion Merrell Dow Pharmaceuticals, technically a prescription antiobesity agent, favored by some athletes for its mildly euphoric and resources-rallying properties w/o the tooth-grinding and hideous post-blood-spike crash that the hairier-chested 'drines like Fastin and Cylert inflict, though with a discomfitting tendency to cause post-spike ocular nystagmus. Nystagmus or no nystagmus, Tenuate's a particular favorite of Michael Pemulis, who hoards for personal ingestion every 75-mg. white Tenuate capsule he can lay hands on, and does not sell or trade them, except sometimes to roommate Jim Troeltsch, who nags Pemulis for them and also goes into Pemulis's special entrepôt-yachting-cap and promotes still more of them on the sly, a couple at a time, feeling that they help his sports-color-commentary loquacity, which secret promotions Pemulis knows about all too well, and is biding his time to retaliate, never you fear. (IJ, 983)

¹⁸¹ Ivi., 42-45.

The pharmacological knowledge that the passage seeks to express resides fully within the concept being described. Certainly, it hints at the vast landscape surrounding this fragment, yet the reader does not wonder what lies beyond. The key is to channel a portion of that knowledge, as the totality would be both unfeasible and impossible to contain, thus leaving on the surface the totalizing ambition characteristic of maximalism. I will return to the nature of encyclopedic inserts later on, but for now, it was essential to introduce them in opposition to the poetics of the "etcetera," a subject I will now address in relation to the negative dialectics.

The vertigo of the list fulfills the "maximalist mode" of this form, asserting itself as a hegemonic characteristic and legitimizing itself as the primary driving force that runs through the extended descriptive sections of *Infinite Jest*. An example will help clarify how it operates. I examine a passage from *Madame Bovary* by Charles Flaubert to highlight the characteristics of maximalist style in the friction that arises between two different descriptive modes.

As she walked through the billiard room on her way to the drawing room, Emma saw, grouped round the table, solemn-looking men with cravats tied high under the chin; they all wore decorations and were smiling as they silently wielded their cues. On the dark wood of the panelling hung large gilded frames that bore, along the bottom, names inscribed in black letters. She read: 'Jean- Antoine d'Andervilliers d'Yverbonville, Comte de la Vaubyessard and Baron de la Fresnaye, killed at the battle of Coutras, 20 October 1587.' And on another: 'Jean-Antoine-Henry-Guy d'Andervilliers de la Vaubyessard, Admiral of France and Knight of the Order of St Michael, wounded at the battle of Hougue-Saint-Vaast, 29 May 1692, died at La Vaubyessard 23 January 1693.' Then the next names were almost impossible to read, for the lamplight had been aimed onto the

green felt surface of the table, filling the rest of the room with shadow.¹⁸²

The entrance to the Marquis d'Andervilliers' house is defined by the paintings that catch Emma's gaze and capture her attention due to their content: they are portraits of noble, prestigious figures who, in the protagonist's eyes, take on an incredible significance given her strong mimetic desire to belong to that world. This marks the beginning of a crucial episode in the novel, one that will create a turning point in Emma's life, as the Marquis's party will overwhelm her with its intoxication, revealing to her a dazzling and luxurious life. Upon closely examining this passage, one can notice the careful management of perspective, which directs the gaze, deciding what to observe and what remains concealed – objects that remain invisible at the room's edges. The lamp present in the scene precisely suggests this orchestration of sight, illuminating the portions that deserve to be described. *Infinite Jest* operates differently. It exaggerates the attention given to details, as if there were no longer a mere beam of light directing the gaze and highlighting what attracts the characters' attention; rather, the descriptions are obsessed with achieving a sense of completeness. Here is its use in a particularly dense passage filled with elements:

The following things in the room were blue. The blue checks in the blue-and-black-checked shag carpet. Two of the room's six institutional-plush chairs, whose legs were steel tubes bent into big ellipses, which wobbled, so that while the chairs couldn't

¹⁸² Flaubert, Charles, *Madame Bovary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 43.

really be rocked in they could be sort of bobbed in [...]. Each chair had a 105-watt reading lamp attached to the back on a flexible metal stalk that let the reading lamp curve out from behind and “shine right down on whatever magazine the waiting person was looking at, [...] the magazines (some of whose covers involved the color blue) tended to stay unread, and were fanned neatly out on a low ceramic coffeetable. The carpet was a product of something called Antron. [...] The premie violets in an asymmetrical sprig in a tennis-ball-shaped vase on the coffeetable were arguably in the blue family. And also the overenhanced blue of the wallpaper’s sky [...]. (IJ 508-509)

In the company of Michael Pemulis, Hal Incandenza finds himself in the waiting room of Charles Tavis, one of the supervisors at the Enfield Tennis Academy, following the Eschaton game incident. Hal's dizzying description creates a claustrophobic sense of a closed space, saturated with objects, generating a cloud of details surrounding our visual field. Every single item in the room is drawn into the gravitational force of the list, which continues expanding and consuming more textual space, eventually ending with a footnote that itself opens up another list. This is an example of the maximalist mode – a strategy that avoids efficient descriptions and drains the mythopoetic power of objects¹⁸³, instead aiming to exhaust the text’s space, which becomes incapable of containing the relentless proliferation of new material. I linger further on *Madame Bovary* to explain the shift in spatial perception in comparison with *Infinite Jest*. Massimo Fusillo observes that Flaubert's narrator's gaze accentuates the pervasive presence of objects; nevertheless, it remains an inherently fetishistic gaze that isolates a detail from the system to

¹⁸³ Fusillo, *Feticci. Letteratura, cinema, arti visive*, 97-110.

elevate it as an autonomous microcosm. This is how fetish-objects are generated, when the elements in focus are rich with emotional implications and narrative significance.¹⁸⁴ A passage at the novel's beginning introduces this characteristic:

But, either because he had not noticed this manoeuvre or because he did not dare try it, prayers were over and the 'new boy' was still holding his cap on his knees. It was one of those head coverings of composite order, in which one recognizes features of a military busby, a lancer's cap, a bowler hat, an otter-skin cap, and a cotton nightcap, one of those pathetic objects, in fact, whose mute ugliness reveals great depths, like the face of a halfwit. Ovoid in shape, its curves enlarged with whalebone, it began with three circular sausage-shaped layers; then, after a band of red, came alternating diamond-shaped patches of velvet and rabbit fur; next there was a kind of bag, its top a stiffened polygon covered in intricately frogged braid, from which hung, at the end of a long, skinny cord, a little knot of gold threads, in place of a tassel. It was new; the peak shone.¹⁸⁵

The gaze of the mysterious "we" lingers on this character, who is observed from the outside, focusing on his physical traits through an indirect strategy. What captures the attention of the "we" is a detail of his attire: the cap. Although it is an object excessively complicated to describe and even to imagine, given its improbable mix of shapes, colors, and styles, it reveals much about Charles Bovary, thus playing a crucial role in constructing the character's identity.¹⁸⁶ Shortly after, Charles will be at the center of a scene in which he displays clumsiness, shyness, and naivety, to the point of being mocked by his teacher and classmates. The staging of the hat is an example of

¹⁸⁴ *Ivi.*, 98-99.

¹⁸⁵ Flaubert, *Madame Bovary*, 6.

¹⁸⁶ Bertoni, *Letteratura. Teorie, metodi, strumenti*, 115.

narrative significance, as it symbolically and emotionally encapsulates the ability to outline a character's contours, constructing part of his inner world and personality. The shift from a latent narrative embedded in objects to a static emptiness can be observed in passages like these:

Everybody's supposed to wear some sort of hat – Avril Incandenza positively towers in the same steeple-crowned witch's hat she teaches all her classes in every 10/31, and Pemulis wears the complex yatching cap and naval braid, and pale and blotchy Struck a toque with a kind of flitty aigrette, and Hal a black preacher's hat with a stern round downturned brim, etc. etc.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁸ Troeltsch wears an InterLace Sports baseball cap, and Keith Freer a two-horned operatic Viking helmet along with his leather vest, and Fran Unwin a fez, and fierce little Josh Gopnik the white beanie with the dirty cart-wheel-track across it from this afternoon's debacle. Tex Watson wears a tan Stetson with a really high crown, and little Tina Echt an outlandishly large plaid beret that covers half her little head, the Vaught twins a freakish bowler with two domes and one brim, Stephan Wagenknecht a plastic sallet — this is just scanning at random; the headwear goes on and on, a whole topography of hats [...]. Should probably also mention Avril's wearing a Fukoama microfiltration mask, it being way too early in the day for supper for her anyway [...]. (IJ, 380, 1029)

The raw material of the discourse is still a hat, but on November 8, every member of ETA must wear a unique headpiece, which leads to yet another enumeration of eccentric details. However, it seems that Wallace understands the irrelevance of this moment and decides not to continue further, relocating the excess material to the end of his novel. Here, however, one discovers that the vertigo continues unceasingly: “this is just a scanning at random; the headwear goes on and on, a whole topography of hats” as the narrator comments.

Because, after all, that is what he does: in the absence of a monocular vision, it is replaced by a scanning approach that conveys a sense of looking point by point, examining them meticulously, and also recording every detail present in the surroundings. The hesitation expressed by “should I also mention” encapsulates this mimetic stance that exhausts the narrative function of objects. *Infinite Jest* externalizes the pervasive presence of things, it records and mentions them but does not penetrate them.

The strong centrifugal force of information in *Infinite Jest* necessitates a separate section of notes – a vast appendix that opens at the end of the book, functioning as an archive of data that is sometimes redundant or peripheral, and other times crucial to the plot. The irrelevance of this sprawling collection of objects, harmoniously strung together by Wallace, becomes apparent when we attempt to read it as an “effect of reality,” a concept developed by Roland Barthes. In such descriptive passages, the narrative dissolves the conflict between narrative purpose and the mimesis of reality, focusing instead on the pure act of representation, disregarding the actual content of what is being represented. In other words, the narrative succumbs to the impulse to represent and manage the overload of information, all while remaining fully aware of the impossibility of achieving completeness. For instance, the redundant intensity of the prose in the scene of Charles Tavis’ waiting room rests on a foundation that makes the inclusion of non-functional details desirable: Hal’s frenetic perception. Driven by a quiet yearning for

completeness, the prose compulsively follows the motion of his gaze as it briefly lingers on one object before moving to the next. Yet, nothing truly holds his attention, as if the surface of each object is resistant to close, sustained observation. Nick Levey's commentary sharply clarifies this convulsive mode: "the expression of a sterile, bureaucratic gaze, one that quantifies the world like a machine and has little time for utopian sensory activity [...] but it can be instantly recoded as symptomatic of a negative pathology like information addiction or some other bureaucratic malaise."¹⁸⁷

The local world of the room is consumed by the prose's need to process the rhythm of the ineluctable modality of the visible, while Hal drowns in a sequence of anarchic details. The uniqueness of each accumulated element is ultimately nullified in this chaotic cataloging of minutiae, creating a sense of detachment rather than engagement. The obsessive list-making reflects a mechanized, almost bureaucratic approach to seeing, where the act of processing overwhelms any deeper interaction with the objects themselves. The formal analysis of this passage reveals the dual, distorted trajectory that commodities in late capitalism embody. On the one hand, the reader witnesses a pervasive obsession with objects, increasingly present and integrated into the environment. Yet, at the same time, they appear lacking, emptied of their physical attributes, flattened by a perspective that embraces only their surface. These objects, incapable of being truly analyzed or considered, manifest their immateriality through the loss

¹⁸⁷ Levey, *Maximalism in Contemporary America. The uses of details*, 66-67.

of their tactile essence, reduced to mere representations. In other words, the constellation of objects surrounding Hal accurately mirrors the characteristics of commodities in the economic system contemporary to Wallace: products introduced into society must necessarily be short-lived, broken, partial, sometimes useless, lest the compulsive cycle of consumption and purchasing come to a halt.

Limited to their pure surface, the objects surrounding individuals in late capitalism transcend their mere presence only through the perversion of an abstract narrative. This reveals what Brown calls the “object’s insistence” – a quality that would typically attract perceptual movements toward them, concentrating emotional energy. However, this potential is corroded by the “game of representation” inherent in post-industrial, cult commodities¹⁸⁸. The grammar of meaning shared by the components embedded in the list makes it impossible to restore a three-dimensionality to the object, which is destined to withdraw into its nature as a “thing”, according to Brown’s distinction – that is, unorganized matter, deprived of the signatures of all things. What remains is the vertigo of an empire of matter that dissolves the molecular bonds between individual and object, where the “thingness” cannot transcend its physical container and become something more¹⁸⁹. In this sense, James

¹⁸⁸ Fulvio Carmagnola and Mauro Ferraresi define “cult” as a type of commodity that, through media communication, acquires a cultural or ritualistic significance. Products endowed with this characteristic are referred to as *hypercommodities*, because their nature—both sensorial and supersensorial—gains an exaggerated prominence. More specifically, the phantasmatic nature of these commodities appears to have shifted from the traditional regime of exchange, where the abstract was traded for the concrete. Carmagnola, Fulvio and Ferraresi, Mauro, *Merci di culto. Ipermerce e società mediale* (Roma: Castelvecchi, 1999), 13-15.

¹⁸⁹ It is significant to remember that “producing a thing—effecting thingness—depends, instead, on a fetishistic overvaluation or misappropriation, on an irregular if not unreasonable

Incandenza's "Infinite Jest" manages to break the silence of things, restoring a fetishistic and desirable relationship. A game of weights and measures opens up where the hypertrophic expanse of dematerialized goods is countered by the perfect dissident commodity, which is a product capable of satisfying the consumer's needs to the point of death, rendering all others useless¹⁹⁰:

[N]othing more than a classic illustration of the antinomically schizoid function of the post-industrial capitalist mechanism, whose logic presented commodity as the escape-from-anxieties-of-mortality-which-escape-is-itself-psychologically-fatal, as detailed in perspicuous detail in M. Gilles Deleuze's posthumous *Incest and the Life of Death in Capitalist Entertainment*. (*IJ*, 792)

This is the supposed explanation provided for the film. Concise, yet it perfectly isolates one of the central themes of the novel: addiction. In this case, it refers to an addiction to entertainment, to the obsessive consumption of visual products and the temporary escape that these kinds of products offer. Although the first chapter acknowledges the spatial magnetism of the master videotape, reinforcing the idea of the fetishism¹⁹¹, my aim here was to identify the thematic resonance of James's creation. Likely embedded in James' skull, the original videotape becomes a fetish only for one of the narrative threads, while it presses against the edges of the others through references,

reobjectification of the object that dislodges it from the circuits through which it is what it typically is." Brown, *Other Things*, 51.

¹⁹⁰ Dini, Rachele, *Consumerism, Waste, and Re-Use in Twentieth-Century Fiction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 7.

¹⁹¹ "I think of John N.R. Wayne, who would have won this year's WhataBurger, standing watch in a mask as Donald Gately and I dig up my father's head" (*IJ*, 16-17). In the end, the videotape physically resonates with the narrative lines that were previously excluded from its orbit, namely those of the ETA students, and it also enters the Ennet House. It draws in characters who had only peripherally come into contact with the film, thus becoming a fetish object for them as well.

dialogues, and fragmentary exegesis of its filmed content, without ever becoming the objective of a quest, as it will be for the AFR. Yet, it fulfills the role of what Mirko Lino calls a “total object”¹⁹²: a polysemic narrative object, capable of fracturing into a series of themes that encompass the individual stories of the characters – solipsism, addiction, entertainment, solitary pleasure, “forms of self-gratification”¹⁹³ – while producing a constant semantic oscillation between James' film and Wallace's novel. Benjamin's words about the figure of the collector certainly come to mind, as the collector observes his material possessions, seeing through them and discerning the presence of the world in a systematic and ordered form¹⁹⁴. Thus, the “total object” allows precisely this: to observe the emanations of a culture, along with its ripples and critical tensions. One could therefore think of “Infinite Jest” as a system of control: with its polysemic nature, stemming from the convergence of postmodern anxieties, it encompasses the multiple narratives that accumulate within the novel.

Yet, even in *Infinite Jest*, it is possible to see the return of the opacity that surrounds the central event of *Finnegans Wake*. Wallace exhibits a certain reticence in explaining the content of the film, as if fully aware of how much the reader yearns to uncover the truth behind it. He ends up scattering information, suppositions, and beliefs. A

¹⁹² Lino, Mirko, *L'apocalisse postmoderna tra letteratura e cinema. Catastrofi, oggetti, metropoli, corpi* (Firenze: Le Lettere, 2014), 65.

¹⁹³ Dowling, William and Bell, Robert, *A Reader's Companion to "Infinite Jest"* (Xlibris, 2005), 68.

¹⁹⁴ Benjamin, Walter, *Das Passagenwerk* translated as *I «passages» di Parigi* (Torino: Einaudi, 2010), 214-217.

novel so long, with so much space at its disposal, but that strategically falls silent before such a crucial element, striving to delay as much as possible the moment of understanding. It is a form of deferral, the Joycean technique discussed in the first chapter, which is inherited here to protect the film's definitive content¹⁹⁵. What interests me, and what I will investigate in the next section, is precisely this imbalance: the absence of crucial and central moments in the narrative compared to the quantitative leap of information that accumulates throughout the pages of the novel.

2.3) From detail to labyrinth

¹⁹⁵ I refer to it as "definitive content" because the testimonies from Molly Notkin and Joelle Van Dyne may be questionable and not entirely reliable. However, much like the incident at Phoenix Park, a basic configuration for James's magnum opus still emerges

One of the factors that increases the difficulty of reading *Infinite Jest* is the sheer amount of data. Objects are part of this immense proliferation, but on a broader level, Wallace's novel is saturated with supplementary information, namely details that often obstruct the reading process, making it cumbersome and frustrating. The entity responsible for organizing the material – what Bell and Dowling refer to as the “editor” or “arranger”¹⁹⁶ – not only demonstrates a paroxysmal zeal in reporting facts but also blends into the verbal fabric of the novel encyclopedic components, an attention to minute and irrelevant details, and meticulous reconstructions of sources. Yet the flip side of this diligence is its “inability or unwillingness to contain and control such massive, nearly “infinite,” amounts of material. The discourse is frequently “excessive,” often spilling over.”¹⁹⁷

In this section, I will attempt to answer some of the thorny questions that arise when grappling with the complexity of this novel, specifically why it incorporates so much data. The guiding lines of negative dialectics will once again serve to define a relationship between external reality and its reflection within the internal reality of the novel, leading to a problematization of the nature of infosphere, because *Infinite Jest* seems incapable of fully encapsulating within itself the entirety of events or the data necessary for their

¹⁹⁶ Dowling and Bell, *A Reader's Companion to "Infinite Jest"*, 213.

¹⁹⁷ *Ivi.*, 214.

understanding. I will explain this passage and its consequences later; let's proceed in order.

The structural component that suggests a data overload is the section of notes at the end of the book, a section that, while at times redundant and seemingly unnecessary, provides essential details about the past of certain characters. Nonetheless, resorting to the notes means relying on a method to preserve, archive, and manage additional material, as if the novel's pages were not enough to contain such an abundance. This is tied to the presence of an "orchestrator"¹⁹⁸ narrator, someone who painstakingly collects the fragments and pulls the strings of the story, managing, organizing, and providing the material for the narrative. Yet, as Heather Houser suggests:

[...] that data is so superabundant that the labor of presenting it must be shared. This technique bears some kinship to postmodern metafiction, but it is distinct from the strategy of having a narrator break the fictional frame and reveal itself to be the author in that the aside splits the extradiegetic narrator in two and points to a division of descriptive labor. [...] In effect, material excess creates conditions where more and more narratorial nodes are required and available to command the presentation of information.¹⁹⁹

Leaving aside the deeply narratological issues addressed later in Hauser's article, my focus is on the indication of the multiple entities required by the text to detect the dispersion of details; the presence of

¹⁹⁸ Ercolino, *The Maximalist Novel*, 3.

¹⁹⁹ Houser, Heather, "Managing Information and Materiality in "Infinite Jest" and Running the Numbers", in *American Literary History*, Vol. 26, No. 4, (Oxford University Press, Winter 2014): 742-764.

what are referred to as "narratorial nodes," which are a symptom of the informational density that generates such phenomena:

He doesn't have a license, it's not his car, it's a priceless art-object car, [...] he's on a vegetable-run for shattered husks of newcomers just out of detox whose eyes are rolling around in their heads. Has anybody mentioned Gately's head is square? (IJ, 476)

The doubts surrounding this question arise from a magmatic flow of words that is difficult to be channeled by a single entity. As a result, uncertainties and asymmetrical information emerge. In short, the narrative voice is unable to retain all the accumulating details and feels the need to diversify and share this effort. The nodes, therefore, act as entities that help keep the centrifugal mass of information under control. I am approaching another example:

Gately sort of fears these old AA guys with their varicose noses and flannel shirts and white crew cuts and brown teeth and coolly amused looks of appraisals, feels like a kind of low-rank tribal knucklehead in the presence of stone-faced chieftains who rule by some unspoken shamanistic fiat¹³⁷ [...]. (IJ, 354)

¹³⁷ None of these are Don Gately's terms. (IJ, 1026)

Notes like this one highlight the presence of another entity observing, assembling, and altering portions of the text. There's a lack of a single narrative authority capable of effectively coordinating the anarchic

mix of details, conveying the idea that the unfolding of events is a chaotic mass of small, disordered occurrences. This necessitates effort to impose a stable structure on the narrative. However, the presence of multiple voices or entities reveals how complicated it has become to orchestrate the story's events, allowing gaps and shadowy areas to emerge. This is not meant to question the construction of what Ercolino calls “narratorial”, which is “the sum of all of the narrative information advanced by each of the focalizations of the different units constituting the narrative”²⁰⁰, rather, it aims to demonstrate the presence of disembodied voices, summoned within the novel to gather and record as much information as possible. The disembodied voices belong also to *Finnegans Wake*: they are those phrases, comments, opinions that insert themselves into the narrative, bringing with them chatter, in the sense given by Heidegger. Although in *Infinite Jest* we cannot speak of surface-level discourse, the centrifugal purpose remains the same: to increase the details and expand the domain of the maximalist labyrinth. However, the issue of the quantity and density of details remains. If the role of narrative omniscience is to manage the storytelling and prevent the material from exploding, a necessary role within this form, on the other hand, the text continues to increase in volume. To address these issues, it is necessary to observe what surrounds *Infinite Jest*. I believe, in fact,

²⁰⁰ Ercolino, *The Maximalist Novel*, 99-100.

that it shares many of the characteristics of what John Johnston identifies as novels of information multiplicity²⁰¹.

I reconnect to Ceserani's insight regarding the transformations introduced into culture by late capitalism: a new apparatus of information proliferation emerges, radiating from social structures beginning in the 1960s-1970s. However, information systems produce data that is not always usable; instead of dissipating, it branches out, expands, and becomes functional for other systems. The viral force of this technological element becomes a focal point for a series of novels published between 1973 and 1991. William Gaddis, Thomas Pynchon, Don DeLillo, William Gibson are authors who grapple with the uncontainable dispersion of the virtual, through works increasingly defined by sophisticated technological information, communicative networks, and a vast expansion of entertainment. One could argue that colossal prose and similar phenomena of dispersion were already present in the literary works produced by John Dos Passos, Musil, or Joyce, who simulate a prose style akin to that of the novel of information multiplicity. What distinguishes these postmodern American authors is the cultural horizon within which this literary phenomenon is developed and achieves its own coherence. Johnston distinguishes two main approaches within this form: one focuses on the antinomic component structuring the novels, while the other addresses material

²⁰¹ Johnston, John, *Information Multiplicity: American Fiction in the Age of Media Saturation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998).

circumstances. The first identifies formal strategies that not only record information in its semantic contradictions but also restage the very proliferation that characterizes it. The second is concerned with relating the individual to what is fundamentally new, that is “the emergence of an electronic communications industry and the commodification of information as a new kind of raw material.”²⁰² Landing in a place that is not only geographically, but also anthropologically and culturally “other” means experiencing a different perceptual impact. In the previous section, I focused heavily on vertigo – its structure and perception – precisely because it is an effect of the impact of the new digital universe, which establishes a new epistemology: a new configuration of knowledge that redefines the relationship between the individual and the world. Speaking of cinema, specifically the movements of the camera, Walter Benjamin in his essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1936) explains that technologies are transformative; they do not merely provide new operational prosthetics to enhance the powers of manipulating reality, but change the very way in which individuals see, represent, and experience the world²⁰³. In short, they bring to light entirely new structural formations of matter.²⁰⁴ It is therefore possible to explain the convulsive gaze, the overabundance

²⁰² Yet it would be mistaken to deny the sense of technological novelty to modernist writers: they are embedded in a historical and material context where new media—film, the phonograph, or the typewriter—are completely separate entities. By contrast, postmodernist writers capture the effects of media within a context already transformed. Mass media produce global forms of telecommunications, networks, and computational technologies; they overcome isolation and reach an interconnection of systems. Ivi., 25.

²⁰³ Bertoni, *Letteratura. Teoria, metodi, strumenti*, 16.

²⁰⁴ Benjamin, Walter, *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit* (1936), translated as *L'opera d'arte nell'epoca della sua riproducibilità tecnica*, (Torino: Einaudi, 1999), 41.

of external inputs to process, the organization managed by the orchestrator and narrative nodes, and the presence of footnotes through the lens of informational multiplicity. *Infinite Jest* reproduces this centrifugal movement within itself, working both antagonistically and collaboratively with data.

Working with such a wealth of information allows one to make the most of what Federico Bertoni calls “relational complexity”²⁰⁵, which is the ability to architecturally construct a novel through a labyrinth of connections. *Infinite Jest* exploits all the possibilities of *dispositio*, that is, the capacity to configure and link individual functional elements within a discourse. A detail embedded within a broader context, for example, a fragment, paragraph, or sentence, reappears in another textual space pages later. This sets in motion a series of analogies, echoes, and references that gradually compose the novel’s theatrical backdrop, creating a dense network of connections within the novel, enhancing its resilience and durability and compelling the reader to engage in a reading attentive to every detail. Yet there is also the risk of getting lost in the labyrinth. During reading, it is natural to question whether all this information is truly functional, whether it enhances the understanding of Wallace’s fictional world or is merely redundant background that can be overlooked. This is where the notion of “cruft”, as elaborated by David Letzler in his book *The Cruft of Fiction: Mega-Novels and the Science of Paying Attention*, comes into play:

²⁰⁵ Bertoni, *Letteratura. Teorie, metodi, strumenti*, 109.

Defined by *The New Hacker's Dictionary* as “Excess; superfluous junk; used esp. of redundant or superseded code,” cruft is generally characterized as code that is “[p]oorly built, possibly over-complex.” Cruft is not technically wrong, but it is unnecessary, inelegant, or too complicated for its own good. The term has widened to cover several digital phenomena, especially within wikiculture, where it is often applied to encyclopedic text that editors find trivial, overwritten, redundant, or unreadable²⁰⁶.

From the intersection of excess and uselessness arise those passages that are both redundant and complex, so characteristic of *Infinite Jest*. Viewed through the lens of “cruft”, they become material useful for stimulating an active response from the reader, who must react by developing the ability to filter, select, and discriminate the information within the “junk text”²⁰⁷ that would otherwise obscure the reading experience. *Finnegans Wake* and *Infinite Jest* incorporate extensive areas of redundancy: Shem’s room, the waiting room of Charles Tavis, are just examples where excess becomes apparent through an abundance of irrelevant details, whose extraordinary discursive proliferation is almost entirely independent of plot and character. However, this excess of material risks triggering what Levey calls “blockage”²⁰⁸: engaging with these novels inevitably leads to data overload, where each individual detail demands greater attention until the mind can no longer accommodate the content. However, I believe that Letzler's category is less suited to the passages I discussed previously when the discussion shifts into the

²⁰⁶ Letzler, David, *The Cruft of Fiction. Mega-Novels and the Science of Paying Attention* (Nebraska: Nebraska University Press, 2017), 6.

²⁰⁷ Ivi., 42-43.

²⁰⁸ Levey, *Maximalism in Contemporary American Fiction. The Uses of Details*, 44.

domain of Adornian dialectics highlighted by Bergholtz; the multiplicity of data claims a self-critical function within the maximalist negative dialectic, developing those contrasting cognitive states that must remain unresolved. The nodes of this argument allow the reader to see them as emerging lands that protrude, where redundancy does not equate to uselessness but is instead a symptom and indication of their necessity. This reopens an unresolved issue highlighted also by Letzler: the presence of encyclopedic inserts, which appear to be mere phenomena of craft and are often deemed unreadable²⁰⁹. The presence of technical-scientific knowledge can be seen as a mimetic choice: the fictional world of *Infinite Jest* acknowledges the existence of knowledge that has become commonplace and is manipulated with ease. Therefore, I would like to demonstrate their value and structural necessity, as they are the formal consequence of the pressure exerted by certain themes within the novel. I will provide some examples. But first, a few words on Letzler's theory.

How does one read this note? If one does not have a background in pharmaceutical chemistry or practical knowledge of synthetic street drugs, one simply can't. Since the narrator declines to explain the distinctions between, or qualities common to, the drugs he lists, the note's sequence of acronyms and Greek prefixes will be illegible to uninformed readers. At the same time, those with the knowledge to successfully differentiate these terms have nothing to learn: for them the passage's catalog of various drugs is entirely redundant. In either case the note adds nothing of practical use to our understanding of the narrative. One might decide, then, that the notes are simply unreadable.²¹⁰

²⁰⁹ Letzler, *The Craft of Fiction. Mega-Novels and the Science of Paying Attention*, 84-86.

²¹⁰ Ibid.

The note in question employs highly specialized pharmacological language, rendering it impenetrable and betraying its encyclopedic utility. In short, nothing can really be learned from it, so it may indeed be considered cruff. Letzler's perspective makes perfect sense; however, it is not possible to dismiss these sections of text so hastily.

I believe that the frequency with which "everything is here" inserts appear, such as the one about the drug "Tenuate" analyzed previously, is a detail that requires closer observation and discussion. Along with other field of hard science, *Infinite Jest* is saturated with pharmacological, medical, and toxicological knowledge, which it often weaves into its pages. Sometimes this appears in the footnotes, as Letzler notes, while at other times it is conveyed through characters, such as in Pemulis's "Big Buddy powwow, where the littler kids receive big-brotherly-type support" (IJ, 66-67). It is a type of knowledge and language that, in Wallace's futuristic world, seems to have embedded itself in the daily lives of the ETA kids, who express their unhealthy fascination with drugs that can sedate them to manage competitive stress, as well as with medications that enhance their physical abilities²¹¹. This reflects O.N.A.N.'s hyper-medicalized germophobic society, deprived of waste and stripped of anything that could corrupt the purity of the body, where drug abuse goes unspoken and is secretly accepted

²¹¹ "SOVWAR's designated launcher is the butch and suspiciously muscular Ann Kittenplan (who twelve-and-a-half looks like a Bielorussian shot-putter and has to buy urine more than quarter-annually and has a way more lush and impressive mustache than for instance Hal himself could raise, and who gets these terrible rages" (IJ, 330).

among young athletes; while near the Concavity, due to the barren wasteland produced by James' fusion system, the toxic effects of experialism on human bodies unfold: the description of Gertraude, the "first Swiss children of southwestern Switzerland to become born without a skull" (IJ, 778), or Hal's account of the mutant creatures in the Quebec region, such as "Québecer kids the size of Volkswagen shlumping around with no skulls", "Québecers with cloracne and tremors and olfactory hallucinations and infants born with just one eye in the middle of their forehead", followed by atmospheric and ecosystemic alterations, for instance "green sunsets and indigo rivers and grotesquely asymmetrical snow-crystals [...]. They get the feral-hamster incursions and the Infant-depredations and the corrosive fogs" (IJ, 1017). Houser in *Ecosickness in Contemporary U.S. Fiction* sees the chain of effects caused by experialist politics as a particular dynamic closely related to the experience of the contemporary world:

Imagining territorial reconfiguration, toxification, and energy production, Wallace presents a predicament that is acutely familiar to twenty-first-century Americans: consumer and industrial growth fuels the demand for energy, the production of which alters the environment irremediably.²¹²

This is a topic I had discussed at the beginning of the previous section, yet here it ties into discursive consequences that the reader must confront, that is, the novel's environmental consciousness, which, by intersecting various fields of medicine, generates those encyclopedic

²¹² Houser, Heather, *Ecosickness in Contemporary U.S. Fiction. Environment and Affect* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 137.

frameworks that center on the notion, concept, and culture of a specialized field of knowledge. This is why I believe labeling these areas as “cruft” is not entirely accurate; they are sedimented content, reflecting the irregularities reproduced within *Infinite Jest* and becoming matters of form, style, and narrative rhythm. They are complex, certainly, but not useless²¹³.

2.4) Voices without bodies

²¹³ My explanation does not cover all the fields of knowledge introduced in *Infinite Jest*, it is true, but this example of mine attempts to view some passages of the novel through a different prism, providing a plausible explanation for passages of dubious functionality. Therefore, this is a way to “re-functionalize” them and insert them into the structure of the novel, demonstrating that complexity is not self-serving, but leaves faint traces that can be analyzed.

I will use this final section for a close comparison between the disembodied voices in *Finnegans Wake* and *Infinite Jest*, as this theme triggers a series of significant formal choices that are worth discussing. In the first chapter, when discussing the centrifugal forces set in motion by Joyce, I described the nature of the satellites present in the novel and their dizzying proliferation. What I call satellites are the characters that exist on the fringes of the novel, who are mentioned but do not occupy significant textual space. They remain in the shadows, at the edges, yet still manage to make their voices heard and step onto the stage. *Finnegans Wake* is an explosion of characters, names, and identities, where HCE and his normative letters are just one among the many examples of the evanescent cosmogony. Joyce's constant work on the materials of the *Wake* ultimately becomes immanent to the characters populating the novel: the continuous cutting, assembling, organizing, and selecting of every cultural object takes shape in the gallery of individuals. The impure and generic medium he uses, besides allowing for infinite and variable recombination, is extremely malleable: "Bits and pieces are picked up and incorporated into the texture with little modification, while the precise nature of each individual fragment is not always of great importance"²¹⁴. From here arises Joyce's nature as a *bricoleur*²¹⁵, someone who gathers fragments, combining and recombining them "until these struggles

²¹⁴ Hart, Clive, *Structure and Motif in "Finnegans Wake"* (London: Faber and Faber, 1962), 35.

²¹⁵ Norris, *The Decentered Universe of Finnegans Wake: A Structuralist Analysis*, 130-132.

are coded as character and event.”²¹⁶ Stripped of their historical context, torn from their social dimension, and transplanted into *Finnegans Wake*, these characters are dehumanized, without origin and without destiny. They are the product of Joyce's relentless exercise, his accumulation of cultural fragments. These entities continue to multiply, invading the novel, remaining in constant flux, and rejecting every conventional rule that would fix them to a particular role, position, or status. Finn Fordham notes that whenever a character latches onto anchoring elements, thereby attempting to belong to a social context and halt its fluidity – such as that of certain professions²¹⁷ – arise “some element from another conflicting historical framework.”²¹⁸ In short, Joyce extends the reach of what Mimmo Cangiano calls the “attempt to create a *mimesis* of reality entirely experienced in a state of contingency”²¹⁹, whereas the precursor is the nebulous entity of Perelà in *Il Codice di Perelà* (1911) by Aldo Palazzeschi. Cangiano sees in this individual made of smoke without a fixed identity the “contemporary crisis of Ego and of objective reality”, resulting in an “attack on any objectivity unwilling to accept its own transitoriness, the resulting crisis of the classical Cartesian notion of Subject.”²²⁰

²¹⁶ Fordham, Finn, *Lots of Fun at Finnegans Wake. Unravelling Universals* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 219.

²¹⁷ For instance: writer, alchemist, postman, Madame of a brothel, striptease artist, mercenary, innkeeper, General, tailor, policeman.

²¹⁸ *Ivi.*, 220.

²¹⁹ Cangiano, Mimmo, *Modernism and the Disruption of History. The Italian Example*, in Borbély, Mihálycsa, and Petrar (edited by) *Temporalities of Modernism* (Milano: Ledizioni, 2022), 84.

²²⁰ *Ibid.*

If the shifting atmosphere of the *Wake* imposes an identity fluidity that extends throughout the novel, the narrative is profoundly affected. Managing a substantial number of characters and voices inevitably breaks the plot into numerous digressive fragments. Levin correctly observes that *Finnegans Wake* “does not narrate; it elaborates; it projects a poignant series of cross-references.”²²¹ To give on brief example:

To let you have your plank and your bonewash (O the hastroubles you lost!), to give you your pound of platinum and a thousand thongs a year (O, you were excruciated, in honour bound to the cross of your own cruelfiction!) to let you have your Sarday spree and holineight sleep (fame would come to you and twixt a sleep and a wake) and leave to lie till Paraskivee and the cockroc crows for Danmark. (O Jonathan, your estomach!) (FW, 192.16-22)

The ones in parentheses are voices emerging from the void, inserting themselves into other characters’ dialogues and seeming to address the reader directly. It’s impossible to define the entity that produced them, yet they are there, drifting across the page and persisting, pressing at the edges of the story to claim their own space. As I noted in the first chapter, discussing the mechanical additive mechanisms of modern epic, these digressions become a central part of the *Wake*, and Joyce draws the reader's attention toward the “vocative nature of these parenthetical interruptions”, which “characterizes the multiple and competing voices of the *Wake*.”²²² It is the construction of a

²²¹ Levin, Harry, *James Joyce: A Critical Introduction*. 2nd ed. (London: Faber and Faber, 1960), 165.

²²² Bonapfel, M. Elizabeth, “Joyce's Punctuation and the Evolution of Narrative in *Finnegans Wake*”, *Journal of Modern Literature*, Vol. 42, No. 4, *Joyce, Beckett, Coetzee* (Indiana University Press, Summer 2019): 62.

world-effect, a universal polyphony that allows the voices of everyone to be heard, even though this “everyone” is not physically present or recognizable most of the time.²²³ A miniature version of the polyphony is presented in the episode of the “Feenichts Playhouse” (FW, 219.02) within the chapter about “The Mime of Mick, Nick and the Maggies” in the second book. It is a theatrical performance that takes place every evening at twilight, when light and shadow blend together. The main show is meant to be a “Magnificent Transformation Scene showing the Radium Wedding of Neid and Moorning and the Dawn of Peace, Pure, Perfect, and Perpetual” (FW, 222.17.19), but it ultimately fails. This performance stages the mechanism governing Joyce's *character-system*; that is, it demonstrates the organization of multiple and varied *character-spaces* within a synthetic structure. This chapter is interesting because the characters on stage are in constant expansion; the narration, in fact, tries to include as many of the children in the theatrical performance as possible: Glugg, Izod, the Floras, Chuff, Ann, Hump, Saunderson, Kate, and the Customers, they are some of the actors who take part in the performance, striving to stand out and prevail, yet inevitably they will disappear from the narrative to make room for someone else who will occupy more textual space. Carol Loeb Shloss's reading, using Alex Woloch's notions of *character-*

²²³ HCE's voice in the long monologue called “Amtsadam, sir”, is one example. His identity becomes recognizable at the end of the second chapter of the third book where, during a kind of séance, or perhaps a psychoanalytic session – since the four judges have now become “bright young chaps of the brandnew brain trust” (FW 529.5) – the “expansive voice” of HCE emerges from the depth of the ground. Hayman speaks of a voice “buried in the nightmare of history.” Hayman, David, *The Wake in Transit* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1990), 193.

system and *character-space*²²⁴, aligns well with the democratic polyphony I mentioned earlier. Shloss sees in the list of child-actors presented at the beginning of the chapter the emergence of competition to remain within the theatrical narrative. Nonetheless, naming someone means granting identity to that individual, but narrating implies an action on their part. To be involved in a plot means to act, to intertwine one's life with other entities, to continuously experience, both within and outside oneself, the presence of others²²⁵. It would seem, then, that the reason Joyce names more and more characters is to convey a sense of crowd, of multitude, namely a pool of people from which to select a few and elevate them to protagonists. In fact, Shloss wonders: "Who is "Ann" or "Kate" or "Saunderson"? Joyce names them only to forsake them. Their minorness serves primarily to create a sense of plenitude, as if a full-blown drama were about to take place."²²⁶ Yet once the performance is over, the narrator wonders what has become of certain characters, "Who is Fleur? Where is Ange? Or Gardoun?" (FW, 252.31-32).

This is the simple mechanism underlying the nineteenth-century realist novel, as well as the subject of Woloch's study in *The One vs. the Many*. It is a structure that unfolds from the tension

²²⁴ Both terms come from the work of Woloch, Alex, *The One vs. The Many. Minor Characters and the Space of the Protagonist in the Novel* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2003).

²²⁵ Mazzoni, *Teoria del romanzo*, 56.

²²⁶ Shloss, Loeb Carol, *Moveable Types. The Character System in "The Mime of Mick, Nick and the Maggies" in II.1* in Devlin and Smedley (edited by) *Allmaziful Plurabilities. Polyvocal Explorations of Finnegans Wake* (Florida: University Press of Florida, 2015), 149-168.

between the individual (the one) and the multitude of secondary characters (the many), as it strives to portray the psychological depth of the protagonist while simultaneously turning its gaze toward a broad and complex social universe to achieve a project of everyday mimesis. The novel adapts to this dynamic, to the possibility of destabilizing the established center and potentially shifting the narrative toward minor characters. This is made possible through formal devices, such as the development of an omniscient narrator. However, this expansion of the narratable domain requires a certain type of character – what Woloch calls allegorical or functional characters – entities that accept subordination, sacrificing themselves in favor of the protagonist who must emerge from among the many. This is precisely what happens during the performance at the Feenichts Playhouse, where certain characters are marginalized and lose the opportunity to possess defining characteristics, ossifying their ability to stand out. Yet the question posed by the narrator at the end of the play implies something else entirely. The absence of those characters is felt and brought back to the center of attention; no entity is overshadowed by the presence of overpowering personalities.

Finnegans Wake, through its disembodied voices, defuses this mimetic violence typical of the nineteenth-century novel, which aims to develop the figure of the hero through the inevitable subordination of secondary characters. Northrop Frye, at the end of his study in *Anatomy of Criticism*, reaches this conclusion:

Who then is the hero who achieves the permanent quest in *Finnegans Wake*? No character in the book itself seems a likely candidate; yet one feels that this book gives us something more than the merely irresponsible irony of a turning cycle. Eventually it dawns on us that it is the *reader* who achieves the quest, the reader who [...] is able to look down on its rotation, and see its form as something more than rotation.²²⁷

Frye is referring to HCE's inability to reconnect the world of dreams with that of waking, but from my perspective, the question of who the hero of the *Wake* is retains all the iridescence of "the many". There is no hero because Joyce attempts to develop a novel in which everyone can have a voice, giving the impression of a popular world where each individual can participate in the story through digressions, constant interruptions, voices that wander and insert themselves into others' dialogues, a profusion of entities.

In Volume Four, Part Three, of *War and Peace*, Pierre dreams of a liquid, vibrating globe shown to him years earlier by his boyhood geography teacher:

"Wait," said the little old man. And he showed Pierre a globe. The globe was an animate, vibrating ball with no fixed dimensions. Its whole surface consisted of drops closely pressed together. These drops moved, changed, several merging into one, or one splitting into many. Each drop tended to expand, to occupy as much space as possible, but others, with a like tendency, compressed it, sometimes destroying it, sometimes merging with it.

"That is life," said the teacher.

"How simple and clear it is," thought Pierre. "How is it that I did not know this before?"²²⁸

²²⁷ Frye, Northrop, *Anatomy of Criticism. Four Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 323.

²²⁸ Tolstoj, Leo, *War and Peace* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 1146.

Following the death of his companion and mentor Karataev, the final image Pierre arrives at in his reflection on the meaning of life is an immense sea of particles – individual lives seeking either to annihilate one another or to merge. Like *Finnegans Wake* and *Infinite Jest*, *War and Peace* is an *opera mondo*, a literary phenomenon that gives the impression of portraying the totality of life. This is precisely what Pierre and the geography teacher are discussing: the planetary representation of the everyday, a multitude of lives “always in motion and in tension, yet perfect and whole, like the globe.”²²⁹ They are in struggle or in symbiosis with each other, in a state of conflict or fusion, striving to coexist in this vast sea that sweeps everything away. He understands that Karataev is “one of the globe’s drops, which spread out and disappear and eventually reemerge.”²³⁰ Tolstoy views reality as a fabric woven from narrative threads, made up of individual destinies that intertwine, each caught within forms of life and power dynamics; the structure that includes them all is grand history, decisive for individual fates yet uncontrollable by any single person. But even though History looms over individual lives, what truly matters are those individual lives themselves. Pierre understands that within each sphere of life, a struggle is being fought that deserves absolute respect and undivided attention. The multitude of characters populating *War and Peace* creates the sensation of standing before that globe traversed by droplets. The reason I decided to discuss *War*

²²⁹ Kaufman, D. Andrew, *Understanding Tolstoy* (Athens: Ohio State University Press, 2011), 114.

²³⁰ *Ivi.*, 135.

and Peace is to explain, from a different and certainly more orderly perspective, the ambitious mimetic project of *Finnegans Wake*. The multitude of characters and overlapping voices represent Pierre's globe, the totality of the world. Joyce chooses to adopt this formal technique to create a polyphonic universe where, though in an anarchic and centrifugal way, everyone deserves attention. In this sense the “Chaosmos of Alle” (FW, 118.21) is a world in continuous tension between order and disorder precisely because it is populated by people.

This extended digression on *Finnegans Wake* serves to revisit questions left open in the first chapter and complementary to what I will now address: the “radical realism” of James Incandenza:

The wraith says that he himself, the wraith, when animate, had dabbled in filmed entertainments, as in making them, cartridges, for Gately's info to either believe or not, and but in the entertainments the wraith himself made, he says he goddamn bloody well made sure that either the whole entertainment was silent or else if it wasn't silent that you could bloody well hear every single performer's voice, no matter how far out on the cinematographic or narrative periphery they were; and that it wasn't just the self-conscious overlapping dialogue of a poseur like Schwulst or Altman, i.e. it wasn't just the crafted imitation of aural chaos: it was real life's real egalitarian babble of figurantless crowds, of the animate world's real agora, the babble³⁴² of crowds every member of which was the central and articulate protagonist of his own entertainment. [...] Which was why, the wraith is continuing, the complete unfiguranted egalitarian aural realism was why party-line entertainment-critics always complained that the wraith's entertainments' public-area scenes were always incredibly dull and self-conscious and irritating, that they could never hear the really meaningful central narrative conversations for all the unaltered babble(/babel) of the peripheral crowd, which they assumed the babble was some self-conscious viewer-hostile heavy-art directorial pose, instead of radical realism.

³⁴² Or possibly *Babel*. (IJ, 835-836, 1076)

Toward the end of the novel, Wallace decides to reveal the artistic status of the author of “Infinite Jest”. The comparison between Wallace and James appears obvious: the two ontological planes on which they move must enter into dialogue, not only due to the semantic oscillation between the book in the reader’s hands and the film in the cinema, but also because of what they aim to represent within their works. It is a long and dense passage, but it is the tear in the paper sky, namely the moment in the novel when what Šklovskij calls the “laying bare of the device”²³¹ occurs: a self-referential technique by which the text draws attention to itself, describes its own compositional methods, and makes explicit the conventions on which it is based. The realism adopted by James is a mimetic form that allows the voices of everyone to be heard – not in a relentless auditory chaos, but rather in the “real life’s real egalitarian babble of figurantless crowds”, where the main action is overwhelmed by the pressure of interference from other characters, becoming lost, impossible to follow. It seems like a perfect description of the *Wake* and of all the devices previously analyzed. Wallace’s novel is structured precisely through radical realism, in what Ercolino calls a “democratic” form of mimesis, made possible by two devices: the fragment and a horizontal dominance in the plot. The former is an element that allows movement from one character to another, shifts

²³¹ Šklovskij, Victor, *Una teoria della prosa* (Torino: Einaudi, 1976), 209.

in place and time, and renders a character the center of that fragment²³². In this way, *Infinite Jest* manages to expand its narrative threads and externalize the possibilities of *dispositio*. Discussing narrative omniscience in nineteenth-century novels, Woloch notes that introducing many characters into the plot encourages the reader to make connections, identify structural patterns, and build their own network of relationships: “The omniscient totality of the nineteenth-century novel compels us to “connect” these individuals—to comprehend forms of social relation which can encompass the diverse populations that people these novels.”²³³ Maximalism takes up this nineteenth-century ambition, pushing it to the extreme by deploying what James calls “fractional actors” (IJ, 834). Ercolino rightly observes that “what counts in the maximalist novel is not the individual character or the single story, but rather a collectivity of characters and a plurality of stories,”²³⁴ and the fragment proves to be the most flexible tool for this totalizing ambition. It prevents the voices from descending into chaos, a condition Joyce instead actively seeks.

²³² Wallace leaves a trace of this behavior earlier in the novel, in James’ fictional performance known as Found Drama: “No see there weren’t any real cartridges or pieces of Found Drama. This was the joke. All it was was you and a couple cronies like Leith or Duquette got out a metro Boston phone book and tore at random and thumbtacked it to the wall and then The Stork would throw a dart at it from across the room. At the page. And the name it hit becomes the subject of the Found Drama. And whatever happens to the protagonist with the name you hit with the dart for like the next hour and a half is the Drama. [...] The joke’s theory was there’s no audience and no director and no stage or set because, The Mad Stork and his cronies argued, in Reality there are none of these things. And the protagonist doesn’t know he’s the protagonist in a Found Drama because in Reality nobody thinks they’re in any sort of Drama. [...] Almost nobody. That’s a very good point. Almost nobody.” (IJ, 1027-1028) It is a passage with a significance very similar to that of radical realism: the character in James’s drama could be anyone, their particularities don’t matter; they suddenly become the epicenter of meaning within the work. This seems akin to how peripheral characters in the narrative, like Ken Erdedy, Kate Gompert, and Poor Tony, claim their own textual space.

²³³ Woloch, *The One vs. The Many. Minor Characters and the Space of the Protagonist in the Novel*, 32.

²³⁴ Ercolino, *The Maximalist Novel*, 57.

The *chaosmos* function, besides being the immanent regulating system within the structure of these novels, is inherited by maximalism precisely because it allows these literary phenomena to approach a “bad infinity” – what Hegel saw in the endless accumulation of many small, singular stories²³⁵. However, bad mimetic infinity is not possible and cannot exist²³⁶: Mazzoni explains that “in the real world mimesis leads inevitably to a violent discrimination between discontinuities worthy of being told and the vast pool of uninteresting stories.”²³⁷ This is what Mazzoni calls “mimetic discontinuity”, or the selective process between individuals who leave a trace and those who remain unnoticed. Nonetheless, maximalist forms seem to resist the mimetic violence that favors the few capable of producing what is interesting. A book published shortly after *Infinite Jest* openly reveals the representative discrimination at the core of storytelling:

The story of a life can be as long or as short as the teller wishes. Whether the life is tragic or enlightened, the classic gravestone inscription marking simply the dates of birth and death has, in its

²³⁵ This project is also shared by other literary phenomena discussed in Ercolino's work. For example, in *Underworld*, in the section *The Cloud of Unknowing*, Marvin, the baseball memorabilia collector, pauses during his planetary wandering in search of the narrative's total-object to reflect on the entangled lives sedimented within the baseball: “The ball brought no luck, good or bad. It was an object passing through. But it inspired people to tell him things, to entrust family secrets and unbreathable personal tales, emit heartfelt sobs onto his shoulder. Because they knew he was their what, their medium of release. Their stories would be exalted, absorbed by something larger, the long arching journey of the baseball itself and his own cockeyed march through the decades.” *Underworld* precisely stages this vast assembly of stories, where each one emerges from the creases of life. The labyrinth created by De Lillo, like that of Wallace, urges the reader to make an effort to connect the scattered threads of the narrative: “You have to know the feel of a baseball in your hand, going back a while, connecting many things.” De Lillo, Don, *Underworld* (New York, Scribner, 1997), 318, 131.

²³⁶ “While each of the characters act individually in their localized environment, their individual actions have multiple connections to lives and narratives beyond their comprehension.” Burn, J. Stephen, *David Foster Wallace's “Infinite Jest”: A Reader's Guide. Second Edition* (New York and London: Continuum, 2003), 58.

²³⁷ Mazzoni, Guido, *Theory of the Novel* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017), 39.

brevity, much to recommend it. However, in the case of Martin Ceccaldi, it seems appropriate to set his life in a socioeconomic context, to say less about the individual than about the society of which he is symptomatic. Carried forward by the sweep of history and their determination to be a part of it, symptomatic individuals lead lives which are, in the main, happy and uncomplicated. A couple of pages are sufficient to summarize such a life. Janine Ceccaldi, on the other hand, belongs to a different and dispiriting class of individuals we can call precursors. [...] Precursors, therefore, require a more detailed study—especially as their lives are often tortuous or confused.²³⁸

With an essayistic shift, Michel Houellebecq synthesizes the underlying dynamics of novels: there are individuals who necessarily need to be described and contextualized, their presence illuminating a historical landscape, while others remain marginalized at the edges since simple individuals swept along by a flow of events, deprived of emotional investment. Houellebecq performs precisely that selection of subject matter, laying out the path for the development of his narrative. Martin Ceccaldi's story does not constitute a point of interest; it does not provide enough incidents to captivate the reader, much like other "symptomatic" individuals like him. Conversely, Janine's story "signifies a belief that particular actions, people, or things, whether real or possible, deserve to be isolated from the limitless expanse of equivalent entities"²³⁹, it belongs to the domain of "particular".

By reclaiming the social scope of the nineteenth-century novel, maximalism has made the multitude one of its structures of meaning – a constitutive element of the genre²⁴⁰ – manifested

²³⁸ Houellebecq, Michel, *Atomised*, trans. by Frank Wynne (London: Vintage, 2000), 26.

²³⁹ Mazzoni, *Theory of the Novel*, 37.

²⁴⁰ *Ivi.*, 387-388.

in *Infinite Jest* as “radical realism”, and in *Finnegans Wake* as the “Chaosmos of Alle”. However, a problem remains: managing so many entities within a single story is complex; for this reason, the realist novel imposes regulatory devices. Woloch explains that realist novel “systematically reconfigures its own allegorical reduction of characters through a pervasive awareness of the distributional matrix”²⁴¹, which means that secondary characters are subjected to a flattening of their three-dimensionality. On one hand, the novel opens up more to the possibility of defocusing the narrative center by shifting toward minor characters, but this inclusivity comes at a price: the allegorical characterization of its characters and their “flatness”²⁴². To summarize: the realist novel exerts a dehumanizing pressure on peripheral characters, while through an omniscient narrator it can shift focus from the central unity to the surrounding entities. Added to this is a centripetal plot structure – a construction of the plot that moves within an atmosphere defined by what Pavel calls “spatial magnetism”²⁴³. The narrator orchestrates the twists and turns of the action, asserting their presence in the act of narration to create coincidences, even implausible ones, where it becomes clear that the characters' threads are carefully guided to intersect and move the plot forward.

²⁴¹ Woloch, *The One vs. The Many. Minor Characters and the Space of the Protagonist in the Novel*, 20.

²⁴² The management of character-space is particularly prominent in Bildungsroman novels, where a hero represents the structural core, surrounded by characters who serve a functional role in their development and enter the work only if they establish a relationship useful to the central unity.

²⁴³ Pavel, *Le vite del romanzo*, 199-200.

These regulatory systems, however, are not applied to *Infinite Jest*, precisely due to the period of mutations and intensities that allows for a slow and viscous transformation of the novel's structure. The nature of the fragment – and the narratorial omniscience that derives from it – account for half of the explanation. The other mechanism that comes into play to keep so many characters under control is a “horizontal dominance”²⁴⁴, which limits the plot development. Now, much like *Finnegans Wake*, *Infinite Jest* also possesses a cyclical plot architecture, characterized by a movement of prolepsis and retrospection that lends an epic scope to the narrative²⁴⁵.

Wallace, however, thematizes this geometric structure: he incorporates it into crucial moments, and it returns as a leitmotif through various characters, fragments, and shining clues²⁴⁶. Among the iterations of this form there is the “circular routine” (IJ, 53) of the ETA students, a daily repetition of their days. Similarly, the activities of the characters at Ennet House undergo little change; even for the AA members, one can speak of a closed regime limited to the

²⁴⁴ It is a formula used by Franco Moretti in his explanation of certain Chinese novels that have entered the literary canon. *Dream of the Red Chamber*, *Water Margin*, or *Jin Ping Mei* host so many characters that one can no longer speak of individuals but rather of groups. This, Moretti comments, creates a completely different type of story and narrative structure compared to European literary conventions. Moretti, Franco, *A una certa distanza. Leggere i testi letterari nel nuovo millennio* (Roma: Carocci, 2020), 126.

²⁴⁵ Moretti, *Opere Mondo*, 228.

²⁴⁶ In addition to the circularity of the plot and routine, there are the “marijuana thinking” (IJ, 335) loops that Hal falls into while watching the Eschaton game, as well as the endless loop in which the victims of the “Infinite Jest” are trapped. The term “annulation” (IJ, 65, 309, 323, 502-503) refers to a physical process in the shape of a ring. The celebratory fires that Marathe and Steeply observe on the desert plain below consist of flames “burning in a seeming ring instead of a sphere (IJ, 423) . Marathe’s confusion when he misspeaks and says “recircling” instead of “recycling” (IJ, 643) creates what Lavagetto calls “the error machine”, which is a slip, a lapse that draws attention to a subtle and concealed trace that places the reader before something larger. Lavagetto, Mario, *La macchina dell'errore. Storia di una lettura* (Torino: Einaudi, 1996).

cyclicity of the days²⁴⁷. In short, the plot is neither traversed by nor produces upheavals or transformations, in other words, “events” – those elements that alter the situation and result in a shift of state – are drastically reduced or attenuated. As previously mentioned, Wallace indulges in the play of digression and diversion, introducing *allogrius* material. He does not develop the narrative lines because what matters does not lie in the fulfillment of an event, but rather coagulates in what happens or has happened on the sidelines.

²⁴⁷ The most evident example is the presence of clichés and banalities that new AA members must embrace in order to begin their journey.

Avoiding any development and permeating the plot with a false movement²⁴⁸, this is the horizontal dominance, a technique that allows the surrounding world of each individual character to expand while simultaneously building a centrifugal plot that softens surprises and twists²⁴⁹.

²⁴⁸ “This sense of a “dreamer’s unmoving sprint” resides in the way the novel’s plot advances and retreats at the same time.” Boswell, *Understanding David Foster Wallace*, 70.

²⁴⁹ I use the term “softens” because turns occur in the shadowed zones of the novel, or rather, they are not narrated, producing an effect that at first seems disorienting, but is immediately replaced by a “natural”, notarial situation, devoid of climax. An example will clarify this shift of action or imbalance outside the narrative. One of the novel’s early fragments focuses on Ken Erdedy, a character who seemingly disappears from the story, only to reappear later as a member of Ennet House. The factor that produces imbalance in his narrative and constitutes his character's transformation is omitted. Even the short-circuit between the novel’s beginning and end is a scar in the plot. Yet these wounds are part of a deliberate strategy. “The difference which seemed the source of value becomes a distance to be bridged by the activity of reading and interpretation. The strange, the formal, the fictional, must be recuperated or naturalized, brought within our ken, if we do not want to remain gaping before monumental inscriptions”, here Jonathan Culler is describing the common process of filling in the gaps left by the narrative, organizing the available material, connecting it, and thus assuming a possible interpretation. Culler calls this “naturalization”, and it is a mechanism that can be triggered through various strategies: Shakespeare, for example, uses “strategic opacity”, William Blake uses the “scars from the gouging” of textual surface, and Dostoevsky employs “reticence”. In *Infinite Jest*, the wounds are both deep and surface-level, in the sense that the kernels withdrawn from the narrative are sometimes microscopic, other times macroscopic. “From a theoretical point of view, the premise of plots does not necessarily require that there be public action”, emphasizes Mazzoni, yet this decentering of events creates the impression of mere false movement. To clarify the term “naturalization” Culler, Jonathan, *Structuralist Poetics. Structuralism, linguistics and the study of literature* (London and New York: Routledge, 1975), 157. The various techniques of opacity, textual wounds, and reticence come respectively from Greenblatt, Stephen, *Will in the World* (London: The Bodley Head, 2016) pp. 323-324; Connolly, J. Tristanne, *William Blake and the Body* (Hampshire-New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2002), 11; Ghidini, Maria Candida, *Dostoevskij*, (Roma: Salerno Editrice, 2017), 44. On the structure of the narrative, the quote comes from Mazzoni, *Theory of the Novel*, 44.

Coda

Auctor

As often happens when seeking the truth, while some questions find answers, just as many arise. Following a path means neglecting others that branch off from it, leading or seeming to lead to destinations far removed from the one reached by this work. The decision to critically approach certain aspects of the novel was driven by their ability to illuminate larger portions of a landscape. Deferral, the vertigo of the list, *Das Gerede*, the expansion of the character-system – these are footholds capable of engaging with the subject, points of reference that isolate a series of specific characteristics. Examining these phenomena closely reveals their radiating power, capable of organizing and interpreting a territory far broader than the initial point of reference. What emerges from this work is, therefore, a synthetically subjective vision of the complexity present in *Finnegans Wake* and *Infinite Jest*, one that requires a certain degree of blindness to follow the course of formal analysis. Viewed from a distance, this work takes on a dual movement: alongside the typical gesture of historicism, which seeks to situate each work within the time and space of its origin, it incorporates a complementary and opposing movement, allowing for the comparison of families of works born from different circumstances. Modernist *opere mondo* and the maximalist novel are bound together by this comparative need: implicit within the folds of the argument lies the Viconian principle that the human mind can rediscover itself across different

epochs²⁵⁰. Thus, it is possible to trace the persistence of the chaos-cosmos function even in the present, where it continues to exert its influence on contemporary surrounding forms. Novels such as *2666* (2004) by Roberto Bolaño, *Against the Day* (2006) by Thomas Pynchon, *Canti del caos* (2001-2009) by Antonio Moresco, *Solenoid* (2015) by Mircea Cărtărescu, *Jerusalem* (2016) by Alan Moore, *Ferrovie del Messico* (2022) by Gian Marco Griffi, continue to pursue a grand mimetic project through polychronic narratives, rich with characters, places, and digressions. In short, the legacy of this function resurfaces once again in the hypermodern era, confronting totalizing narratives anew.

²⁵⁰ Auerbach, Eric, “Contributi linguistici all’interpretazione della *Scienza nuova* di G.B. Vico” in *Letteratura mondiale e metodo* (Milano: nottetempo, 2022), 171-186. Mazzoni, Guido, *Auerbach: una filosofia della storia*, *Allegoria*, 56 (2007): 80-101.

Although they exhibit different characteristics²⁵¹, these novels still strive to encapsulate the prismatic nature of humanity in its entirety. The methods and techniques may change, but the underlying matrix remains the same. Mechanical additions of new satellites, encyclopedic and essayistic inserts, fragments that frenetically infiltrate the pages – all are instances in which the author seeks to

²⁵¹ Without delving too deeply into the future and the complex landscape of the contemporary phenomena, the aforementioned novels have very little in common with *Infinite Jest*, *Underworld*, or *The Recognitions* (1955) by William Gaddis. This divergence is also evident in the works of authors who have previously embraced this form: *2666* and *Against the Day* already reveal substantial differences compared to their predecessors, *The Savage Detectives* (1998) and *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973). The sharp edges of difficulty are softened: the absence of sudden shifts in direction, perspective, and focus strips these works of the characteristic hysteria that once defined the maximalist genre; this is also evident in the lack of adherence of these texts to the frenetic circulation of information, often digital, that defines postmodernist maximalism. The encyclopedic exuberance that imparts the typical "zaniness" to the text dissolves, understood, however, in the aesthetic framework of Sianne Ngai. In *Our Aesthetic Categories. Zany, Cute, Interesting* (2012), Ngai explains that "zaniness more specifically calls up the character of a worker whose particularity lies paradoxically in the increasingly dedifferentiated nature of his or her labor", specifically zany "demand that they be able to take on virtually any job at any moment, in an incessant flow or stream of activity". I believe that a possible response to the iridescence of the maximalist phenomenon must involve a deeper investigation into its connection with the zany aesthetic, which could potentially define its frenetic encyclopedism and hybrid realism. Yet, the loss of "textual zaniness" is not the only substantial difference. In contemporary epic forms the narratives remain broad and deep, but time stretches even further, the rhythm grows melancholic, and the plots advance laboriously, stripping themselves of central cores. Alongside this narrative lethargy, there is a constant movement of characters – a movement that crosses cities, nations, and continents, traversing borders, always in search of or fleeing from something. Planetary ambition translates into an obsession with places, with the spaces inhabited by human beings. Far removed from Joyce's completism for Dublin, the new epic phenomena possess a different awareness of the globe, its composition, and its passableness. This tendency aligns with a different aspiration toward completeness, driving these novels to expand narratively by integrating a range of historical and geopolitical factors into the structure of work. This extended digression on some mutations of contemporary epic introduces a new field of possibilities for *opere mondo*: although their mimetic gesture remains unchanged, the titles I reference reveal affinities with the adventure novel, a genre that witnessed the very birth of the novel form. But beyond the similarities and traces that remain on the surface, what such a mutation seems to signify is the end of the maximalist experience, where its postmodern charge reaches exhaustion, crystallizing into a new style. The term "textual zaniness" is not mine but is used by Grausam, Daniel, *On Endings: American Postmodern Fiction and the Cold War* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2011), 42–46, in reference to the *Courier's Tragedy* by Pynchon in *The Crying of Lot 49*, though with a different interpretation. Ngai's approach and explanation add significant nuances, with the cited sections drawn from *Our Aesthetic Categories. Zany, Cute, Interesting* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, London and England: Harvard University Press, 2012), 8-9. The concept of "completism" derives from an analysis by David Kurnick on *The Savage Detectives*, although his interpretation assumes a new form of realism. I do not entirely agree with this perspective, as I argue, as I have repeated multiple times, that the foundational core of these expansive narratives remains essentially unchanged. Nevertheless, his argument is intriguing, and I therefore refer to his text for further exploration Kurnick, David, *The Savage Detectives Reread* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2022), 45-46 and to the analysis conducted by Gabriele Lazzari in *New Global Realism: Thinking Totality in the Contemporary Novel* (London: Bloomsbury, 2024), 155. The end of the maximalist experience and the emergence of slow adventures are the focus of Samir Sellami's study, *Hyperbolic Realism. A Wild Reading of Pynchon's and Bolaños's Late Maximalist Fiction* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2024), 80-81, 176.

add, to expand the narrative and its scope. The material absorbed by the novel, taken individually, reveals unique characteristics in both content and style²⁵². However, when one considers the process itself – the act of adding – all these literary phenomena seem to resonate with one another. I believe that the underlying nature of this hypertrophy lies in the archetypal sense of the word *author*, which is an agent noun derived from *auctus*, the past participle of *augere*, meaning "to increase". Compulsively adding is the way the maximalist form communicates a vision of the world, overcoming the bad infinity to which every novel is condemned by being, necessarily, only the story of certain particular beings. Yet, it is not merely about adding. Throughout this work, the pronounced prolixity and length of these texts have been discussed repeatedly, always attempting to explain this choice by providing contingent causes and contextualization.

As Moretti claims, major innovations born of experimentation are never intentional; they proceed gropingly, stumbling in the dark of

²⁵² The critical path followed by Ercolino highlights a tapestry of the maximalist novel woven from diverse threads, which find areas of overlap and intersections. In this way, he identifies resonances between novels, such as the theme of addiction in *Infinite Jest* and *The Corrections* (2001) by Jonathan Franzen.

textual peripheries until, through accumulation, they solidify²⁵³. This observation is revisited by Ercolino in his chapter on the length of maximalist novels, eventually turning toward the fetishistic nature of the object itself²⁵⁴. However, there is something else that must be brought into focus: the whole that forms from the aggregation of individual elements around a structure becomes maximalist when it manifests a hyperbolic character. In the categorizations of ancient rhetoric, hyperbole appears as a technique of amplification, which by its very nature leans toward accumulation²⁵⁵. It is a term that encompasses the excess, hypertrophy, and exaggeration of this genre, as is often emphasized by the varied terminology used to define it²⁵⁶; but the hyperbolic disposition is also a deep structure that one encounters as soon as the semantic gradations of the novel's origins are considered. As Terrinoni explains, the verb *to romance* refers to excess, creativity, and speaking in a hyperbolic manner²⁵⁷, therefore,

²⁵³ Moretti revisits a passage from Shklovsky in which, discussing *War and Peace*, he argues that formal innovation progresses quantitatively – that is, through texts that have a greater amount of space at their disposal. Applying this idea to *Ulysses*, and specifically to the case of stream of consciousness, Moretti examines how this narrative form emerged through multiple attempts, facilitated by an expansive textual surface that allows for creative freedom. He further adds that the very structure of the epic encourages narrative expansion: digressions accumulate alongside the central action, slowing its progression and serving as a flexible material for experimentation. Placing the episode – and thus the innovation – at the forefront would immediately trap it within the necessities of the plot. The textual periphery functions as a protected space, where time slows down, allowing for versatility and flexibility to carry out experiments. Moretti, *Opere Mondo*, 178.

²⁵⁴ Ercolino, *The Maximalist Novel*, 19-25.

²⁵⁵ Samir Sellami identifies the presence of hyperbole in the writings of the Roman orator Quintilian, for whom it was already a means of showcasing the necessary excess – following a series of failed attempts in the act of designation. Sellami, *Hyperbolic Realism. A Wild Reading of Pynchon's and Bolaños Late Maximalist Fiction*, 31-33.

²⁵⁶ In addition to "maximalism," it is possible to find terms such as "mega-novels," "encyclopedic novel," "total novels," and "art of excess." This indicates a consistent search for vocabulary to associate with this category of novels, aiming to convey their vastness.

²⁵⁷ Terrinoni, *Joyce e la fine del romanzo*, 39

one of the paths available to the *auctor* – the one who adds – through the novel is that of exaggeration, the accumulation of material.

The common ground of these etymological excavations I am conducting reveals the subterranean pathways of a literary field of possibilities that periodically reemerges in systemic continuity. These branches trace the foundations of the great 19th-century novels, when the novel form began to rival philosophical systems in representing the totality of life. I speak of continuity because, when observing literary history from the perspective of technical change, the narrative possibilities employed by maximalist novelists at the start of the 21st century were shaped by the polystoric novels that preceded them. Undoubtedly, new devices have expanded the ways of storytelling, but the raw material of the novel remains unchanged²⁵⁸.

However, what I sought to highlight in these final lines is the profound backcloth glimpsed beyond the form of these novels – a depth that hints at an enduring interest in singular and finite lives, following their trajectories within an atmospheric regime. By externalizing "the objective fragmentation of the world into worlds,"²⁵⁹ maximalism not only internalizes it as content but also reflects its atomized form. In this sense, the complexity of maximalism can be regarded as a reclamation of the primary paradigm of the novelistic form. Anchored around the figure of the author and the novel, the maximalist novel, as demonstrable, thrives

²⁵⁸ Mazzoni, *Teoria del romanzo*, 362.

²⁵⁹ Mazzoni, *Theory of the Novel*, 344.

on amplifying universal fates, endlessly unfolding them without ever severing the initiatory rituality intertwined with the figure of the author and the novel. The numerous passages addressed earlier create a vision of the world, rendering it narratable, frameable, yet neither containable nor conclusively definable. This implies that to speak of complexity is, inherently, to speak of the novel.

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