

Forum

Members of the Association are invited to submit letters, typed and double-spaced, commenting on articles published in *PMLA* or on matters of general scholarly or critical interest. Footnotes are discouraged, and letters of more than one thousand words will not be considered. Decision to publish and the right to edit are reserved to the Editor, and the authors of the articles discussed will be invited to reply.

Finnegans Wake and *Ulysses*

To the Editor:

Your comments in the Editor's Column (*PMLA*, 94 [1979], 203–04) corroborate what has long been suspected, that few articles on modern literature successfully invade *PMLA*. This dearth was a particular source of apprehension while I wrestled with Jennifer Schiffer Levine's "Originality and Repetition in *Finnegans Wake* and *Ulysses*" (*PMLA*, 94 [1979], 106–20), the first article on James Joyce in *PMLA* since my own in 1967. Since Levine's article may well have to serve for another twelve years, some of the numerous gaffes that inform her essay need to be challenged and corrected. Apparently the rigorous review process you describe in "A Galaxy of Editors" (*Bulletin of the MMLA*), whereby each essay is first approved by two specialists before being considered by a seven-member Editorial Board, is nonetheless fallible. I am astonished that specialists were indifferent to Levine's obsessive honing of her critical tools or that they were unaware when her infrequent incursions into the texts produced factual errors and misreadings; even more depressing is the thought that any member of the Editorial Board found enough information on either *Ulysses* or *Finnegans Wake* to make the effort worthwhile.

Certainly the question addressed by Levine's essay remains important. Unfortunately, Levine has misconstrued the search for original "sources" with an original use of existing literary and historical materials, and she expends enormous energy to arrive at what Joyceans have long known—that Joyce evolved his materials from existing texts, building his structures by repetition. Her heavy use of the fashionable word "discourse" does little to make this an original reading of these texts, and it frequently does a disservice to them: she comments, for instance, that the footnotes to Chapter x of the *Wake* do not provide origins for their referents. This "discovery" tells us that footnotes are frequently discursive rather than documentary, that the referent can often be found *in* the text.

The central imbalance of this essay seems to be its reliance on Joyce's works as a slim pretext for arguing post-Saussurian notions about language that disregard evidence in the works themselves: "One difficulty, said Stephen, in esthetic discussion is to know whether words are being used according to the literary tradition or according to the tradition of the marketplace" (*A Portrait*, p. 188). However structuralists view the interplay between "original" and "mass-produced" language, Joyce employed them as antithetical entities: clichés in *Ulysses* illustrate the dysfunction between literary and marketplace contexts. Levine insists that the reader "mediate" these contexts, recognizing clichés and rejecting their literary claims as "empty"; but she herself cannot differentiate between what is clichéd, and therefore emptied of meaning, and what is not (a difficulty Wyndham Lewis stumbled over fifty years ago). In her example from Hades, the only clichés in the quoted text are those supplied by her bracketed "mediation": "But in the end she put a few violets in her bonnet" is *not* clichéd; "Grieving Queen becomes Plucky Little Widow" (Levine's paraphrase) *is*. She is correct in asserting that "the distinction between literary and ordinary language" in Joyce "needs to be rethought," but it requires an awareness of the *totality* of Joycean language constructs—not merely selected snippets chosen to support a thesis that coopts *au courant* terminology in order to give the impression of an *explication nouvelle*.

Levine's inability accurately to discern Joyce's irony leads to misreadings, such as the supposition that Bloom recalls the seedcake episode erotically, rather than romantically, and makes no distinction between the mindless use of clichés and their purposeful, ironic usage. Bloom is occasionally guilty of the first, but he is also a master of the second (as he examines the possibility of being born with a silver knife in one's mouth). In "Got the shove, all of them. Who kicked the bucket," he is far from guilty of the cliché Levine accuses him of: "Got the shove" is not a cliché about death; it refers to getting fired. Bloom comically deploys it for death,

then alters the euphemistic cliché he already used (*as cliché*), “Who departed this life,” to the irreverent “Who kicked the bucket.”

The insensitivity to language Levine demonstrates is disastrous for a reader of *Ulysses*, nor is it much use for a reader of *Finnegans Wake*. “Where did thots come from?” hardly refers to God, much less to children, despite Stephen Heath. The natural syntax is “Where *do* children come from?”; the past tense is unnatural in either normal speech or Joyce’s context. “Prosodite” does not contain “prostitute” in either sound or context—the play of consonants is faulty; it is a neologism rather than a pun (“prose” plus identifying suffix). Nor are “counterfeit franks” anachronistic “frankfurters,” but Levine’s insistence on food items—that which can be consumed and then recycled—elevates thirteen foods in a list of eighty disparate items (*FW*, pp. 183–84). Such typos as “epitah” (epitaph) and misattributions (the Hen chapter of *Finnegans Wake* is v, not iv) supplement other factual errors: that “there are no precise signatures” to the *Wake* letter ignores “Alma Luvia, Pollabella”; that “one’s own productions” are “foul, vile, smelly” may be accurate for many but not for Shem, who revels in his; that the “claw holes” in the letter are “made by the previous reader” assumes that the hen *reads* the letter she collects, a supposition that ignores the fork holes being made by the breakfast-table reader. (That the text is being shaped and reshaped by every reader is fundamental to *Finnegans Wake*.) As for *Ulysses*, the bookstall offering *Sweets of Sin* was not on O’Connell Bridge but at the foot of Metal Bridge.

Sadly, Levine does little better with critical commentary than with the texts. She repeats the apocryphal “Come in” in *Finnegans Wake* (Beckett via Ellmann), but can she find it there? If not, what happens to her argument? How are we to reconcile differing opinions on the children’s lesson of *Finnegans Wake* when one says it is about “‘the nature of God’ and another about ‘their mother’s genital organs’”? Is it important to know that the first “critic” is a slapdash dilettante and the second a meticulous Joyce scholar? This latter category should be the ideal, both for Levine and for *PMLA*’s specialist readers.

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Ms. Levine replies:

Bernard Benstock is quite right that the *Sweets of Sin* bookstall stands at the foot of Metal Bridge. I stand corrected, too, on the “epitah” typo and the misnumbered episode from *Finnegans Wake*. But on

more substantive issues I remain unpersuaded. Benstock’s criticism is rooted in two main premises. The first, which I find unacceptable, is that Dedalus’ opinions in *A Portrait of the Artist* should remain the authority in gauging Joyce’s later works. The second issues from Benstock’s misreading, or deliberate disregarding, of my argument. Let others judge whether my incursions into the text are “infrequent” or my critical discussion “obsessive.” But I think it is clear that “what Joyceans have long known—that Joyce evolved his materials from existing texts, building his structures by repetition”—is the starting point of my argument, not the conclusion. Perhaps Benstock’s irritation with what he calls “au courant terminology” and the “fashionable” word “discourse” has made him attack too quickly.

I do *not* simply say that the footnotes to Chapter x of the *Wake* do not provide origins for their referents. Nor is it my “discovery” either that footnotes are frequently discursive rather than documentary or that a referent may be *in* the text. I point out, after all, that footnotes may refer backward to earlier texts and also forward to future texts (as in “for a fuller discussion, see Ch. iii”). But all this is the preface to, and not the nub of, my argument. The *Wake* episode depends on “foreknowledge” about what footnotes usually do in order to question a whole series of implicit issues: the privileging of one discourse (the main text) over another (in smaller print below it), the straightforward and “natural” relationship between words and their points of origins, the nature of originality, our relationship to all the discourses that surround us.

I do *not* accuse Bloom of the mindless use of clichés. On the contrary, I make it clear twice, citing both the “Got the shove” monologue (p. 117) and his reading of *Sweets of Sin* (p. 114), that Bloom resists and exploits the lure of stereotype. Benstock’s detailed account of “Got the shove, all of them. Who kicked the bucket” is one I would agree with and also one implicit in my discussion. That is why I say that Bloom’s phrases are “informed by a sardonic, even dismissive, humor” (p. 117). And that is why I say that “He himself . . . controls the disjunctions between the different systems of language” (p. 117). If Bloom were not aware that “got the shove” is not exactly funeral talk, I would hardly call his response sardonic. Similarly (on the other example from “Hades”), if I were not aware that my own interpolations were clichéd, I would not capitalize the phrases “Grieving Queen” and “Plucky Little Widow”: the choice is deliberately parodic. I cannot agree with Benstock that the only clichés in the excerpt are my own; though I suspect I could have indicated more precisely that Bloom’s