

Semantic Instability and Philosophical Pessimism: Reading 'De Profundis' and *Finnegans Wake* with Schopenhauer

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The following article explores Oscar Wilde's and James Joyce's different approaches to language. To offer a new perspective on the authors' distinct approaches to words and syntax, I incorporate the philosophy of Arthur Schopenhauer that connects the deficiencies of established languages with the somber realization that the world is beyond understanding. Schopenhauer maintains that despite our deep desire to understand actuality, the only knowledge afforded to humans is mediated by the senses and filtered by subjective perception. The idea of a futile pursuit of knowledge is central to the pessimistic underpinnings of Schopenhauer's philosophy, offering a lens through which to examine the divergent perspectives on language and human experience in 'De Profundis' and in *Finnegans Wake*.

Among the numerous allusions to Wilde in the *Wake*, one can find direct references to Wilde's particular way of reading Queensbury's note by imposing an intelligible word ('sodomite') upon a misspelling ('somdomite'). These allusions provide, on the level of plot and through linguistic experimentations, commentary on the contingency of words and grammatical structures, and the impossibility of absolute and objective knowledge. I conclude that the non-representational features of the *Wake* emphasizing the material properties of letters more than the denotations of words align with Schopenhauer's pessimistic vision by hindering the search for knowledge, while offering an aesthetic delight that, in a Schopenhauerian fashion, affords a respite from the sufferings of existence.



Introduction

Finnegans Wake is brimming with linguistic permutations, including neologisms, puns, and portmanteaux. Yet, despite the novel's widespread and unprecedented departure from the conventions of the English language, one historical misspelling associated with Oscar Wilde stands out: the famous linguistic error in 'For Oscar Wilde posing somdomite', in a note sent to Wilde by the Marquess of Queensbury. One reason for the prevalence of this allusion is Joyce's fascination with sins and crimes. The crimes associated with Wilde—gross indecency, buggery, and sodomy—all recur in the *Wake* and reinforce the Wakean preoccupation with sexual transgressions. The other, I argue, is Joyce's critique of the drive for conceptual stability that sets off the chain of events that led to Wilde's indictment in the Central Criminal Court of England and Wales and his subsequent imprisonment. In the following article, I propose that certain allusions to Wilde zoom into Wilde's impulse to correct the misspelling 'somdomite' implied by pursuing a libel action against Queensbury. Indeed, folded into Wilde's insistence to initiate a private prosecution against the Marquess of Queensbury is a linguistic impulse to decipher the meaning of permuted words—an impulse to impose sense upon what is essentially, and despite its author's intention, a nonsensical linguistic unit ('somdomite').

Wilde's way of reading Queensbury's note was a fatal appeal to the vocabulary of Victorian England that restricts the body and its desires. This attitude toward established language continues in Wilde's post-indictment writing, especially in his lengthy letter to his lover Lord Alfred 'Bosie' Douglas, known as 'De Profundis' (1905). In the letter, written during his confinement and published posthumously, Wilde promotes linguistic and semantic stabilities that align with the moralistic vocabulary that condemned Wilde. Indeed, throughout the letter, Wilde contrasts good and evil—'I turned the good things of my life to evil, and the evil things of my life to good', and suggests that rhetoric is the antithesis of truth—'I am not speaking in phrases of rhetorical exaggeration but in terms of absolute truth to actual fact' (Wilde, 2013: 104; 34). He opposes love and hate, associating himself with 'love': 'Love [is] the dominant note of my own nature' (81), and his lover with 'hate': 'In you Hate was always stronger than Love' (74). The presence of binary oppositions in the letter highlights a strong tendency for maintaining semantic stability, in line with the conventional norms of his era and the restrictive moralistic assumptions that governed human conduct. I will explore 'De Profundis' as championing the importance of conceptual stability that, in turn, upholds traditional moral ideals that link individual redemption to progressive history and existential order.¹

¹ See Finn Fordham's analysis of the stormy relationship between the Earwicker twins, Shem and Shaun, as unveiling Joyce's critique of providential visions of history, particularly of 'progressive Christian ideology' (2007: 44). Shaun's alignment with progressive history reflects Wilde's similar tendency.

Although Joyce shares with Wilde a fascination with sexual behaviors considered inappropriate, his attitude toward language suggests that for him semantic stability is at odds with unregulated acts of love and unauthorized desire. In other words, linguistic experimentations in the *Wake* perform the collapse of linguistic and conceptual norms that, in turn, challenge moralistic restrictions on human sexuality. Through allusions to Wilde, the *Wake* questions the validity of fixed categories and binary oppositions, and releases human knowledge from the necessity of linguistic norms. In the *Wake*, Wilde is ‘a great white caterpillar capable of any and every enormity’ (FW 33.23),² even of departing from linguistic and conceptual conventions. The *Wake*, ‘at its wildest’ (FW 34.26), displays a linguistic and conceptual chaos that sets Wilde, and the readers, free of the confinement of universalities and traditional values dictated by semantic language and conceptual rigidity.

To gain insight into the philosophical depth of Wilde’s and Joyce’s conflicting ideas about language, I turn to the philosophy of Arthur Schopenhauer, as unfolds in *The World as Will and Representation* (1859).³ The core of Schopenhauer’s beliefs revolves around the idea of an irrevocable divide between language and actuality, and the assumption that the objective world cannot be known to human beings. His fascination with the limitedness of language is evident in his engagement with his most preeminent concept, the ‘will’, that rejects conceptual thinking. Instead of providing a lucid and comprehensible conceptualization, Schopenhauer imagines ‘will’ as an inaccessible and undefinable ‘thing-in-itself’; the unknown essence of nature and humanity that makes humans cling to life. ‘Will’ becomes a word denoting an experience that is essentially ‘unconscious, uncaring, unknowing, amoral, and fundamentally goalless’ (Wicks, 2011: 9). As his roundabout way of defining ‘will’ showcases, Schopenhauer’s philosophy is preoccupied with the unrepresentable and this, in turn, advances his pessimistic outlook. Schopenhauer’s pessimism, his aim to demonstrate ‘the inevitable suffering at the very foundation of the nature of life’ (Schopenhauer, 1969: [W1] 323–324), is associated with semantic instability: suffering and the inability of language to represent the world as independent of perception are both unrelenting facts of existence.

Utilizing Schopenhauer’s differentiation of optimism and pessimism, I will make the case that Wilde’s pronounced aim to make peace with the life choices that had led to his

² James Atherton reports that Wilde was named a ‘great white caterpillar’ by Lady Colin Campbell, and that ‘[e]ach time the caterpillar is mentioned in the *Wake* it is accompanied by references to homosexuality’ (2009: 95). Slote, noting that ‘caterpillar’ also denotes ‘a soldier’, further explores the great white caterpillar in the *Wake* as a reference to Wellington, arguing for ‘an early conceptual link between Wilde and Wellington’ (1995: 104).

³ Schopenhauer’s magnum opus has been published in three editions. I refer to the expanded edition published in 1859 that included volumes one and two. Thus, when I cite from the work, I indicate in square brackets whether the quote is from the first part [W1] or the second [W2].

imprisonment— — ‘I have got to make everything that has happened to me good for me’ (Wilde, 2013: 104)— — connects with his insistence on semantic stability. In turn, I will demonstrate that *Finnegans Wake* partakes in a Schopenhauerian pessimistic vision that annihilates any attempt to endow language, as well as human existence, with a coherent meaning. In other words, while Wilde’s adherence to dogmatic thinking in ‘De Profundis’ constitutes his attempt to come to terms with his sufferings, the *Wake* expresses Schopenhauer’s insistence that there is no single ordering principle that cures suffering. My argument is that the failure to justify suffering in a senseless world is demonstrated through linguistic means in the *Wake*, specifically through allusions to Wilde. I will conclude that Joyce’s radical approach to language, which deregulates linguistic conventions and traditional structures, simultaneously performs Schopenhauer’s bleak views on existence *and* his vision for alleviating human suffering through the art of music.

Correcting the Past: Schopenhauerian Pessimism and Wildean Optimism

The complex nature of Schopenhauer’s pessimistic philosophy has sparked a debate among researchers. Here I follow the two meanings of pessimism delineated by Patrick Hassan: either ‘our world is the worst of all possible worlds ...’; or ‘... there is no significant progress in human history’ (2012: 1488, fn. 1). Schopenhauer’s negative outlook stems from his belief that the objective world is impossible to attain, since it is a product of subjective perception: ‘The world is my representation’ (Schopenhauer, 1969: [W1] 3). In other words, humans long to understand the world in order to exert control over it, avoid negative consequences, and shape the course of history towards an ideal goal. However, the longing to comprehend the world and its existence is hindered by the inaccessibility of the world, rendering humans powerless in their relationship with actuality. The will to understand the world, to control circumstances, to shape the course of history, is ‘a hungry will’ that generates ‘pursuit, hunting, anxiety, and suffering’ (Schopenhauer, 1969: [W1] 154). In short, inasmuch as ‘happiness is understood in terms of satisfaction’ of the will, then ‘final and lasting happiness is impossible’ (Hassan, 2021: 1491).

A notable accomplishment of Schopenhauer’s magnum opus is the intriguing relationship between pessimism and the limitations of semantic language, as well as the opposite link between optimism and the referential order of language. Semantic and conceptual stabilities are presented as tools in the hand of such cultural institutions as the Church that advocates a progressive world order for purposes of self-preservation. For Schopenhauer, doctrines that offer (false) deliverance from suffering are those that also insist on the stability of truth and knowledge. That ‘Christianity... has degenerated into shallow optimism’ goes hand-in-hand with dogmatic interpretations of articles of faith and human existence (Schopenhauer, 1969: [W1] 401). In contrast to the Church,

Schopenhauer's pessimism and his belief in inevitable suffering, are associated with the confined scope of semantic functions: language falls short in capturing the essence of the world and in organizing experience in a way that alleviates suffering.

Addressing Wilde's attempt in 'De Profundis' to make sense of his suffering— —with Schopenhauer in mind— —allows us to read Wilde as exercising philosophical optimism that attempts to endow language, as well as human existence, with coherent meaning.⁴ Indeed, in his letter to Douglas, language is potent and serves as a tool for manipulating past events and finding solace from suffering. Thus, Wilde writes: 'I want to get to the point when I shall be able to say, quite simply and without affectation, that the two great turning-points of my life were when my father sent me to Oxford, and when society sent me to prison' (Wilde, 2013: 104). The second turning point shattered the life he had previously known, and yet he insists that he must 'absorb into my nature all that has been done to me, to make it part of me, to accept it without complaint, fear, or reluctance' (104). Here, Wilde displays an active approach to life that advocates for the idea that one can transform their misfortunes into meaningful and constructive experiences, and strengthen and shield oneself from disappointment and despair. Wilde's aim to accept his indictment and incarceration 'without complaint, fear, or reluctance' is informed by forces within society, such as institutionalized religion, that promote the idea of finding value in misery and granting humans redemption from their hardships (104).

... there is nothing in the world so wrong but that the spirit of Humanity, which is the spirit of Love, the spirit of the Christ who is not in Churches, may make it, if not right, at least possible to be borne without too much bitterness of heart. (131)

Wilde maintains here one can transform negative experiences into positive and productive ones through love and a spiritual bond with Christ.

Still, Wilde goes beyond merely suggesting that the most difficult experiences can lead to a more improved life. When he maintains that 'Whatever is realized is right' he endorses the traditional optimistic view that actuality can fulfill the most favorable outcome (Wilde, 2013: 104).⁵ Wilde's approach to past events fits with Schopenhauer's definition of optimism as the illusory idea that life can yield anything but suffering. Schopenhauer insists that 'This world is the battle-ground of tormented and agonized beings who continue to exist only by each devouring the other' (Schopenhauer, 1969:

⁴ Here, too, I follow Hassan's use of 'optimism' not in its traditional definition as 'the best of all possible worlds, but [as] the broader view that life is worth living' (2021: 1499, n 23).

⁵ This tradition is based on Leibniz' doctrine of the best of all possible worlds. For a useful account of Leibniz rationalist optimism, and of the critical misinterpretation of this famous statement, see H D Caro (2020).

[W2] 581); any attempt to force a system of optimism is a blatant ‘absurdity’ (581).⁶ In fact, Schopenhauer claims that happiness, joy, and self-fulfillment serve the ‘Christians, positivists, and Hegelians [who] continued to insist that the world was essentially a good place, and that the pattern of history was progressive’ (Shrimpton, 2007: 42). Through the lens of Schopenhauer’s pessimism, Wilde’s willingness to instill into his incarceration a positive value is misguided and naïve. This is precisely the naiveness that, according to Schopenhauer, makes people think they can modify the fundamental state of existence: ‘We tend also to pursue happiness as if it were likely, or even guaranteed, that the world should turn out to be in accordance with what we will’ (Janaway, 1999: 324).

Recounting his sufferings in prison,⁷ Wilde refuses to lament them as the result of ‘wrong and unjust laws’ prescribed by ‘a wrong and unjust system’ (2013: 104). Instead, he determines to come to terms with his past by converting his adversity into an affirmative experience through contemplation: ‘I have got to make everything that has happened to me good for me’ (104). The key to this conversion, the cure for his sorrows, is to redefine suffering as the beginning of personal redemption: ‘There is not a single degradation of the body which I must not try and make into a spiritualising of the soul’ (104). By reshaping the past, by conceptualizing his punishment as a tool for the purification of the soul, Wilde aspires to achieve personal and social redemption. Indeed, he advises Douglas: ‘Do not be afraid of the past. If people tell you that it is irrevocable, do not believe them’ (160). Wilde’s adherence to self-redemption reflects his conviction that he can rectify the past to alleviate his suffering.

Wilde reconstructs his past tribulations to show that they have ultimately guided him towards the best life outcome, describing a progress from wretchedness and sinfulness into redemption and salvation. Crucially, Wilde’s optimism is rooted in his skillful manipulation of ideas and in his belief that through language he can transform his past:

What lies before me is my past. I have got to make myself look on that with different eyes, to make the world look on it with different eyes, to make God look on it with different eyes. (2013: 161)

Jarlath Killeen indicates that it is widely accepted in research that following his imprisonment, Wilde’s language has developed to become more straightforward and

⁶ Janaway explains that Schopenhauer discredits specifically ‘the belief that being alive is simply a good thing, whatever it brings’ (2002: 117).

⁷ ‘The plank-bed, the loathsome food, the hard ropes shredded into oakum till one’s fingertips grow dull with pain, the menial offices with which each day begins and finishes, the harsh orders that routine seems to necessitate, the dreadful dress that makes sorrow grotesque to look at, the silence, the solitude, the sham’ (Wilde, 2013: 104).

introspective, reflecting a genuine change in his spiritual views that now embrace the idea of redemption:

Traditionally, it has been argued that in this letter Wilde abandoned the ironic pose that can be found throughout most of his major writings, and in *De Profundis* becomes a sincere, penitent and emotionally mature writer. *De Profundis*, then, marks a shift from an ironic to a sincere mode of thought. (2005: 163)

According to this critical approach, Wilde's use of language in 'De Profundis' endorses his newly acquired belief that existence is rational, history is constantly advancing, that hardships can be meaningful and redemption attainable. Thus, Wilde's demonstrated and acknowledged tendency to rearrange experience through words, opposes Schopenhauer's firm belief that human beings lack the power and ability to change the circumstances that lead to their inevitable suffering. With this, Wilde reveals an inclination toward the Christian morality that Schopenhauer, the pessimist, so detested.

Language and Moralistic Traditions

The connection between language and Christian morality, and how it informs Wilde's optimism, is suggested by Wilde's attitude toward guilt. On the one hand, he explicitly deplores the authors of 'violent letters' (Wilde, 2013: 55) that have led to his downfall; he berates Douglas for having 'that dreadful mania you inherit from your father, the mania for writing revolting and loathsome letters' (52). Thus, again and again, Wilde fixes the blame for his downfall on Queensbury and Douglas:

At the one supremely and tragically critical moment of all my life, just before my lamentable step of beginning my absurd action, on the one side there was your father attacking me with hideous cards left at my club, on the other side there was you attacking me with no less loathsome letters. (53)

The fault of both father and son is asserted when Wilde finds in them the motivation for his own actions: 'Between you both I lost my head', a 'loss' that brought about the 'lamentable step' of suing Queensbury for libel (53).

And yet, intertwined with his accusations against Queensbury and Douglas, are self-reproaches. Seven times throughout the first seven pages of the letter he repeats 'I blame myself', a curious recurrence that merits a close inspection (Wilde, 2013: 45—51). Killeen argues that Wilde's self-reproaches bemoan his passivity in letting Douglas and his father to manipulate and ruin him; therefore, he claims, 'the self-accusations are really attacks on Douglas' (2005: 169). In turn, I contend that Wilde's self-reproaches

demonstrate a conceptual maneuver by which he adhered to the redemptive narrative of Christianity. Thus, his self-reproaches indicate an attempt to seek a form of guilt that advances a historical progress and concludes with personal redemption.

The redemption that Wilde is looking for fits such Christian ideals as asceticism, the parable of the return of the prodigal son, and martyrdom. In order to instill his sufferings with meaning, Wilde defines his misfortunes as ascetic experiences that deliver him, someone who had been tempted by so-called sins, to the embrace of Christian morality.⁸ That he had been degraded and defeated by the legal system of his time only reinforces his martyrdom.⁹ By appealing to such Christian paragons, Wilde attempts to impose the regulating system of religion upon the chaos of existence, to force a moral order and a vision of salvation upon a life unconcerned with moral and ethical principles. Wilde's repeated self-accusations—'I blame myself' (2013: 45–51)—set the stage for a more direct allusion to the Christian doctrine of original sin: 'The sins of another were being placed to my account' (81). This statement is consequential and should be unpacked. The precise 'sin' at stake is not clear. It is not likely that Wilde is referring here to his homosexuality, since there is no explicit indication in 'De Profundis' that he considers sexual relationships with other men as sinful. While this 'sin' remains unspecified, Wilde attests that it has been transferred and imposed onto him through the Marquess of Queensbury's manner of framing him:

... the Crown witnesses— the three most important— had been carefully coached by your father and his solicitors, not in reticences merely, but in assertions, in the absolute transference, deliberate, plotted, and rehearsed, of the actions and doings of someone else on to me[.] (81)

The image operative in 'sins of another were being placed to my account' invokes the doctrine of original sin that, according to Christian theology, has been transferred from humanity's first parents to all subsequent generations (81). While this is not a testimony to Wilde's faith in the actual Christian doctrine,¹⁰ the image reflects a cultural tendency to stabilize the chaos of actuality by appealing to a regulating, pre-individual system that centers around the idea of personal and social redemption.¹¹ Even more so,

⁸ William Morris, Wilde's contemporary, claimed that the 'terrible doctrines of asceticism' were 'born of the despair of the oppressed and degraded, [and] have been for so many ages used as instruments for the continuance of that oppression and degradation' (Gagnier, 1997: 31).

⁹ Karl Beckson and Bobby Fong discuss Wilde's infatuation with Christian martyrs and their association with 'images of the martyred artist' (1997: 62).

¹⁰ I refer the reader to chapter 6 of *The Faiths of Oscar Wilde* by Jarlath Killeen, which explores how Wilde incorporated Christian themes into his writing while in confinement.

¹¹ According to Joseph Donohue, the collective guilt of original sin is not disposed of by Wilde, but modified to fulfil 'an aesthetic and symbolic orientation' (1997: 124).

Wilde claims that he chooses not to deny the sins attributed to him but to accept them, although committed by someone else:

I could have had each one of them dismissed from the box by the Judge I could have walked out of Court with my tongue in my cheek, and my hands in my pockets, a free man. ... But I refused. I did not choose to do so. (81)

Wilde's choice not to dispute the allegations made against him, despite their falsity, has a symbolic meaning: it reinforces his adherence, in 'De Profundis', to the Christian narrative of salvation.¹²

Through appealing to the Christian doctrine of original sin, Wilde demonstrates an impulse to achieve spiritual redemption, a concept that clashes with Schopenhauer's philosophy. For Schopenhauer, the 'oft repeated doctrine of a progressive development of mankind to an ever higher perfection' necessarily perceives the world through an optimistic lens (1969: [W2] 184). To demonstrate the fallacy of optimistic approaches, such as the Christian theory of redemption, Schopenhauer provides an example from the textual world. He asks his readers to consider the following attempt to make sense of a text:

If we find a document the script of which is unknown, we continue trying to interpret it until we hit upon a hypothesis as to the meaning of the letters by which they form intelligible words and connected sentences. (184)

In the pursuit to make sense of the script, the reader will be forced to give the words new meanings that would fit into their hypothesis. Being unable to interpret the intended meanings of the messages in the document, the readers create their own message and convince themselves of its authenticity. The same process of forcing meaning occurs in the encounter with the world:

Similarly, the deciphering of the world ... must spread a uniform light over all the phenomena of the world, and bring even the most heterogeneous into agreement, so that the contradiction may be removed even between those that contrast most. (184)

According to Schopenhauer, the quest for meaning in language is comparable to the pursuit after the meaning of existence. Wilde displays a similar inclination to impose sense ('sodomite') upon non-sense (Queensbury's misspelling 'somdomite') in language, just as he tries to impose sense (Christian progressive history) upon chaos (his suffering in an uncaring universe).

¹² For a study of Wilde and collective Christian guilt, see Karen Alkalay-Gut (1997).

Schopenhauer's description of reading an unintelligible text happens to mirror the experience of reading *Finnegans Wake*. It is a happy coincidence, that allows us to contrast Wilde's approach to language with Joyce's approach. The *Wake* resists absolute deciphering and the fixing of linguistic errors. In turn, the Wakean universe that emerges from the textual frenzy is not interested in the moralistic binary opposition between good and evil, or proper and improper conduct. Instability reigns in the *Wake*, and Wilde himself, as it had already been argued by Slote, is a figure of instability in Joyce's book. Observing that Wilde is present in the *Wake*, not only through his own life story but through other figures — including Wilde's father-in-law, Horatio Lloyd, his father Sir William Wilde,¹³ and Hester Traverse Smith, author of *Psychic Messages from Oscar Wilde* (1923)—Slote maintains that Wilde enacts the 'dissolution of the possibility of an archetype' (1995: 102). Crucially, Slote's observation demonstrates that Joyce dismantles conceptual stability *through* references to Wilde. Although Wilde is but a single character in a book overflowing with allusions to historical figures, the special manner of alluding to him, which resists 'the possibility of an archetype' (Slote, 1995: 102), produces a glaring contrast to Wilde's own insistence on linguistic transparency and conceptual stability. Any interpretive framework imposed upon the *Wake* is bound to contradict other interpretive perspectives, thereby enacting Schopenhauer's notion of the world's irrevocable incomprehensibility: 'for every false deciphering, even though it suits some phenomena, will all the more glaringly contradict the remainder' (Schopenhauer, 1969: [W2] 184).

Letters and Letters: Wilde in the *Wake*

When Wilde failed to leave Queensbury's note uncorrected, he was destroyed by the social order of his time, and it is Wilde's manner of reading sense into nonsense that is discouraged by the language of *Finnegans Wake*. Joyce impedes readers' attempts to unveil objective plotlines by confronting us with an unbreakable wall of linguistic disarray. The primordial objective to correct misspellings is thwarted in *Finnegans Wake* due to the inability to fix one meaning for each pun or portmanteau and the will to fixate meanings proves to be tedious and unnecessary; it contributes nothing to the significance of Joyce's incomparable literary achievement. One passage explores the potentially disastrous outcomes of attempting to fix linguistic changes or force an absolute definition onto made-up words. Crucially, said passage alludes to Wilde and hints at his way of reading Queensbury's note in 'letter potent to play the sem backwards like Oscan wilde' (FW 419.23–24).¹⁴ Then, the speaker of the passage warns:

¹³ Slote describes Wilde as a reflection of the divided subjectivity as indicative of Wakean characters. Like Wilde, 'HCE is not so much the mimetic figure of an individual or individuals as a disjunction of tropic associations' (1995: 107).

¹⁴ Here I wish to refer the readers to Robert Baines' discussion of manners of reading *Finnegans Wake*, in his recent study, *Philosophical Allusions in James Joyce's Finnegans Wake*. When attempting to account for the significance of Joyce's

It is a pinch of scribble, not worth a bottle of cabbis. Overdrawn! Puffedly offal tosh! Besides its auctionable, all about crime and libel! Nothing beyond clerical horrors et omnibus to be entered for the foreign as secondclass matter. (FW 419.31–36)

Upon receiving Queensbury's short note, his 'pinch of a scribble', Wilde could have sued for libel only by correcting the linguistic error in 'sodomite'. By doing so, he had called upon himself all the horrors of the world encapsulated, in 1895, in the legal term 'sodomite'. Thus, the conflation of 'horror' and 'error' in 'clerical horrors' suggests that 'horror' lies not in 'error' but in the act of fixing it. Correcting the error, Wilde unleashed horror; adhering to the semantic properties of language, Wilde invited his own criminalization.

The image of a 'pinch of scribble', alluding to Queensbury's note, partakes in the *Wake*'s preoccupation with letters (especially the letter written by Shem for ALP) and with letters (alphabetical characters). Characters in the Wakean universe are often seeking to reveal the 'Letter, carried of Shaun, son of Hek, written of Shem, brother of Shaun, uttered for Alp, mother of Shem, for Hek, father of Shaun' that may or may not incriminate HCE in a sexual crime (itself based on accusations made against Horatio Lloyd) (FW 420.17–19).¹⁵ And yet, despite the recurrence of letters in the *Wake*, they remain indecipherable to both the characters and the readers of the book. Thus, it is said, Shem wrote in letters so strange that Shaun could not have read the letter: 'But could you, of course, decent Lettrechaun, we knew (to change your name of not your nation) while still in the barrel, read the strangewrote anaglyptics of those shemletters patent for His Christian's Em?' (FW 419.16–19). Here Shaun is associated with 'decent' letters: decent letters (textual messages) are written with properly arranged letters (alphabetical characters). In turn, 'shemletters' are associated with 'strange' writing. Seeing that Wilde is soon alluded to, 'strangewrote' potentially offers a comment on improper spelling, deliberate or indeliberate errors in writing.

An earlier allusion to Wilde in the same paragraph addresses misspellings as means for deviating from conventions and linguistic rules:

... letter potent to play the sem backwards like Oscan wild or in shunt Persse transluding from the Otherman or off the Toptic or anything off the types of my finklers in the draught or with buttles, with my oyes thickshut and all[.] (FW 419.23–27)

allusions to Vico, Baines distinguishes between 'looking at particular words and phrases from throughout the novel' and looking for words and phrases that 'derive from a single section' (2023: 5, 6). I find this distinction appealing, and I follow Baines's approach to reading the *Wake* when I choose to strengthen my argument by pointing to allusions made in the same paragraph.

¹⁵ See Slotte for an account of Horatio Lloyd, Wilde's father-in-law, as the original source for HCE's crime in the park (1995: 105–6).

Misspellings, referred to in the passage as ‘off the types’, disturb standard type that follows a prescribed construct. Here, in this impossibly structured sentence that includes a direct reference to Wilde (‘Oscan wild’), it is possible to detect a warning against the correction of linguistic errors. The statement ‘shunt Persse transluding’ can be read as ‘shan’t press [a] translation’, and may thus suggest that the reader should not press meaning upon nonsense by reading nonsensical linguistic units as stable words and concepts. Even one alphabetical character can make a difference. If Wilde had treated the extra ‘m’ in ‘sodomite’ as a ‘potent letter’, one that irrevocably corrupts the concept ‘sodomite’, perhaps he would have avoided his devastating legal troubles.

The introduction of HCE to the readers in Book I.2 recalls again Wilde’s miserable decision to read in ‘sodomity’ the (then) crime of ‘sodomy’: ‘A baser meaning has been read into these characters the literal sense of which decency can safely scarcely hint’ (FW 33.14–15). Base, as ‘morally low’, can only attach to an established concept such as ‘sodomy’; in turn, the linguistic unit ‘sodomity’ is nonsensical and therefore amoral. According to the passage, the reader chooses to read a baser meaning into a nonsensical unit. Slote discusses the implication of the reader in the construction of ‘baser’ meanings when he argues that the base actions attributed to HCE, reflect also on the accusers: to determine and maintain the culprit’s guilt, the accusers must retain the presence of base offenses through speech: ‘As the baser meanings read into HCE proliferate, everyone is lowered’ (2013: 148). The accusers thus become implicated in the charges they place on the culprit. That the act of reading abases the reader suggests the reader participates in the creation and perpetuation of the moralistic binary opposition between proper and improper conduct. Surely, Wilde has participated in the creation and perpetuation of the legal term ‘sodomy’ to his own detriment.

Finnegans Wake takes a stand against correcting linguistic errors. This stance is emphasized when the *Wake* contemplates or fantasizes about an alternative past, one in which Wilde does not correct Queensbury’s error:

Big went the bang: then wildewide was quiet: a report: silence: last Fama put it under ether. The noase or the loal had dreven him blem, blem, stun blem. Sparks flew. He had fled again (open shunshema!) this country of exile, sloughed off, sidleshomed (FW 98.1–5).

The question of what might have occurred if Wilde had decided against taking legal action (phrased as ‘wildewide was quiet’) is hinted at in the quoted excerpt. It is suggested that if Wilde’s famacide (‘Fama’), Queensbury, would have remained silenced (‘silence’), then the prosecution against Wilde would have sunk into the ether (‘put it under ether’). Contemplating this potential scenario concludes that Wilde’s choice to read ‘sodomite’ in ‘sodomite’ has established his own blame (‘blem, blem, stun blem’).

In *Finnegans Wake*, it appears that Wilde's predicament is rooted in a misguided desire to fixate words and meanings. The *Wake*, however, does not conform to a singular interpretive structure, nor does it neatly categorize the world into easily understood concepts such as good and evil, guilt and innocence, love and hate. The linguistic permutations in *Finnegans Wake* show that nothing is certain and that no characterization is absolute and complete. In line with Wilde's neat distinction between 'love' and 'hate' as mentioned earlier, I refer the reader to Book I.6, where Shaun allegedly professes his hate for his brother Shem:

... were he my own breastbrother, my doubled withd love and my singlebiassed hate, were we bread by the same fire and signed with the same salt, had we tapped from the same master and robbed the same till, were we tucked in the one bed and bit by the one flea, homogallant and hemycapnoise, bum and dingo, jack by churl, though it broke my heart to pray it, still I'd fear I'd hate to say! (FW 168.6–12)

Shaun's dislike for his brother is countered by confessions of their past intimacy. The several details given in descriptions of closeness and familiarity between them—like sharing a bed, warming up by the same fire, eating of the same loaf of bread, and being beaten by the same flea—complicate the integrity of Shaun's hate, if understood as the opposite of love. In fact, love and hate interlace and intermingle in Shaun's description of Shem as 'my doubled withd love and my singlebiassed hate'. According to Shaun, he is connected with his twin or his double through love, and at the same time separated from him by hate. Both sentiments are operative here and a clear distinction between them is complicated through puns and portmanteaux.

In this sense, Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*, thwarts all efforts to comprehend the meanings of words and sentences and captures the essence of Schopenhauer's pessimism. Schopenhauer's pessimistic philosophical view stems from the idea that the will possesses 'an imperishable satisfaction' and no aspect of the will can attain complete and total fulfillment, including the will to understand 'the objective world' (Schopenhauer, 1969: [W1] 362; 30). The reader of *Finnegans Wake* who strives to satisfy their desire for clear characterization, conceptualization, and motivation on the level of plot, is bound to suffer grave disappointment. If, as Hassan's reading of Schopenhauer's concludes, 'happiness—which is defined by Schopenhauer in terms of fulfillment—is elusive by nature' (2021: 1496), then the irretrievable elusiveness at the center of Joye's last novel that hinders the reader's ability to establish an authoritative interpretive framework to the book expresses philosophical pessimism. By Schopenhauerian terms, Joyce is a pessimist. More importantly, Joyce links pessimism and optimism with opposing attitudes towards language.

In Book I.6—a section dedicated to 12 questions and answers—a character named Jones contemplates the denotations of words, wondering whether meanings are fixed or not:

Talis is a word often abused by many passims (I am working out a quantum theory about it for it is really most tantumising state of affairs). A pessim may frequent you to say: Have you been seeing much of Talis and Talis those times? optimately meaning: Will you put up at hree of irish? Or a ladyeater may perhaps have casualised as you tempted her *à la sourdine*: Of your plates? Is Talis de Talis, the swordswallower, who is on at the Craterium the same Talis von Talis, the penscrusher, no funk you! who runs his duly mile? (FW 149.34–150.6)

The passage unfolds an argument between two opposing side—one associated with pessimism ('pessim'), the other with optimism ('optimately')—considering the term 'Talis'. The word 'Talis', it is reported, 'is often abused' by pessimists ('many passims'), a potential comment about the instability of words associated with Schopenhauerian pessimism. The opposing side, that apparently endorses an optimal meaning ('optimately meaning') of existence, is perturbed by the instability of words suggested by pessimism: the optimist mocks the pessimist's questioning of words ('Is Talis ... the same Talis'), right before uttering a profanity: 'funk you!' This exchange suggests not only that Joyce was familiar with the philosophical debate between pessimism and optimism, but that he associated these terms with opposing attitudes towards the stability of words.

Joyce's linguistic maneuvers in the *Wake* that privilege language over an objective plot (if such one exists), recall Schopenhauer's insistence on the primacy of representation. The philosopher contends that the world that we see is a product of subjective perception; if the world does exist objectively and independently of human perception, humans cannot access it. Human beings can only experience the appearance of the world as it is mediated to them through their own perception. Because 'the world of daily experience ... does not represent how things really are' (Wicks, 2011: 15),¹⁶ and appearances only deceive us to believe they are actuality, it is then that 'the world must be recognized, from one aspect at least, as akin to a dream' (Schopenhauer, 1969: [W2] 4).¹⁷ Indeed, linguistic permutations in the *Wake* create an elusiveness that prevents

¹⁶ Wicks further indicates that Schopenhauer's view of ordinary life as illusory is derived from Kant (see Wicks, 2011: 15–16).

¹⁷ *Finnegans Wake* is often interpreted as a rendering of a dream language. John Bishop, one of the more known proponents of this view, links the representation of dreams in *Finnegans Wake* with Vico, claiming that '*Finnegans Wake* explores, after the example of Vico, all the dark, unconsciousnesses that underlie its hero's thinking' (1986: 207). A decade and a half later, Derek Attridge dedicated a chapter to challenge this view arguing, among other things, that Joyce's novel 'provides

readers from establishing objective plotlines. In other words, each individual may interpret a sentence or a passage in their own unique way, as the inner workings of the mind vary from person to person. Joyce poses linguistic barriers to a stable and objective sense—such as paronomasia, portmanteaux, and linguistic errors—in a manner that performs Schopenhauer’s idea that subjective perception prevents access to an objective and comprehensible actuality.

While objects in the world are mere representations, the ‘thing-in-itself’ (also referred to by Schopenhauer as ‘will’) is the timeless and endless essence of every phenomenon: ‘As the will is the thing-in-itself, the inner content, the essence of the world, but life, the visible world, the phenomenon, is only the mirror of the will’ (Schopenhauer, 1969: [W1] 275). Crucially, the thing-in-itself is not a phenomenon that advances knowledge: ‘The will, considered purely in itself, is devoid of knowledge, and is only a blind, irresistible urge’ (275).¹⁸ Just as, for Schopenhauer, knowledge is limited to the appearance of things in the world, in *Finnegans Wake* our knowledge is hindered, or arrested altogether, at the material level of language. All things, according to the *Wake*, stem from a lack of knowledge:

In the ignorance that implies impression that knits knowledge that finds the name-form that whets the wits that convey contacts that sweeten sensation that drives desire that adheres to attachment that dogs death that bitches birth that entails the ensuance of existentiality. (FW 18.24–28)

In this passage, the possibility of a planned or ordered design to existence is called to question for the very basis (or anti-basis) upon which it stands: ignorance, that is, a fundamental deficiency in knowledge or information. Just as any attempt to decide on the meanings of puns is ‘a wildgoup’s chase across the kathartic ocean’ (FW 185.6), any attempt to decide on a programmed pattern of history that relieves human sufferings is rooted in ignorance.

At the same time, while the passage invokes the idea of the inaccessibility of the world and the limitedness of knowledge, it also creates an aesthetic that, in Schopenhauer’s philosophy, alleviates suffering. While the meaning, or meanings, of the passage quoted above is not explicit, its aesthetic is very prominent: through alliterations and

no waking, daylight frame ... no identifiable dreamer’, and ‘offers none of the vivid visual imagery that characterizes the convention of the dream relation’ (2004: 135). The point of my argument is not to take a side in this debate, but to claim that *Finnegans Wake* shares with Schopenhauer the insistence on elusiveness as part of human existence.

¹⁸ Wood discusses the ‘terminological problems’ in Schopenhauer’s doctrine of the will (1996: 306). In brief, Wood claims that ‘Schopenhauer is, as it were, caught between a rock and a hard place, wanting his “will” to be more than an unknowable X but not anything that could be an object of knowledge’ (307).

assonance, the sounds of the sentences flow from the vowel sound ‘i’, to the sound of ‘n’, and from there through the sounds of ‘w’, ‘c’, ‘s’, ‘d’, ‘b’, all the way to the sound of ‘en’. As this passage demonstrates, the Wakean aesthetic is one that privileges the materiality of the letter-unit and its visual and audio properties over a stable meaning. Language use in the *Wake* thus produces aesthetics that, if we take to Schopenhauer, makes existence easier to endure. For Schopenhauer, aesthetics is not a representation: his ‘theory of the aesthetically sublime’ proposes that certain forms of art can elevate the human mind above its sorrowful daily existence:

The feeling of the sublime is distinguished from that of the beautiful only by the addition, namely the exaltation beyond the known hostile relation of the contemplated object to the will in general. (1969: [W1] 202)

A characteristic of such sublime aesthetic is that it is free of requirements of representation. Music is thus the quintessential form of art for Schopenhauer, and the key for a bearable existence.

Rupert Wood explains that, for Schopenhauer, ‘Music is what one is left with, a surplus, when what might, in aesthetic terms, count as representation is taken away’ (1996: 314). While representational artistic expressions are attached to the world of phenomena, music stands for what cannot be represented in words; it is, Schopenhauer writes, ‘prior to any judgement, and ... independent of all reason or argument’ (1969: [W1] 244). Because music cannot be translated into concepts of consciousness, ‘it expresses the innermost nature of all life and existence’ (Schopenhauer, 1969: [W2] 406). The overt materiality of the letters of *Finnegans Wake*, which overshadows the semantic features of language, performs the non-referentiality of music. Although the *Wake* cannot exist ‘outside’ language, since it is made of the Latin-script alphabet, its pluralities—the multitude of meanings achieved by puns and portmanteaux—offers an aesthetic surplus that goes beyond semantics. The non-referentiality of its linguistic units makes them first and foremost audible and visual units. The visual aspect is for a different discussion, and here I simply follow Michelle Witen’s claim that within the ‘obscurity [of the *Wake*] there are distinct patterns that illustrate ways in which Joyce blurs the boundaries between a reading experience and a listening experience’ (2017: 218).¹⁹ The strong auditory features of the linguistic units in the *Wake* precede denotations and align the *Wake* with Schopenhauer’s idea of the joy produced by non-semantic art. In the *Wake*, phrases with ambiguous meaning but with appealing

¹⁹ Relating to the discussing surrounding music in the 19th and 20th centuries, Witen examines features of *Finnegans Wake* useful for contextualizing my analysis, such as the ‘inseparability of material and form’ as well as the ‘non-representational “essence” of pure music’ (2017: 220).

emphatic audibility, such as ‘dogs death that bitches birth that entails the ensuance of existentiality’ (FW 18.27), precisely express Schopenhauer’s view. Exemplified here is the idea that our irredeemable suffering, caused by our basic inability to reach satisfaction, can only be alleviated through aesthetic pleasure derived from artistic expressions that resist the requirement to accurately represent worldly phenomena.

Conclusion

Pessimism was a fashionable philosophical approach at the turn of the 20th century. Shrimpton reports that by the 1870s, the word ‘pessimism’ has become ‘the description of a distinctive intellectual position’ (2007: 42), and notes that the trend of pessimism in the literary culture of the *fin de siècle* borrowed philosophical vocabulary from Schopenhauer (43). Wilde himself acknowledges this trend in ‘The Importance of Being Earnest’ (1895), where we find the following exchange:

ALGERNON I hope tomorrow will be a fine day, Lane.

LANE It never is, sir.

ALGERNON Lane, you’re a perfect pessimist. (2009: 32–33)

Shrimpton argues that ‘the line is a philosophical joke’ about a character who is ‘philosophically up-to-date’ (2007: 46). Wilde’s shrewd characters display a keen understanding of the popularity of pessimism that speaks to the social status attached to philosophical trends. Even if Wilde did not endorse pessimism, he clearly acknowledges its prominence in the higher spheres of England’s social hierarchy.

In turn, Schopenhauer is alluded to once in the *Wake*, as ‘schoppinhour’ (FW 414.33), in the Ondt and the Gracehoper episode. The scene, as Robert Baines indicates, is brimming with humorous modifications of philosophers’ names;²⁰ accordingly, he argues that such puns as ‘schoppinhour’ suggest that ‘Joyce’s novel accords the great names of philosophy no special reverence’ (138). Baines supports this claim by his analysis of the nature of philosophical allusions in the *Wake*, dividing them between allusions to philosophers and allusions to philosophical concepts (37). While allusions to philosophical ideas seem to verify Joyce’s familiarity with particular philosophies, other allusions to names seem superficial and cannot suggest philosophical proficiency. I am happy to take on board Baines’s argument that the humorous twists on the names of renowned philosophers undermine their gravity, as well as his distinction between allusions to philosophical figures and allusions to philosophical ideas. Indeed, the mere allusion to Schopenhauer in ‘Schoppinhour’, is not enough to establish a direct

²⁰ Baines further reports that Joyce illuminated ‘Schopinhour’ as an allusion to the German philosopher in a letter to Weaver from ‘March 1928’ (2023: 139).

influence of Schopenhauer's philosophy on the author of the *Wake*, and leaves the readers only with a humorous pun.²¹ However, as I hope to have shown, there is much to be gained by applying Schopenhauerian pessimistic interpretive framework to examining divergences between Wilde's and Joyce's views on language, as well as for illuminating the significance of Wilde to Joyce's critique of cultural and linguistic norms in *Finnegans Wake*.

Inasmuch as Joyce, through the figure of Wilde, connects the perils of the world with semantic stability, reading is key. The *Wake*'s linguistic instability teaches us to read differently from Wilde's way of 'reading' Queensbury's note which insisted on the referentiality of 'somedomite'. Since that reading started the chain of events that led him to Reading Gaol, it is both appropriate and Ironic that the 'Ballad of Reading Gaol' (1898) so blatantly displays a pun on reading and Reading.²² Reading according to strict prescribed rules can be detrimental. *Finnegans Wake*, in a sense, instructs us to read in a way that dispenses with the need for a stable meaning and that acknowledges the surplus of existence that cannot be represented in words and concepts:

So you need hardly spell me how every word will be bound over to carry three score and ten toptypical readings throughout the book of Doublends Jined (may his forehead be darkened with mud who would sunder!) till Daleth, mahomahouma, who oped it closeth thereof the. Dor. (FW 20.13–18)

If every word can be interpreted in more than one sense ('three score and ten toptypical readings') then readers of the *Wake* are asked to abandon the hope for a stable and objective reading, and to conform with the Schopenhauer's pessimistic outlook on the inability to understand the world. And yet, pessimism in the *Wake* is not fatal; the *Wake*, to be sure, is not endorsing the view that life is not worth living. Indeed, as 'Was liffe worth leaving? Nej!' suggests, it is not advisable to leave life (or to leave Dublin and its Liffey river) (FW 230.25). While living is prescribed by the 'Suffering law' (FW 94.28)—although the world is a 'chaosmos' (FW 118.21), and history is unguided by providence ('Noo err historyend goody') (FW 332.1)—the *Wake* promotes the appreciation of non-semantic aesthetics. The materiality of letters in the particular arrangement of words can bring about a sense of aesthetic pleasure that eases the discomfort of recognizing that language is unstable and truths are contingent and artificial, and offer a little bit of 'alternate nightjoys' (FW 357.18). At least while reading the *Wake*.

²¹ James Walter Caufield argues that Schopenhauer's influence on Joyce has been consistently overlooked by researchers, despite Schopenhauer's popularity 'by the end of the nineteenth century' and despite Richard Ellmann's discovery that Joyce had 'an English translation of Schopenhauer's *Essays*' in his 'personal library in Trieste' (Caufield, 1998: 696, 697).

²² This pun was identified by Valentine Cunningham (1994: 1).

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Abbreviated Texts

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