Joyce and Jolas:
Late Modernism and Early Babelism

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As an epigraph, I would like to quote the limerick written by Joyce in honor of his friend and editor, when he saluted the publication of Eugene Jolas' experimental poems, Mots Déluge, in a new version provided by Jolas in his recently republished Man from Babel:

"VERSAILLES 1933
There's a genial young poetriarch Euge
Who hollers with heartiness huge:
Let sick souls sob for solace
So the jeunes joy with Jolas
Book your berths: Après mot, le déluge!"

Joyce not only plays on Jolas' name but also puns on his own name, using it as a verb ("...the jeunes joy with Jolas..." sounds almost like James Joyce) to re-write the cynical motto attributed to Louis XV. The French king allegedly offered this famous mot when he brushed aside importune criticism of his extravagant spending, showing too that he was aware of the impending crisis that would erupt after him with the 1789 Revolution. Here, "Après moi, le déluge" ("After me, the deluge") becomes "After (the) Word, the Deluge," thus stressing multiple and overdetermined links among the old embattled Ego, the ongoing "Revolution of the Word" and an apocalyptic consciousness of time's end. The Ego (Moi) has been replaced by a Mot, or a "Verbe" (Hebrew Dabar, Greek Logos, Latin Verbum, English Word) that condenses all the qualities formerly associated with an egoistic or egocentric subject. The fact that Joyce wrote the limerick at Versailles in 1933 gives it, too, a sense of ominous

1 Eugene Jolas, Man from Babel (Yale University Press, 1998), p. 112. Jolas mentions that critics said that his neological poems were "halfway between madness and genius" (p. 112). The limerick is reproduced but with a slightly different punctuation by Richard Ellmann in James Joyce, 2nd revised ed. (Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 587.

foreboding.

Joyce’s relation to Eugene Jolas can be understood as much in terms of overlapping Egos and Names as in terms of parallel philosophies, politics, and esthetics, in a movement that can be placed precisely in history—around the end of the 1920s, the beginning of the 1930s, and the waning of a certain type of “happy avant-garde” and its obsession with a “new language” or a “counter-language.” It can also be understood within its context, as seen from the vantage point of the present, now that we have reached the end of this century, a century in which *Ulysses* has come to embody our highest literary values as “best novel of the century.” Let us not forget, in case we happen to be persuaded by the Modern Library jury’s vote, that Jolas and his associates had long ago announced the death of the novel: “The Novel is dead/Long live the novel”—a proclamation to be found at the end of *transition* n°18 (November 1929, n.p.) that vigorously asserted, “The novel of the future will take no cognizance of the laws imposed by professors of literature and critics.”

It is not surprising to see how fast Jolas became Joyce’s confidant, falling into the shoes of the friend and publisher that was Sylvia Beach. Like Beach, Jolas would allow Joyce the luxury of multiple page–proofs upon which he could keep adding curiously unpronounceable words. Joyce used these as we would work with a computer screen today, but to considerable expense. Thus, Jolas explains first in *transition* n°21, (p. 252) and then in his autobiography that the printers had become so used to Joyce’s last–minute corrections that the author’s name became a common swearword when they would say “Joyce, *alors!*” Joyce was delighted to realize that his name could not only be translated into French as “*jouasse*” (a slang term meaning “extreme happiness”) but also that the “word Joyce” could turn into a printer’s “verb of objurgation.” Jolas does not use “verb” at random here. His most fundamental belief is that the Word creates the world, and this is probably the one thesis he shares entirely with Joyce—or, in the very clear terms used in *Finnegans Wake*: “This exists that issiis after having been said we know. And dabal take dabnal!” (*Wake*, 186.08–9). The metamorphism of a phrase such as “And the Devil take Dublin” into richly stratified layers using Sanskrit and Hebrew overtones testifies to the ongoing textualization of a Biblical *dabar* (speech). Later, Lacan would go one step further and show that Joyce’s Ego (*moi*) and the Word (*Verbe*) are made to coalesce in a dynamic and polysemic Name: the name of Joyce, Joyce as a Name, or Joyce—the–Name. After Me, Joyce the Ego–Name, there will only be a deluge of words . . . until the next century.

I would therefore like to reopen the issue of the Joyce–Jolas relationship in light of the recently published autobiography by Jolas. While the revised version provides few totally new insights into Joyce, it suggests how crucial it is today to have a look at *transition*: all of its issues acquire vital significance for whomever hopes to make sense of the context of Joyce’s production and reception.

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In *transition* n°15, Jolas begins “Super–Occident” by taking stock of the effects of the

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3 Jolas, “Homage to James Joyce,” *transition* n° 21, p. 252.
Crisis in values (economic and spiritual) brought about by the Crash of 1929. While rejecting Eliot’s “intellectual treason,” he surveys the intellectual and artistic movements around him and finds that he cannot identify with any of their programs (Surrealism groping toward the Spirit, the Bauhaus praising functionality, proletarian art aping bourgeois philistinism, Fascism perverting the Nietzschean utopia). Wishing that he could recreate a new individual able to blend the particular and the universal, the conscious and the subconscious, he notes: “But before this development is possible, a continuous subversive action will have to take place” (transition n°15, p.13) and this leads him to the postulation of a Revolution: “Never has a revolution been more imperative” (p. 15). But whereas one might expect some kind of political plan to follow—he has already explained how an earlier anarchism had been overcome (“Anarchism was one phase of our development, but we know now that it belongs to another age” transition n°15, p. 14)—the next sentence restricts starkly the domain of application to the Word: “We need the twentieth century word. We need the word of movement, the word expressive of the great new forces around us. . . . The new vocabulary and the new syntax must help destroy the ideology of a rotting civilization” (transition n°15, p.15). And then he launches into a long diatribe against journalism and bad popular literature that culminates in one of the worst cases of purple prose: “The art of the future must be conceived as a universal art, with regional autonomy. We want the most complete decentralization in life and in expression, while, at the same time, working for the new humanity, which will, as always, be biologically monistic, but evolutionary in manifestations, totalistic and autochtonous” (transition n°15, p. 16).

In case the reader has not grasped his meaning, Jolas returns with less passionate rhetoric to the same series of ideas in his editorial notes at the end of the same issue. There he seems to make amends for his earlier position and stresses “real life” issues: “Literature alone does not suffice. We also have to meditate about the motives and directions of our being. We must seek the new conditions of life around and within us, in order to avoid becoming esthetes of a dying decade. We must plunge into philosophy and social sciences, while we form the things of our creative vision” (transition n°15, p. 187). Here, to sum up, it seems that while Jolas begins expressing the most durable elements of his system, he is trying to blur the boundaries between categories that we, today, tend to keep separate—Modernism and the Avant-garde on the one hand, Modernism and Romanticism on the other.

In the same “Notes,” Jolas claims that the ambition of his journal and friends—seen as “friends” who can now show their “collective power”—is to express “the new mythology of our epoch” (transition n°15, p. 187). But, even more clearly this time, he refuses any alliance or compromise with Michael Gold’s New Masses and reiterates his condemnation of “proletarian philistinism” (p. 188). It seems that one can see in these remarks, as well as in the famous “Proclamation” of “Revolution of the Word” in the following issue, a simple return to the “Earliest System—Program of German Idealism” of 1796—a parallel that can be confirmed by the systematic appeal to Blake’s famous “Proverbs of Hell.”4 In this joint declaration—no one is sure who actually wrote the program (probably Hegel), and it is to be found among Hölderlin’s, Schelling’s, and Hegel’s collected works—the three poets and

4 See Blake’s “The Marriage of Heaven and Hell” (1793). Stuart Gilbert claims that he added these quotes to the proclamation at the last minute.
philosophers who had been together at the Tübingen Stift state that they can be useful for the German people only if they create a "new mythology": "... we must have a new mythology, but this mythology must be in the service of the Ideas, it must be a mythology of Reason." The anonymous author adds: "The philosophy of the spirit is an aesthetic philosophy" and claims that poets are already the "unacknowledged legislators of the world": poetry must become again what it was before "the teacher of mankind," "for there is no philosophy, no history left, the maker's art alone will survive all other sciences and arts."  

Now, while Jolas is continually alluding to Joyce and taking his Work in Progress as the best realization of such a "new Mythos," we may wonder how to reconcile his unrelenting Romanticism with Joyce's well-known distaste for Romanticism. Should we change our view of Joyce's radical opposition to Romanticism, or admit that he simply did not wish to antagonize his publisher-friend by voicing too clearly his doubts? Besides Joyce's anti-Jungianism clashes with the concept of the universal and collective Mythos. But the main issue that I would like to reopen is that behind the possible disagreement about a "collective Mythos" there is a firm agreement that the foundation of any Mythos is provided by a Logos understood as full Verb and Word.

A few critics have noticed that Jolas and the contributors to transition and also Our Exagmination... are quite fond of quoting Ogden's and Richard's linguistic theories. This is the case of John Rodker, who quotes the idea from The Meaning of Meaning that "blood pressure" also determines meaning in order to justify Joyce's then ongoing experiments with verbal synaesthesia. The Meaning of Meaning is an interesting essay because it starts by refuting de Saussure's theory of the sign as being too "philological"—too far from "things" (therefore not "verifiable" scientifically) and too close to the logic of a single language, namely French. After giving their own definition of meaning as a triangular arrow linking Symbol, Thought, and Referent, the two authors of The Meaning of Meaning devote their second chapter deals to classical conceptions of "the power of words" in order to examine the most important myths of language. They discuss at length Mauthner's nominalism (a strong influence on Beckett and Joyce), Hugo's mystical conception of the Verbe as God and finally provide an example of how language works even when it means almost nothing. They imagine that if a writer (not too far from Lewis Carroll's jabberwocky) was to say: "The gostak distims the doshes," one could still make relatively good sense of it—thanks to the prevalence of grammar (one could say "the goshes are distimmed by the gostak"). This is in a nutshell what takes place with Joyce's "synthetic" language. Like Ogden, Joyce believes that meaning percolates through our activity in the world of Symbols which we inhabit.

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6 Harris, p. 511.


10 Ogden and Richards, The Meaning of Meaning, p. 11.

11 Ogden and Richards, The Meaning of Meaning, p. 46.
is more a "mode of action" or a "gesture" than an expression of thought—a view confirmed by Malinowski in his appendix. It would be too long to develop Joyce's linguistic theories (they owe more to Jousse and Saussure taken together than to Ogden and Richards), but it is clear that the latter's psychological pragmatism finds its way into the *Wake*, at least when reformulated as a theory of generalized mimology: "... lead us seek, lote us see, light us find, let us misnot Maidadate, Mimosa Multimimetica, the maymeamingin of maimoomemeining!" (*Wake*, 267. 1–3).

It is curious to see how much Jolas and Gilbert, for instance, relied upon Ogden's and Richards's definitions in order to launch the idea of a "Revolution of the Word." In *transition* no 18 (pp. 203–05), Stuart Gilbert discusses in "Functions of Words" the loaded term "Revolution," distinguishing clearly the Symbolic function of language from its emotive counterpart. "The Revolution of the Word" is a movement that wishes to explore this secondary, non-utilitarian function of language, to treat the *aura*, the "light vapour which floats above the expression of the thought" (p. 204). The revolutionary composes his own "syntax"—not in the linguistic sense, but in the etymological sense of the "setting together of things." When expression is privileged over communication—as the Manifesto made plain—the new "syntax" hopes to explore a "dream world" and create a new vision.

I would suggest that we read all of the essays in *Our Exagmination*. . . . as if they had been written by a single author. This would, in fact, recreate the voice of the magazine, since Joyce is the only indisputable "authority" and prime *exemplum* whom all contributors agree upon; it allow us to be wary of the snide and disparaging comments that are regularly lavished upon these essays. For instance, when Suzette Henke "revisits" the essays contained in *Our Exagmination*. . . . in *Classics of Joyce Criticism*, she tends to be superior and ironical, dismissing the collection as "critical anomalies"—pieces that deserve to be kept only in the museum of early and misguided efforts. Most Joyce scholars have felt authorized to such an attitude by Joyce himself, for he seems to mock himself and his "disciples" above all—especially when he reintroduces them into his book as the "twelve deaferend dumbbawls of the whowl abovebeugled to be the contonuation through regeneration of the urtteration of the word in pregross" (*Wake*, 284. 19–23).

Henke also notes that Beckett's essay is the only introduction that has survived and is regularly anthologized—probably more because of Beckett's reputation than for his explanations of Joyce, she suggests. "Those decentered disciples sent on a 'wilgoup's chase across the kathartic ocean' (*Wake*, 185.6) foundered in a nexus of undecidability but made valiant efforts to resist the centrifugal force that marginalized their critical enterprise."¹³ My position is quite different. I believe that this collection remains today the best introduction to the *Wake* because it does not attempt to impose a grid and is systematically attentive to the way the "Word" functions in all its dimensions (that it sees the "poetic" and "musical" or "oral"/"aural" aspects of the text which have been so rarely studied, if at all noticed, by Joyce specialists of the following generations).

One can notice that the chronological order of publication has not been respected, since

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¹³ Henke, p. 61.
Beckett’s piece—published last, the *transition* issue (n°16/17) in which it is found announces the publication of the whole volume of *Our Exagmination*. . . .—comes first. It is clearly meant as a general introduction to the collection as well as to the *Wake*. One of the earliest pieces, by Elliott Paul on “Mr. Joyce’s treatment of Plot” (*transition* n° 9), is paradoxical indeed, since it was published in 1927, that is, twelve years before the publication of the book itself. Besides remarking on the circular structure of the work, Paul provides, in fact, an introduction to the problem of characterization in the *Wake* that attempts to go beyond the recurrent litanies on “distortion and creation of words” (*Our Exagmination*. . . ., p. 131). The curious collapsing of “plot” with “characters” can be read in a positive light—as if apart from a few archetypal motifs such as the “Fall,” Joyce’s epic had created not really a “story” but merely a matrix of stories—in which Time and Space are indeed elastic, since “the characters are composed of hundreds of legendary and historical figures, as the incidents are derived from countless events” (*Our Exagmination*. . . ., p. 134). Clumsy and vague indeed as these pages are, they nevertheless convey the pleasure of discovery and enjoyment of a new type of writing clearly defined as a new “polyphony” (p. 136). Paul remarks that, however baffling the text may be in its verbal intricacies, it always respects the syntax and structure of English. The avant-gardism of the “apostles” never pushes them into a position of a “radical break” with the past and with usual language, as was the case, for instance, of the French reception of the *Wake* in the 1970s with *Tel Quel*.

Above all, the collected pieces in *Our Exagmination* . . . give us a sense of the new reader. John Rodker’s piece is perhaps the best in that respect, especially when he sees the achievement of “... the complete symbiosis of reader and writer” in *Work in Progress*. (See *Our Exagmination*. . . ., p. 143). Joyce echoes later with: “His producers are they not his consumers? Your exagmination round his factification for incamination of a warping process.” (*Wake*, 497. 1–3). Many other important insights are provided too late in *transition* to be inserted in the few other pieces not included in *Our Exagmination*. For instance, I would single out Michael Stuart’s essay published in *transition* n° 18, entitled “The Dubliner and his Dowdili: Notes on the Sublime” (pp. 153–61), as a very original essay which analyzes for the first time the function of the sublime in the *Wake*. Or, equally fruitful and little discussed, Jolas’s valediction to Joyce, called “Homage to the Mythmaker” and published in the last issue of *transition*, n° 27, makes the surprising claim that Issy is Earwicker’s “adopted daughter” (p. 170). Whether this is Jolas’ unauthorized comment, or a hint given by Joyce himself, this looks like an important element to assess in light of the debate concerning “incest” (not only between Earwicker and Issy, but also, by a somewhat unduly biographical extension, between James and Lucia Joyce).

More importantly perhaps, both critics stress the links between Joyce’s aesthetics and Romantic theories of the Sublime from Longinus to Burke, from Kant to Schlegel, all quoted by Jolas (p. 175). Their intuitions added together would realize exactly what Ginette Verstraete’s excellent book has recently demonstrated. As she suggests, a better understanding of *Finnegans Wake* can be gained when one moves beyond the confrontation between Kant and Hegel and uses the model provided by Schlegel’s esthetics.14 A new “feminine sublime”

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14 See Ginette Verstraete’s *Fragments of the Feminine Sublime in Friedrich Schlegel and James Joyce* (SUNY Press, 1998).
would thus be born, a sublime that might also encompass ugliness and ridicule.

It seems useful to conclude with C.K. Ogden’s experiment in translating the last four pages of *Anna Livia Plurabelle* into Basic English, “the International Language of 850 words in which everything may be said,” and published the result in *transition*. As Ogden proudly announced: “the simplest and most complex languages of man are placed side by side.”

Indeed, the translation is surprisingly successful, for apart from a few conceptual rewritings (“Well, you know or don’t you kennet or haven’t I told you every story has an end” thus becomes: “Well are you conscious, or haven’t you knowledge, or haven’t I said it, that every story has an ending . . .”), the rhythm is generally well conveyed. The piece ends with: “Night now! Say it, say it, tree! Night night! The story say of stem or stone. By the side of the river water of, this way and that way waters of. Night!” Ogden wants to prove that Joyce is indeed doing very complex things with simple means. He also demonstrates that since one cannot translate proper nouns or the rhythm given by a still normal grammar, the verbal inventions are not as important as most detractors would have it.

One might recall that C.K. Ogden had published in 1931 a book entitled *Debabelization,* with the revealing subtitle: “With a Survey of Contemporary Opinion on the problem of a Universal Language.” The tone of this book is often facetious, as when Ogden imagines that if the Soviet Union was to follow the project of a universal language called *Novial,* it would be called *Sovial.*

By deriding other projects, he stresses that English should become the basis of a new universal language; otherwise one merely adds “to the existing Babel.” Since English contains the best features to provide a grammatical and semantic basis for his Universal Language, Ogden’s project of the “universalization of English” is not very different from Joyce’s poetic experimentation with several languages. “If we are content merely to assume its adoption with the necessary phonetic modifications, we have *Anglic.* If we prefer to imagine that it will gradually absorb other languages in virtue of its adaptability, flexibiltiy, and analytic simplicity—taking what it needs *from all,* we get what may be called *Pasic:* a foretaste of such a language may be found in the later work of James Joyce.”

However, *Basic* (with its eight hundred words) is to be preferred if English is to succeed as a language used by the whole world in a purely instrumental fashion.

In view of the recurrence of the term in *transition,* it is important to remember that Ogden does not advocate the use of a “synthetic” language such as Ido or Esperanto, but wishes to adapt and simplify an existing language. His other model is Chinese, and he notices that Chinese has produced a language a great complexity of thought and evocative power without having “cases, modes, tenses, and a complex system of derivations”—whereas Esperanto has all of these. But Chinese is inferior to English because it is not sufficiently technical or accurate. Joyce was not only pleased with efforts such as Jolas’ or Ogden’s, but he

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16 *In transition,* p. 139.
18 Ogden, *Debabelization,* pp. 15-16.
19 Ogden, *Debabelization,* p. 104.
20 Ogden, *Debabelization,* p. 132.
incorporated them into the very substance of *Finnegans Wake*—just as he did with the attempts of his twelve “apostles” of *transition*. If he often derided their efforts, we should not conclude that he did not enjoy or need them. As we know, the point in *Finnegans Wake* is not to find one's way out of the dark forest but to accept being lost and even to enjoy a wandering progression through Night, a theoretical place where Jolas had perhaps anticipated Joyce.

The affinities between Joyce’s *Work in Progress* and “the language of night” are startling. Jolas had started reading saint John of the Cross early and quite independently of Joyce, and this reading nourished his fascination for all sorts of mystical and paradoxical discourses. In *transition* n° 23 (1935), an issue partly devoted to “James Joyce and his new work,” Jolas typically designs “a Little Mantic Almageste,” in which he lists Blake, Boehme, Madame Guyon, and St. John of the Cross, among other mystics, as the forerunners of the new language of myth and the unconscious developed by the group of experimental writers and artists whom he keeps promoting—Joyce representing, of course, the culmination of such a process in his eyes. The language of Night confronts the inexpressible: it attempts to posit esthetic discourse in the place once occupied by negative theology. The apophatic language of negative theology justifies its activity when facing the task of extending and subverting the usual communicational model.

In *Ulysses*, Joyce had postulated the reconciliation of the Citizen and the Artist, those two emblematic figures, while leaving to an uneducated female voice the “last word” of his book. With the arduous progression through *Work in Progress*, Joyce’s systematic creation of an ideal audience has first and foremost a defensive function: the “common or neuter” reader is less educated than critics might wish, yet he or she (he–she) can read the book and derive "lots of fun" from it. By the 1930s, Joyce, who had already decided to based his new epic on an Everyman (Here Comes Everybody), wished to make the “new reader”—and nobody could be better qualified for this role than Eugene Jolas—an integral part of his narrative structure.

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22 See Colleen Jaurretche’s *The Sensual Philosophy: Joyce and the Aesthetics of Mysticism* (University of Wisconsin Press, 1997) for an excellent exploration of the “negative” mystical tradition which Joyce relied upon.