**De-confusing Confession at *Finnegans Wake***

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Joyce began his career in fiction by putting confession under a sign of suspicion: with furtive gossip about the late Father Flynn, who, according to his sister, had been found ‘sitting up by himself in the dark in his confession-box … laughing-like softly to himself’ (*D* 17). Joyce closed that career, writing, according to Nora, late into the night in his room the dark fiction of *Finnegans Wake*, also laughing to himself.[[1]](#footnote-1) The mysterious subject of both sets of laughter can only be guessed at. Is *Finnegans Wake*, as some have thought, a confession of sorts?[[2]](#footnote-2) Is Joyce somehow suspect because, resembling his creation Flynn, he is unable to take confession and sin seriously? The enigma of what was so funny is part of what keeps the machinery of interpreting Joyce’s works ticking over.

The varied settings, forms and processes of confession, from church to parlour, courtroom to consulting room, and the multifaceted issues that surround them – psychological, social, and historical – provide abundant ways into the maze of *Finnegans Wake*. Some routes through have been acknowledged, but it is still a relatively uninspected theme of the book.[[3]](#footnote-3) Being a labyrinth, we wander in the *Wake* and mistake our path, but errors of reading are so inevitable that they are easily forgiven, and not felt as errors as such. And nor are they guaranteed to be portals of discovery instead. Given such entangled multiplicity, thinking about confession is liable to slip into confusion. Joyce is well aware of this possibility, for while he eschewed confession in his life, he explored it throughout his work. He plays with the association that the half-rhyme confession-confusion seems to endorse. On three occasions in *Finnegans Wake*, he fuses the process of confession with a state of confusion: ‘the pardonable confusion’ (*FW* 119.33), ‘general uttermosts confussion’ (353.25), and ‘the confusional’ (520.12). As a way to introduce terms for this chapter I will begin by offering exegesis of the first two of these fused phrases. I will then provide eight observations about confession in *Finnegans Wake*, intended to de-confuse the issues, before concluding about the role of confession and identity.

The first of the above phrases – ‘the pardonable confusion’ - appears in chapter I.5, which describes ‘The Letter’, ALP’s testimony that is supposed to prove HCE’s innocence and save him from having to confess or testify. One section (119.12-124.21) uses the language of Sir Edward Sullivan’s 1914 introduction to the Book of Kells, a paradigm of and inspiration for *Finnegans Wake* itself. In Sullivan’s description, there are traces of a condescending tone: ‘the quaintness of its striking portraiture’ (1) and ‘a number of droll and impish figures’ (36). Joyce augments this in his parody of Sullivan, which explains why the ‘confusion’ is patronisingly judged as ‘pardonable’: such verdicts are made to confer authority on the judge. While the incredible intricacies of the Book of Kells are supposed to illuminate, communicate and reflect a profound wonder at God’s word and creation, judging the incredible intricacies of ALP’s letter and Joyce’s text as a *confusion* invites a suspicion that the *Wake* is in error and has something to confess, even if that something proves to be ‘pardonable’. Readers find some relief in such metonymic logic, where the book as a whole seems to be represented by descriptions of local states. At first glance, the book is clearly in a state of general confusion, and readers might well suspect that, lurking in its dark depths, there are things which need confessing, on behalf of its characters or even its author. Some crime, though covered up, is blatantly there. Like the hunchback which HCE endures, the misshapen form of the language admits to some crime’s existence though it never reveals its exact content. Calling the confusion ‘pardonable’, judgement precedes evidence. In a move that is typical of the *Wake*, Joyce pre-empts criticism of himself and of his book, by parodying judgemental perspectives on it. This defers the act of confession: why confess one’s sins, when you can have your confessor do it for you, especially when they get it wrong and condemn themselves in the process, leaving you blameless? As this essay shows, this is a common pattern in *Finnegans Wake* which, far from being written in a confessional mode, is continually a subversion of it.

The second phrase that combines confession and confusion pops up immediately after what is, I would argue, the keystone of *Finnegans Wake*:Buckley shooting the Russian General. Once Buckley’s rifle ‘*expolodotonates*’, there follows a ‘*general uttermosts confussion*’ (353.23-25), which, brilliantly fusing ‘fission’ and ‘fusion’, sounds an anticipatory echo of a nuclear explosion, something that was being projected in weapons research during the 1930s. Though at one level it describes a specific moment of intense dispersal, people running for cover from a thunderstorm, it also proffers a broader description of the book’s overall condition: the noise is an all-purpose and extreme confession, voiced *for* and *by* ‘the general’, that is, a military commander, but also (as per Hamlet’s usage), the generality of mankind, or the people. All violence and suffering indirectly confesses a common human guilt. But the precise content of this ‘confession’ is also obscured through a maximal and extreme fusion or confusion of confessions that *utters most*, that speaks more sins than anyone else. This evokes, with sensational apocalypticism, a prayer for forgiveness going up amongst the clouds and sounds, as it were, of an atomic (‘Adomic’ [615.06]) explosion. The muddled layerings of international politics and domesticity, make this explosion less globally tragic and frightening than that: it’s hard to distinguish catastrophe in amongst the cacophonic contingencies of the *Wake’s* ‘confussions’. All this ‘*general* *uttermosts*’ *confusion* undermines the shame of confession, for it is, moreover, hard to tell the brag from the agenbite, denial from avowal.

In order to disentangle and defuse the *Wake’s* ‘confussion’, to *de-confuse* it, I intend to use the sequentiality of narrative, the Wake’s syntagmatic and diachronic dimensions. There are a number of narratives that can be examined: those within the *Wake* (how one thing follows another); narratives of composition (how one thing was written and rewritten after another); how narratives of confession evolved across Joyce’s work; and how histories of confession can be seen to intersect with the composition and the reception of *Finnegans Wake*.[[4]](#footnote-4)

I have three reasons for using this lens of narrative. First: a confession is of course itself a narrative within a larger narrative, and, in fiction at its technical best, it has a double aspect: fictions recite moments of crisis, and the recitation is itself a crisis, with repercussions of resolution, incrimination, or further complication. Confessional stories are a dramatic way of providing originary narratives which, as we see in *Finnegans Wake*, may be triggered by questions or commands: ‘What … brought about … this municipal sin business?’ (5.13-14), ‘Tell me all. Tell me now’ (196.05). The responses, as stories, may satisfy a desire for information, bring together isolated fragments, and bring journeys to an end, lightening the load of doubt. The metaphor of ‘unloading’ as a purpose is announced in *Finnegans Wake*, at the climax of one of HCE’s speeches: ‘Fall stuff’ (366.30). HCE has just unloaded his excess emotional baggage about his own ‘fall’, being a boastful libertine or a ‘Falstaff’, finally realizing and confessing his flawed nature, just as Falstaff had to do when Hal cruelly failed to acknowledge him. The fall of such stuff seeks from his audience forgiveness, reconciliation, and resolution, all conventions of narratives of confession. But none of them are given in *Finnegans Wake*,which subverts or at least defers them all.

A second reason is to keep alive our sense of linear sequence in *Finnegans Wake* and explore the functions of sequentiality. Work on the *Wake*’s narrative has been relatively dormant since the 1980s while two other approaches to the text - the philological and creative responses - have come to dominate.[[5]](#footnote-5) The latter promotes perceptions that narrative places a straitjacket on the text, a position which, paradoxically, actually limits our understanding of the text – as narrative.[[6]](#footnote-6) When we imagine only an awkward silence in the relationship between narrative and *Finnegans Wake*, we exaggerate the difficulties between them. When Joyce said: ‘there is no go-ahead plot’, he was not saying there is no plot whatsoever (*LIII* 146). That things follow on from other things, whether in the tales that are told or in the way the tales are told, can be quarried for significance. Even shaggy dog stories have sequence, and, indeed, rely on a quantity of sequential events to ensure that effects of timing are successful. We should keep alive our analyses of narrative, not in spite of it being hard to identity, but for that very reason.

Thirdly, the narratives that build around confession can be used to think about how confession works as a totem in accounts of human identity. Analyses of confession have been particularly important to existential explorations of the human, and of ‘the human’ as an effect of institutions, or regimes of truth. They address questions about whether humans are essentially or just occasionally fallen or innocent or redeemable, whether they should seek to do penance, or feel shame but transcend that shame, whether the representation of a sin or the reasons for sin can ever be accurate or sincere. Is confession a relief for the individual, as it would appear to Leopold Bloom when he thinks ‘Confession. Everyone wants to’ (*U* 5.425)? Or have institutions used the ritual of confession in order to turn ‘Western man’ into ‘a confessing animal’, as Michel Foucault believed (Foucault 59). *Finnegans Wake* may be called on for its perceived power as a prophetic work, a text that is at once sacred and secular, to answer such questions. But should our interpretations of its ‘confusional’ riddles be edifying, to help usher in a new idea of the human? Or is it a detached, purely aesthetic and non-didactic account of an unchanging humanity? In any case, which model of the human is it working with?

Confession, broadly speaking, appears in two contexts in the *Wake*: the religious and the secular. The religious one in its Catholic form is of course primary for Joyce, something he experienced directly and intensely at school. The form it took had been laid down and ritualised with special care by Catholic theologians as the ‘sacrament of penance’, which established and enforced a sequence, one to which Stephen Dedalus is subjected in *A Portrait*.[[7]](#footnote-7) This sequence begins, of course, with sin: sin should lead to the hatred of sin, which should then raise the question of whether the subject is baptised or not. If they are, then the subject can and should confess, that is, accuse themselves and give evidence of their sin. This constitutes the auricular confession which takes place where the auditor or confessor has the ‘power of the keys’.[[8]](#footnote-8) If they do, and the confession is sincere, then this leads to a judgement of the confessant by the confessor. This leads to penance, which consists of repentance, reparation and contrition. And this, once complete, leads to the remission of sin or absolution. The sin is now gone. This highly developed and baroque narrative of abstract circumstances is built upon a foundation of concrete everyday experience of contamination and purification: a stain appearing and being washed away. The washerwomen of I.8 underpin this metaphor: hence one of them looking at the ‘gangres of sin’ in the clothes she is washing (196.18). ALP is positioned after I.7 in which the confessant Shaun attempts to get his scatological brother Shem to confess to his sins.

The second and secondary context is the legal one, where some kind of public admission, often during a defence, is made in a courtroom. Bloom in ‘Circe’ does this, as does HCE at a number of points in *Finnegans Wake*. Joyce, without active experience of confessing in this context, drew for his knowledge from careful reading of famous trials, real and fictional, in journalism, novels, plays, and biographies throughout his life.

These institutional contexts can both echo in the experiences of everyday encounters where we are accused of some fault or other, where we are expected to acknowledge or to counter with denial or banter. One example of this in Joyce’s fiction is the pathetic scene where Heron torments Stephen to get him to admit ‘that Byron was no good’ (*P* 82). Stephen, being a good martyr, proudly refuses to do so, but feels humiliation in any case. Joyce’s fascination with the power of these processes, especially in its primary Catholic forms, and his will to counter that power, never left him or his art: one distinct quality of his art reflects a proud unwillingness to submit to any authority that believed it had the right to pass judgement on him.

With these contexts of confession in place – sometimes rival contexts - I will now turn to eight basic observations on confession in the Wake.

1. Where does confession unfold in *Finnegans Wake*? The structure of confession is especially prominent, though ultimately subverted, in I.7, ‘Shem the Penman.’ There is also a flurry of confessional jargon scattered within confessional narratives in the penultimate episode that Joyce wrote for the book: II.3, sections 4, 5 and 6 (which consists of ‘How Buckley Shot the Russian General’ as related on a television in the pub, and the landlord’s response to the story). That Joyce wrote these towards the end of the composition process but embedded them in the dark middle of the book may be relevant and suggestive for readers who speculate that *Finnegans Wake* issomehow a confession on Joyce’s part. In one of these scenes HCE admits that he had dreamt of his ‘deepseep daughter which was bourne up pridely out of medsdreams unclouthed’ (366.14-15). While confessions may be anticipated during trials, like that of Festy King in 1.4 (85.20-93.21), or during inquiries, like that of Yawn in III.3, in neither do they materialise. And so, the resolution that might come with confession does not materialise either.

2. Public confession: *Finnegans Wake* has a considerable quantity of public confession, though an exact sense of this is often unclear, as the scenes are so nebulous that, whether there even is an audience or how large it is at any given moment, is hard to spell out. On the other hand, there is a general sense that this is a world with little privacy. The narrators of III.4 for instance, floating in and out of the bedrooms of the Porter family, are very close to being voyeurs.

In theology, public confession has a technical term: exomologesis. Joyce seems to have known the term, as he notes it down in his late Index notebook (composed early 1938), under the heading Confession. It appears near the end of the following mini-directory of terms, probably compiled from a work of reference:

plinnyflowers, columellas

Baldoyle Turf general’s

confession, he forgets

supernat. sorrow, pupose of

amendment, penance, confess[on?]

tomb of martyr shrine, moral &

physical presence metanoia

confess. contrit, absol. satisfaction

retain, remit, **excomologosis**,

murder, idolatry, adultery. (*JJA* 40, 182; notebook VI.B.46-83)

Joyce’s intimidating quasi-omniscience can be qualified here, as his transcription misspells the word as ‘ex**c**omolog**o**sis’, an error that was carried over when he transferred the word onto his drafts. Joyce would transfer and transform nearly all of these words onto a couple of proof pages preparing for the last instalment of *transition* in May 1938. He used two of them to make the phrase ‘metanoic excomologosis’ which he inserted, amongst others into the following sentence (in bold):

*The saintly scholarist’s roastering guffalawd* ***of nupersaturals holler at this metanoic excomologosis*** *tells of the chestnut’s …* ***absolutionally*** *romptyhompty sucessfulness.* (FW 341.29-32. See *JJA* 55, 200 and 209; II.3§4 draft level 6, 6+)

At this late stage of composition, there is usually some intentional entropy in Joyce’s transmissions anyway, as can be seen when ‘supernatural sorrow’ is spoonerised to become ‘nupersaturals holler’. We will return in point 4 to this sense of a language which freely exhibits, that is confesses, its own failings.

Shem’s confession after Shaun’s exhaustive denunciation in I.7, seems public, though, again, quite how public is tricky to say. Shaun has addressed an audience at the start – ‘How is that for low, laities and gentlenuns?’ (177.08) - as if this character assassination is being publicly performed, but we do not hear from them at any point in the chapter. It may just be us readers of course. I will return to Shem’s confession in point 5 below.

Through metaphorical layering, the Russian General’s act of excretion is signalled as a confession, just as the General also appears in the guise of a Pope. This figure of authority opens up and, as it were, unloads, seeking to purge himself, he hopes, in private. But the sniper Buckley sees him which makes it public. The drama as a whole, moreover, unfolds on television in a ‘public’ house. It is related in the third person by a narrator who, in concluding his description, condemns him. An elaborately structured confession is performed during the tale, the General/Pope self-harming: his eyes (‘oggles’), his nose (‘nosoes’), his mouth (‘mouther’), feet and hands (‘manucupes’ and ‘pedarrests’), and finally his phallus (‘tree of livings in the middenst’):

*He blanks his oggles because he confesses to all his**[tellavicious nieces](http://jjda.ie/main/JJDA/F/FF/fnbs/n53all.htm" \l "n53095af). He blocks his nosoes because that* *he confesses to everywheres he was always putting up his latest faengers. He wollops his mouther with a sword of tusk in as* *because that he confesses how opten he used be obening her howonton he used be undering her. He boundles alltogotter* *his manucupes with his pedarrests in asmuch* *as because that he confesses before all his handcomplishies and behind all his comfoderacies. And (hereis cant came back saying he codant steal no lunger, yessis,*  *catz come buck beques* *he caudant stail awake) he touched upon this tree of livings in the**[middenst](http://jjda.ie/main/JJDA/F/FF/fnbs/c10all.htm" \l "c10257f)* *of the garerden for inasmuch as because that he confessed to it on Hillel and down* *Dalem and in the places which the lepers* *inhabit* *in the place of the stones and in pontofert**[jusfuggading](http://jjda.ie/main/JJDA/F/FF/fnbs/n53all.htm" \l "n53083d) amoret* *now he come to think of it* *jolly well ruttengenerously olyovyover the ole blucky shop. Pugger old Pumpey O'Dungaschiff!* (349.27-350.07)

The will to an artful order here resembles the sumptuous uniform of the General which intimidates Buckley. It calls into question the sincerity of the confessions. As a public performance, this confession is a bid to achieve a sanctimonious status.

Having listened to Butt’s version of Buckley’s story, HCE, now as the Innkeeper of the Mullingar Inn, mirrors the Russian General, and also performs a public confession before his customers, though it is formally much messier. He admits to reading a rude book on the lavatory, he asks to be excused of his choice of words, then concludes that he is ‘guilty but fellows culpows’, that ‘It was felt by me sindeade’ (363.20) and, as we have heard, that he dreamed of his ‘deepseep daughter which was bourne up pridely out of medsdreams unclouthed’ (366.14-15). While reconciliation is sought or expected, none is granted. HCE’s expectation of mercy is denied in the kangaroo court of the pub.

3. There is no auricular confession in *Finnegans Wake*. Surprisingly, at no point do we ever enter the confessional and there is no private confession made straight into the ear of a qualified priest. This is a corollary to the dominance of public confession. Twice before Joyce had accompanied his characters vividly into the booth, first in *A Portrait*,with a degree of sensational trauma:

His sins trickled from his lips, one by one, trickled in shameful drops from his soul festering and oozing like a sore, a squalid stream of vice… Blinded by his tears and by the light of God’s mercifulness he bent his head and heard the grave words of absolution spoken. (*P* 144-5)

And then, as a riposte, with a comic account in Molly’s final stream in *Ulysses*.

he touched me father and what harm if he did where and I said on the canal bank like a fool but whereabouts on your person my child on the leg behind high up was it yes rather high up was it where you sit down yes O Lord couldnt he say bottom right out and have done with it what has that got to do with it and did you whatever way he put it I forget no father and I always think of the real father what did he want to know for when I already confessed it to God. (*U* 18:107-113)

It is as if with these two very different instances, he has dealt with the central confessional point of Catholicism and moved on, leaving the baroque structure of the sacrament of penance behind him, tottering without its keystone.

4. The unintentional or inadvertantconfession. These confessions are best known as Freudian in the sense of the Freudian slip; but Joyce, aware that the mechanism was understood by writers long before Freud, would not have described them in this way. To provide one such slip from many possible examples, I hope a public confession will be pardoned: for the April 2019 ‘Lucia’ event in Dublin I had written a paper which began with a personal note. ‘I was fascinated as a teenager by Joyce’. But what I actually said, in a mangling worthy of HCE, was the less bland: ‘I was fascinated by a teenager…’. I was unable to return to my paper until the laughter had died down. Part of the comic effect in such slips is due to the perception of an awkward tabooed truth breaking through, and a parody of communication rituals. The unintended meaning appears to be the truer or stronger one: the intended communication is a mask which slips with the repressed truth rising up in revelatory and, we tend to say, ‘Freudian’ ways. There are larger truths: for linguistic slips reveal the extent to which language is a mask; the truth appears, paradoxically, in error: and its appearance is signalled in laughter. In *Finnegans Wake* the stutter provides a paradigm for this. An unintended bodily reflex makes the mask of a declared innocence and respectability slip. HCE’s stutter is a parody of unintentional revelation: as we hear, he was a ‘tuttut toucher up of poetographies’ (242.18-19) or, as he announces in ‘Here Comes Everybody’: ‘one of my life’s ambitions … from an early peepee period (533.25-26). The same effect is felt wherever HCE or Shaun are boasting or offering excuses. With the latter, HCE embodies the Latin phrase: *excusatio non petita accusatio manifesta*, that is ‘when you provide an excuse that noone has sought you only accuse yourself’.

The language of *Finnegans* *Wake* as a compendium of mangled forms or lapsus linguae, contributes as a whole to the presence of inadvertent confession. At every turn it draws attention to its own idiosyncracies as flaws, as fallen. But while the language confesses its faults, it does so unintentionally, as HCE does. In any case, reading may redeem these ‘faults’, that is the language invites us to treat what looks like a broken and nonsensical machine, as an effective producer of meanings. So, while its misshapen monstrous appearance is a sign of fallenness and error, its excesses are also the source of its power.

5. *Finnegans Wake* and qualified confession. In a qualified confession, an individual may admit to a personal fault, but manages to spread blame outwards, to disperse and dissolve it, through shared responsibilities and gestures of universalization. There are two intriguingly similar examples of this, already alluded to above: Shem in I.7, and HCE in II.3. Shem’s response to Shaun begins ‘My fault, his fault, a kingship through a fault’ (193.31-32), an adaptation of Richard III’s famous and desperate battle cry as conjured by Shakespeare: ‘A horse, a horse, my kingdom for a horse’ where he is willing to sell (that is betray) the kingdom he mistakenly thinks is still his to sell.[[9]](#footnote-9) Joyce fuses this self-deceiving plea with the sincere admission of guilt in the Catholic prayer, *Confiteor Deo omnipotenti*: ‘mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa’.[[10]](#footnote-10) A great deal (a kingdom) may be at stake even when a small mistake is discovered. Through concatenation, even a little error by one person leads to a great loss for everyone. One bite of an apple and paradise is gone for ever, and, as the folk proverb has it: ‘for want of a battle the kingdom was lost, and all for the want of a horseshoe nail.’ Shem adapts Richard III’s desperation and the *Confiteor*, and admits blame for the loss of a kingdom, but also shrugs it off by sharing the blame around: whether Adam *and* Eve, or Shem *and* Shaun, we are all partners in crime. Shem’s qualified confession in response to Shaun’s full-frontal attack quells and disperses it, rather than affirming its contents. He doesn’t indicate a period of penance. The relativity of Mercy trumps the absolute judgment of Justice. This qualified confession beats Shaun on his own ground: Shem takes on the confessor’s power of judgement and, something Shaun seems incapable of, forgiveness. It is by following the linear sequence here that makes such readings possible.

The second qualified confession occurs when HCE, as we’ve heard, having watched the story of Buckley shooting the Russian General, announces that he is ‘Guilty, but fellows culpows’ (363.20), that is, he admits being at fault, but all the other ‘fellows’ are culpable too. Though guilty, the fall that follows is qualified as a happy fall – a felix culpa.

In both cases the blame is shared and spread: yes, I'm at fault, but so are you, so is everyone. There is an element of mystification in such gestures, but they can be ethically moving. Godbole in Forster’s *A Passage to India* performs the same when he speaks to Fielding: ‘When evil occurs, it expresses the whole of the universe. Similarly when good occurs’.[[11]](#footnote-11) HCE’s qualified confession, however, unlike Shem’s, does not let him off the hook. Instead of a forgiving flow of maternal waters, HCE is subject to a douche of insults emptied all over him. This is penance in the form of a public shaming and echoes the conclusion of I.3 when HCE receives a stream of invective from a drunk battering at his gate, the contents of which HCE carefully notes down. This echoes Shaun’s accusations of Shem and the critical insults thrown at Joyce, which Joyce carefully took down. All are subsets of the crimes which humans accuse other humans of doing.

6. *Finnegans Wake* and involuntary confession. There is no confession in *Finnegans* *Wake* that is produced under coercion, from threats of blackmail or torture. In III.3, the third watch of Shaun (or Yawn), there are attempts at acquiring knowledge of the crime by four old investigators (masters, gospellers, judges, senators, psychoanalysts) whose cross-examination appears inquisitorial. Matthew, the most aggressive of them, with an Ulster accent that is described at times as full of “Northern Ire” (522.04), gets impatient in his search for the truth:

-- Ef I chuse to put a bullet like yu through the grill for heckling what business is that of yours, yu bullock? (522.01-02)

Deploying the conventional comic trope of the livid judge, the over-assertive aggression makes their authority appear ridiculous, inarticulate, and impotent. Anger has muddled Matthew as he interrogates Yawn. He might intend to say ‘If I choose to put a bullet through you for heckling, then that’s none of your business.’ But the question, even in this amended form, is absurd since of course it is his business. In any case, moreover, he unintentionally turns his witness from being a target into a weapon (‘a bullet like you’). Matthew also means to use the cliché to ‘put someone through the mill’, to make them work hard, but he gets that wrong, as the word ‘mill’ twists into ‘grill’. This reinstates an element of threat since ‘to grill someone’ implies the application of heat during an interrogation, a ‘grill’ also being an instrument of torture, on which Saints-to-be (St Lawrence, famously) or heretics might be burned, or on which part of a ‘bullock’ might be turned into a steak. Putting someone through a grill also sounds particularly grim, like turning someone into mince. But this defective threat fails to extract a confession from the witness who is too slippery, and so the line of enquiry disappears. We’ve come a long way from Stephen’s humiliating martyrdom at the hands of Heron in *A Portrait.*

We might look for evidence of coercion elsewhere in *Finnegans Wake*, especially in II.3 and the Russian General which was being drafted and redrafted while the Moscow Show Trials, that began in 1936, were taking place. The public confession given by ‘The Victar’ (i.e. Victor, the victor, the Vicar), quoted above, is so extreme a performance as to suggest some coercion prior to the televised courtroom being entered. With the Show Trials of course any evidence of backroom torture was always carefully expunged. In *Finnegans Wake* ‘the Victar’s’ confession issues from nowhere – who knows what triggered it? But the absence of evidence is not evidence that evidence has been expunged. This makes intentional echoes with the show trials hard to prove. Unable to ground my suspicion, *Finnegans* *Wake* falls back into its generally rather benign condition, one that tries to be un-horrified by those darker narratives that hover around crime and punishment.

7. *Finnegans Wake* is not a classically confessional text. Joyceknew well the canon of confessional texts, whether Augustine’s, Rousseau’s, Hogg’s or Newman’s, and all of them are referenced in *Finnegans Wake*. But *Finnegans Wake* is far from any kind of 1st person memoir. In fact, Joyce, from his earliest days of writing, strategically avoided the first-person memoir, writing that might now be deemed ‘autofiction’ with all its attendant ironisations. This is clear from one of the first pieces of extended artistic prose he wrote titled ‘A Portrait of the Artist’. Joyceans consider this to be an embarrassing and over-wrought text, a Nietzschean extravaganza. But it is partly *about* embarrassment as Joyce admits that ‘he descended among the hells of Swedenborg’ and ‘in a moment of frenzy he called for the elves’ (*PSW* 214, 218). Its experiments in detachment between the writer and his highly proximate subject “he” will become a constant in Joyce’s method. Joyce had established himself, like Mr Duffy in ‘A Painful Case’, as an illeist, using the third person as a veil over the I, projecting and objectifying himself. The third person distances Joyce from Dedalus, and distances himself from the direct confessional tradition. In this, the early ‘Portrait’ is more of a foundational text than we realise. It announces that this artist has discovered a simple law of creative expression: “mastery of art had been achieved in irony.’ (*PSW* 216). But it’s not just the discovery of detachment: it’s the discovery that irony will be able to deal with the drama of an intense emotional life, without extinguishing it. Selected secret sins can be made public but not in a confessional mode. Highly personal materials will be processed throughout his oeuvre. In *Finnegans Wake* there are plenty of details that correlate closely with events in Joyce’s and his family’s life, personal and potentially shameful, and which are revealed, if in a coded form, placed in the voice of another. One distancing technique was to find people accusing him of things in print, in reviews, say, and then appropriating them for the *Wake*’s portrait of the artist, Shem. As with the early ‘Portrait’ sketch, Joyce let off steam around his own conscience. But he also teased his readers with material that appears personally revelatory, making readers reflect on their own prurience.

The tradition of confessional texts, especially after Rousseau, is one that reflects Europe’s sectarian split. This brings me to my eighth and final observation.

8. *Finnegans Wake* and how the church split over confession. Joyce is, unsurprisingly, acutely aware of this split which began during the Reformation, and provides one in a series of exemplary antagonisms paraded on the second page of *Finnegans Wake*. Here it exclaims: ‘What clashes here of wills gen wonts’ (4.01). In the phrase ‘What bidimetoloves sinduced by what tegotetabsolvers’ (4.09-10), Protestantism is referenced through a line that underlies it: ‘Bid me to live and I a true Protestant will be’, while Catholicism is there in the liturgical phrase ‘ego te absolvo’ – I absolve you. The Protestant / Catholic split maps crudely onto English / Irish relations which combine in references to Cromwell’s hostility to Irish Catholics, as shown in his policy of sealing up confession boxes in Ireland. One of the margin notes of II.2 witnesses this: ‘*Ungodly old Ardrey Cronwall beeswaxing the convulsion box*’ (261.L05-08). But *Finnegans Wake* leaves few expressions of sectarianism unqualified, and this margin note is full of complicating layers. ‘Cromwell’ here is also a High King (‘Ard-Ri’) of Ireland, though here that is of ‘Cornwall’; and instead of sealing the confession boxes, he is polishing them with beeswax, less a job for an ungodly person, than some lowly servant of the Church. ‘Confession’ has moreover become a ‘convulsion’, so that the special controlled quiet of the confessional, intense but discreet, has been replaced by an uncontrolled body pushing violently back at a structure that aims to contain it, like a padded cell.

Central to these eight observations is how the irony of Joyce’s method has moderated confession as a sign of individual autonomy. Irony is art’s riposte to the requirement of sincerity, and maybe its origins can be traced to institutional demands for true and authentic confessional statements. These observations also make it possible to see a trajectory through Joyce’s work following this theme. Put simply, there is a movement away from the confession box as a dramatic setting. Joyce’s oeuvre starts very close, by eavesdropping on the confession box in ‘The Sisters’; then, as we’ve seen, in *A Portrait* we follow Stephen, compelled by the Hell-fire sermon of the retreat, into a booth. When Stephen is later invited to join the priesthood, he is tempted to do so for the reason that, once on the other side of the grille, he will hear the secret confessions of others. He chooses art instead, where the sins of others can be communicated in a different way, as mimetic fiction, bypassing the priest’s commitment to the seal of secrecy. As priest of the imagination he will be able to pardon reimagined sins. Hence ‘The Holy Office’ (1904), when Joyce appropriated the priest’s inquisitorial function of cleansing and redeeming the sins of others who, in this case, are the writers of the Celtic twilight: ‘I carry off their filthy streams’ so ‘that they may dream their dreamy dreams’ (*PSW* 98). ‘The Holy Office’ was written just two months after the time at which he had set *Ulysses*, wherein exactly contradictory attitudes to confession are expressed: ‘Confession. Everyone wants to’, says Mr Bloom (5:425), while Mrs Bloom grumbles: ‘I hate that confession’ (18:106-07). Bloom’s perfunctory attempt to find a universal diagnosis of the compulsion to share one’s shame (an apology for confession that both the Catholic Church and psychoanalysis were using at the time) is countered by the particularity of his wife’s empirical view. Joyce seeks no resolution to this contradiction, allowing instead a plurality of functions for confession to unfold and flourish in *Finnegans Wake*, as we have seen.

My method in compiling these observations is intended to illustrate the value of reading narrative in *Finnegans Wake*. Narrative and syntagmatic approaches should supplement and qualify (not replace) two very different but prevalent ways of engaging with Joyce’s novel. The first of these I’ll call ‘paradigmatic’, which focuses on the unit of the word. Annotations are dominated by this approach, as is genetic criticism which traces the sources of Joyce’s notes, and which are almost always single words or short phrases. This is not all of genetic criticism by any means, since genetic criticism has much to say about how syntagmatic structures evolved (whether in plots, or the sequences or expansions of paragraphs). Nevertheless, the Brepols edition of the Buffalo notebooks have strengthened the paradigmatic mode of focus on smaller linguistic units. The second popular approach comes from avant-garde interpretations or tributes, that respond to an understanding of the complexity, the nonsensical and the apparent randomness that can be sensed in the language of *Finnegans Wake*. This can be seen in several of the musical responses in Derek Pyle and others’ waywordsandmeansigns, a remarkable project of homage, where an unabridged reading of the entire book, chapter by chapter is accompanied by original music, produced by different performer/composers for each chapter. Not much attention is given to the sense of narrative, however, nor to voices that might communicate any flow of narrative. Performing *Finnegans Wake* is a huge challenge for even the most highly skilled and trained readers, and so it is not surprising that the recitations in this project lack variety in voicing and pacing that might otherwise seek to emphasise its potential for narrative, or for character driven drama. The project is not too concerned about this since it sees the text as a form of music, open to unclassical free styles of performance, resembling in spirit the experimental music that the project elicited. The music can be intriguing and highly inventive in its own right, drawing on avant-garde genres of free-jazz, or sampling and layering diverse sounds. Inevitably, the relation of the musical atmospheres and the text is often arbitrary. The project seems to flaunt and celebrate this arbitrary quality, not seeking any particular ‘sense’ of narrative flow in the text to communicate through the music, but emphasising the sense of disconnect, and a degree of random improvisation. Syntactic coherence within the linguistic unit of the sentence, the paragraph, the chapter, the book itself, is sidestepped by these approaches.

These two modes both have clear strengths, but they may distract us from developing ways of reading any narrative sequence in *Finnegans Wake*. There are, unquestionably, bizarre arbitrary jumps between many paragraphs, chapters and events; disparate imagery is fused in a single word or phrase; the reader is repeatedly thrown into the deep end, especially at the start of chapters, with inexplicably fuzzy-edged scenarios and at best dream-like scene setting. Reasons for a setting, or intentions behind actions are difficult even to hypothesize, but none of these are reasons to limit consideration of the effects of sequentiality. These undertainties are vital not in spite but *because* narrative flow is so frequently disrupted in *Finnegans Wake*. Joyce, in any case, also wrote and adapted *tales*, and micro-narratives, and invariably had a linear temporal scheme, which he might call a ‘trellis’ and on which he might hang his capacious details. One such trellis appears in the structure for Book II, drawn up in 1926, something intended to fill the blank space between what he had by then already written of Books I and III, nearly all the episodes of which Joyce had seen into ‘pre-publication’ format.

Between the close of [triangle\*] at nightfall and [Shaun\*]a there are or four other episodes, the children’s games, night studies, a scene in the ‘public’, and a ‘lights out in the village’. (*Letters I* 241)

This structure, adapted somewhat, reappears in a notebook from 1931, where the episodes are attached to hours:

8-9 Children’s hour

9-10 A little learning

10-11 hist. survey

11-12 open air debate. (Notebook VI.B.31-269, JJA 36, 308).

As rudimentary titles, these are open containers, and hardly constitute a plot assuch. But the linearity of their chronology, resembling the schedule of *Ulysses* whose episodes are divided into hourly boxes, could not be clearer. Together they indicate a temporal structure for Book II which remained and structured the composition. This is just one example of sequential structure.

Analysing narrative and sequence may use structuralist narratology to understand the flows and forms of temporality, may assess causation or judge the roles of chance, may posit motivations or extract implied morality, or provide models of tragic or comic justice. All of this can be done with any narrative, even with *Finnegans Wake*. But to focus solely on these conventional methods would miss something special to *Finnegans Wake*. For sequential arrangement is also formal, contributing to musical effects of rhythm and dynamics, of crescendo and of diminuendo. There are many instances of the imitation of such musical structures. Chapter III.3, as we follow the growth of a quietly mewling baby to a mayor’s vast oration, is the most obvious example of a crescendo. Book IV and I.8 offer diminuendos. The drama of confession – whether whispered or hollered, fast or slow, harmonic or discordant – contributes of course to this musical form.

The second reason for the emphasis on Wakean narrative and its syntagmatic dimensions is that they should enable sceptical approaches to generalised criticisms of the human condition. Such approaches help to subvert those accounts that reduce and essentialise human discourse to a particularly prominent but narrow mode, such as confession. The centrality of confession in accounts of human identity can be seen in that powerful strand of critical humanism in the post-Holocaust, post-war, and post-collaborationist writing that flourished in France, much of which came to be grouped under the term ‘theory’. Albert Camus’s view that ‘a work of art is a confession’, is often quoted approvingly.[[12]](#footnote-12) This generalisation was extended by Michel Foucault when he proposed that ‘Western man has become a confessing animal’, a warning confirmed by Derrida in his maudlin *Circumfession* when he quotes himself: ‘one always asks for pardon when one writes.’[[13]](#footnote-13) This dominance of confession as a key marker of the human, has recently been qualified with the idea that, rather than being *confessional* subjects, we are in fact *testifying* subjects. As Susannah Radstone writes: ‘discourses of testimonial witness may now be superseding confession’s dominance in literature and other media.’[[14]](#footnote-14) In either case, humanity is still in a courtroom. But should the essence of the flows of human discourse really be so easy to identify? How can a condition of “general confession” give way to a condition of ‘general testimony’? Is intellectual life so constrained as to get stuck upon certain phases of a discursive cycle? The problem with both these views is that they perceive human activity moving uniformly through history along a single channel, occasionally changing direction and content. A pluralist account of the human condition sees multiple modes operating simultaneously. The world of *Finnegans Wake* offers such an account, so its confessions are just one mode of utterance among several. These utterances always form part of a shifting sequence, elements of a ‘nacheinander’, in which one thing inexorably follows another. The syntax of how confessional narratives unfold is always itself significant. Shem’s qualified confession leads to redemption for both confessor and confessant. The Russian General’s general confession leads to his assassination. HCE’s confession leads to a character assassination and then a collapse into a drunken stupor as Roderick O’Conor (382.26). The various commodious cycles of narrative in the Wake allow different visions of the human to have their day. In the *Wake*, the confessional, the testimonial, but also the accusatory, the judgmental, the heckling, and the forgiving – all have their moments, and the wheel keeps turning. The coexistence and plurality of these processes can be called on to qualify any easy and sensational generalisations of what it is to be human.

But *Finnegans Wake* is not descriptive of a human totality either, much as we might like it to be. Though it draws on a profound memory of wide reading, it produces a history of the world which is partial, excluding, in particular, some of its darker aspects, like physical torture. *Finnegans Wake* includes no involuntary confessions produced under duress. It is a comedy after all, where torture and forced confessions have no place. It is not a reliably total description of this world. But it may have accidentally forecast one of the historical shifts we have witnessed: where the tide of the Catholic culture of confession has receded, from its high water mark in 1910, when Pius X stipulated that seven-year-olds ought to attend confession regularly; and where a new tide of public confession, made inevitable by new media and communication technologies, has risen, as if to take its place. Could the comic tortureless world of *Finnegans Wake* forecast yet more, by constituting an ideal of sorts, a prescription for a world to share in its responsibilities, to be more tolerant and forgiving than this one? Perhaps. But it is, I confess, beyond me to know such a thing, or even to assert it as such.

1. Richard M. Kain, ‘An Interview with Carola Giedion-Welcker and Maria Jolas’ in *James Joyce Quarterly* 11.2 (1974), 94-122, 96. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Atherton, James, *The Books at the Wake* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1959), 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See Kimberley Devlin, *Wandering and Return in ‘Finnegans Wake’* (Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press: 1991); Damon Franke, ‘In the ‘nummifeed confusionary’: Reading the Negative Confession of ‘Finnegans Wake’’, *Journal of Narrative Theory,* 30.1 (2000), 55-95; Wolfgang Streit, *Joyce/Foucault: Sexual Confessions* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2004); Chrissie Van Mierlo, *James Joyce and Catholicism: the Apostate’s Wake* (London: Bloomsbury Press, 2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. For a useful overview of the 20th Century ‘decline of confession’ see Bill Cosgrave, ‘The Decline of Confessions: Disaster or Return to Normal?’ *The Furrow,* 34.3 (1994), 158-162.

   [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. On the *Wake* as narrative, see John Gordon, ‘*Finnegans Wake’: a Plot Summary* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1986) and Danis Rose and John O’Hanlon, *Understanding ‘Finnegans Wake’: a Guide to the Narrative of James Joyce’s Masterpiece* (New York: Garland, 1982). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. For example, John Cage’s *Writing for the Second Time Through ‘Finnegans Wake’* and Derek Pyle’s *Waywords and Meansigns* both celebrate Joyce’s text through adaptation but their choices communicate little if anything about any narrative logic the text may have. See waywordsandmeansigns.com [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See ‘Penance’ in Volume 11 of the *Catholic Encyclopedia* (1913). https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Catholic\_Encyclopedia\_(1913)/Penance [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. ‘Penance’. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. William Shakespeare, *Richard III*, 5.4, l.7. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. https://www.preces-latinae.org/thesaurus/Basics/Confiteor.html [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. E.M. Forster, *A Passage to India* (First published 1924. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979), part II, ch.19, p.169. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Albert Camus, *Carnets: 1935-1942*,trans. Philip Thody (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1963), 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Jacques Derrida, *Circumfession* trans. Geoff Bennington (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 46. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1*, trans. Robert Hurley (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979), 58-9. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Susannah Radstone, ‘Cultures of confession/cultures of testimony: turning the subject inside out’ in *Modern Confessional Writing*, ed. Jo Gill (London: Routledge, 2006), 167. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)