

## CHAPTER I

*Joyce, race and racism: introduction*

Race is the primary site of this account of the *Wake*, with race discourse, especially in its 'scientific' forms, featuring largely. Such an emphasis requires some explanation because although race is a familiar enough concern of Joyce studies, especially since Vincent Cheng's landmark reading, *Joyce, Race and Empire* (1995), it is usually worked differently. Most typically it figures in the context of Irish history and postcolonial critical traditions. Here race is often understood in terms of the Derridean binary where the imperial Self becomes conditioned against the colonial Other and *vice versa*. In this framework the Joyce *oeuvre* is often formulated as a vigorous and developing engagement around colonial identities. *Dubliners* (1914) becomes a young man's anatomising of a colonial subject too conditioned, weak or stupid to be extricated from the 'native' condition, but also exoticised in some ways as the romantic Other. *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916) is a more mature and nuanced representation of Irish identity. Here Joyce's prototype artist might declare his resistance to both nation and state, but he proclaims the end of his youth with a determination 'to forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race'.<sup>1</sup> With this apparent contradiction, the question of what it means to be 'Irish' becomes considerably problematised.

The 'postcolonial' phase of criticism has also maintained that race remains a major issue in the mature work of James Joyce. *Ulysses* (1922) in particular has been seen as a postcolonial endeavour, a text that not just by its representation of the colonial subject but, more crucially, by its appropriation of colonial and, indeed, Irish nationalist discourses formulates a complicated interrogation of ideologies of race and nationalism. Here episodes such as 'Scylla and Charybdis', 'Oxen of the Sun' and 'Cyclops' have become established illustrations of what is seen as a widespread engagement with English and Anglo-Irish cultural models. The latter episode often features in postcolonial accounts as the high point of a complex interaction with forms of cultural nationalism that is central to the *Ulysses* project as a whole.<sup>2</sup>

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The current study is related to such work in various ways. Race is considered in terms of relations between England and Ireland; chapter 2 in particular discusses this dynamic with an emphasis on formulations of the ‘Celt’. The primary interest, however, is not in Irish, Anglo-Irish and British identities *per se* but in a race history that operates on a larger scale and thus places Joyce in a wider Western context, and a very different political environment. Here race remains important in terms of the romanticised identities of both decolonising radicals and the conservative centre, but also becomes disastrously positioned at the heart of the extreme right. It is in this context that Joyce’s engagement with race, certainly a product of colonial relations in many respects, also figures as a wider disputation with rationalism, capitalism and modernity. From this perspective *Finnegans Wake* (1939) features not as an Irishman’s assault on the English language, as a critic such as Declan Kiberd would claim, but rather as a very particular and specifically targeted response to the betrayal of progressive and humanist ideologies.<sup>3</sup> These latter emerged from the Enlightenment as powerful doctrines of equality,<sup>4</sup> only to be wrecked by consolidation and reaction as postrevolution Western culture began to circumscribe the limits of reform and, indeed, redefine the nature of reason and rationality.<sup>5</sup> The central argument here is that the strangeness of *Finnegans Wake* – and it is, still, magnificently strange – can be read as an engagement with a culture that had itself made a huge investment in acculturating the bizarre.

‘Neo-grammarian’ historical linguistics plays a special part in this account as the ‘science’ that once opened the floodgates to what was constructed as knowledge about racial difference. As early as the 1650s, Justus Georg Schottel, the ‘chief grammarian of the period’ was articulating the language principle that was to form the foundation of European Aryanism:<sup>6</sup>

When the languages split up and mankind was dispersed across the world, Ashkenaz, the supreme head of the family, crossed Asia Minor and settled in Europe, where he made the land fertile and divided it . . . He was the ancestor of the Germans, and had brought from Babel the old Cimbric of German language . . . Today we still observe, everywhere in Europe, the presence of root-words of a German language, though these differ from one another in consequence of all kinds of changes and confusions, having been deformed and damaged by the admixture of foreign words.<sup>7</sup>

On the back of linguistics, and the entirely false assumption that language is a racial characteristic, the Germanic idea became key to the Aryan myth. By the early nineteenth century, Schiller was defining the German people

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as ‘the kernel of mankind, elected by the universal spirit to strive eternally for the human race’. He maintained the hope that the German language ‘might prevail throughout the whole world’.<sup>8</sup> According to Jules Michelet, Germany was the powerhouse behind the entire European phenomenon. Germany ‘gave her Swabians to Switzerland and to Sweden; her Goths to Spain; her Lombards to Lombardy; her Anglo-Saxons to England, her Franks to France. She gave both a name and renewal to all the peoples of Europe.’<sup>9</sup> Similarly, Johann Fichte was able to ascribe ‘all the peoples of Europe, excepting the Slavs, to Germanic stock; but drew a distinction between an “original race” (*Urvolk*), namely the Germans, and the “neo-Latin peoples” who were deficient, de-Germanised and sterilised through the loss of the original language’.<sup>10</sup> The argument here is that the *Wake* is centrally engaged with an academy that formulated such views in terms of rationality and reason.

Linguistics had a central role in this respect, but hardly an exclusive one. By the late nineteenth century, scientific racism had become invigorated by the biological sciences and scarcely a single branch of social science or the humanities remained unaffected. Archaeology, anthropology, history, palaeoanthropology and sociology: all became crucially defined by race. Positioned in a framework provided by linguistics and Darwinism, such forms of knowledge worked in quite contradictory ways to ‘prove’ on the one hand the workings of ‘progress’ in the social as well as the natural world and yet, on the other hand, to identify a process of social and cultural ‘degeneration’ so powerful as to be thought potentially capable of throwing human history into reverse. This theoretical disposition led many Western intellectuals, at the *fin de siècle* and beyond, to understand modernity as a degradation of originary Enlightenment idealisms or, indeed, as a cultural condition that had been disastrously reared on flawed ideas of ‘natural rights’ and false principles of ‘equality’.

The latter position was held by many of Joyce’s ‘modernist’ contemporaries, certainly those working in the field of literature – W. B. Yeats, Ford Madox Ford, Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, Percy Wyndham Lewis and D. H. Lawrence, all strongly identified with right-wing radicalism, and not simply as a matter of youthful experimentation. Yeats’s interest in eugenics was lifelong, as was his instinct for conservative landlordism; Madox Ford held a deep suspicion of ‘Parliaments in England, the Constituent Assemblies of France [...] and] all the rules in the Constitution of the United States’. These were the implied wrong turning points of history, the usurping institutions of an *ancien régime* fondly reconstructed in Ford’s account as ‘the old feudalism and the old union

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of Christendom beneath a spiritual headship'.<sup>11</sup> Eliot was infamously appalled by 'mass' society, as was Pound, whose interest in Mussolini was to end so disastrously. Above all, Lewis, in some ways the most complex and interesting artist of this generation, gave credibility to absurd and dangerous right-wing ideas over a period of some fifty years. This account argues for a distinction between Joyce and such figures. Indeed, it sees the *Wake*'s well-known and pervasive attack on Lewis not as the local 'spat' of conventional literary history – the retaliation for Lewis's assaults in *Time and the Western Man* (1927) and elsewhere – but as the signature of a much more fundamental clash of political and cultural ideas.

*Joyce, Race and 'Finnegans Wake'* argues that it is substantially through the idea of race that Joyce, like so many of his contemporaries, takes a position on modernity in the *Wake*. At one level this involves the representation of race consciousness in everyday social and cultural life. Through the handling of 'character', if the notion has any meaning in the *Wake*, race becomes, however fluid and nebulous, nevertheless central to human identity and the sense of self. Contemporaneity is significantly constituted in terms of race consciousness in the *Wake*, a consciousness played out primarily in demotic forms, in the gossipy stories and everyday exchanges of ordinary life as well as in 'popular' culture. At the same time, *Finnegans Wake* takes a political position on race, and it is here that Joyce becomes much at odds with his writer contemporaries. For Joyce does not think of race as the essentialist condition sometimes mystified in modernist literature where 'the Dark Demon' is in eternal conflict with a 'White spirit' counterpart.<sup>12</sup> Race in Joyce is a construct, the primary purpose of which is understood in terms of the maintenance of social cohesion and consent. Race identity here becomes not a matter of biology but of culture. This recognition means that the racism which typically disguised itself as the rational measurement and management of difference becomes exposed as an ideology, operating at the structural levels of culture and society as knowledge, authority and power. Such an identification of the wider politics of race is central to *Finnegans Wake* and involves the recognition that the scientific racism legitimised by such a politics was not an English, colonial aberration, but a European phenomenon closely linked to the rise of modernity, to myths and fantasies about the self and cultural identities that the European academy once privileged as advanced and precious human knowledge.<sup>13</sup>

Disagreement, refinement and the displacement of old paradigms were the familiar elements of that privileging, producing an intellectual culture that was extremely diverse and complex. It involved contradictions, fashions

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and competing schools of thought, and it became, certainly by the late nineteenth century, entirely mainstream. It needs to be emphasised that however irrational and unacceptable scientific racism may appear now, in its day it was embedded in the major cultural institutions of Western intellectual life. This involved the exercise of vast resources over a long period of time and produced often contested versions of cultural and social truth, though whatever forms scientific racism took and however much it disputed with itself, it maintained as a first principle, and quite against the egalitarian orthodoxy of classical Enlightenment tradition, the belief in the theory of permanent racial types.<sup>14</sup> This belief was entirely fallacious, though whether it was the simple product of 'misunderstanding' that some theorists have suggested must be doubtful.<sup>15</sup> For Kenan Malik, the scientific demonstration of racial difference, often applied to national populations as well as to those 'outside', was a key mechanism in maintaining social control: '[t]he tendency to view social differences as natural became rationalised through the discourse of race. The concept of race emerged, therefore, as a means of reconciling the conflict between the ideology of equality and the reality of the persistence of inequality. Race accounted for social inequalities by attributing them to nature.'<sup>16</sup> Writing from a different tradition, D. T. Goldberg implies a similarly structural level when he writes that 'the spirit of modernity is to be found most centrally in its commitment to continuous progress: to material, moral, physical and political improvement and to the promotion and development of civilization and general standards for which the West took to be its own values universalised'.<sup>17</sup>

These points about the complexity, one-time authority and sheer cultural significance of scientific racism are well known and have been widely discussed, but they need emphasising here, because if we underestimate scientific racism, mistaking it for a fringe culture, or an unfortunate accident of modernity, then the *Wake* is substantially lost as a decisive and, indeed, courageous intervention. One of the basic principles of this account, then, is that in order to avoid a 'presentist' reading of the *Wake* it is necessary to disengage, as far as possible, from what Elazar Barkan describes as the postwar 'retreat from scientific racism'.<sup>18</sup> This is the cultural revisionism that not only thoroughly undermined the scientific basis on which racism was formally constructed, but which also involved a substantial reconfiguration of European intellectual history. Here the thinking behind an event such as the Holocaust could become marginalised as human aberration, a dark and evil corruption of the true Western intellectual tradition, rather than a logical and, to that extent, predictable

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outcome of a 300-year-old European obsession with race classification. As historians such as Léon Poliakov and sociologists such as Michael Banton, Zygmunt Bauman and Malik have shown, there is a very real sense in which for much of the modern period, ‘to think racially was to be modern and scientific’.<sup>19</sup> From Linnaeus to Charles Darwin and beyond, reason and rationality were bound up with developing knowledge about the classification of human types. A second basic principle of scientific racism, that higher racial forms had progressively evolved and could likewise degenerate in adverse cultural conditions, was constructed as a key modern scientific reality, one which at times could take on supreme epistemological importance. Benjamin Disraeli’s ‘philosophy of history [which] might be summarised in the formula “All is race; there is no other truth”’, resonated throughout the nineteenth and a good part of the twentieth century.<sup>20</sup>

This is not say, of course, that there was no contesting of scientific racism. From within the academy, the process of unravelling began as early as the 1860s and gained momentum through the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. By the 1920s, however much race classification remained a reality in the public mind, it was clearly possible to think in terms of new versions of modernity where ideas of race and nation became deeply problematised. Joyce was predisposed towards these versions of liberalism well before he wrote *Ulysses* and the *Wake*. As a young man, he had already developed what became characteristic attitudes to race and racism and these were very much shaped by Irish cultural contexts – particularly, in my view, by his position as a member of the Irish Catholic middle class. This class was shaped by both nineteenth-century liberalism and a culture of radical dissent that English politicians from all sides attempted to contain. By the late nineteenth century, the Irish middle class had benefited in very obvious ways from a number of traditions that were progressive in nineteenth-century terms. Joyce could be ambiguous about precise forms of dissent and certainly angered by the slowness of reform, and what he often perceived as the hypocrisy of English Liberal politicians. It is well known that he despised William Gladstone and regarded the Liberal party in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as a weapon that could be used against Ireland.<sup>21</sup> But, in the broader sense, Joyce was a product of liberalising dynamics and it was from this foundation, and his attachment to a late modern, existential version of romanticism, that he separated out from conservative cultural nationalism and its counterpart race fantasies, adopting a ‘legal-rational’ approach to Irish politics, as opposed to one based on notions of Irish ‘cultural individuality’.<sup>22</sup> In the early 1907 essay ‘Ireland, Island of Saints and Sages’, there

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is evidence of an obvious exposure to nineteenth-century race discourse – in the ideas of ‘nordic aggressiveness’ and of the ‘virgin’ ‘thread’ which might theoretically designate a ‘pure’ culture. But the essential thrust dismisses race purity and the Celtic myth. It is recognisably ‘progressive’ and, for its time, radical on race:

Our civilisation is a vast fabric, in which the most diverse elements are mingled, in which nordic aggressiveness and Roman law, the new bourgeois conventions and the remnant of a Syriac religion are reconciled. In such a fabric, it is useless to look for a thread that may have remained pure and virgin without having undergone the influence of a neighbouring thread. What race, or what language (if we accept the few whom a playful will seems to have preserved in ice, like the people of Iceland) can boast of being pure today? And no race has less right to utter such a boast than the race now living in Ireland . . . Do we not see that in Ireland, the Danes, the Firbolgs, the Milesians from Spain, the Norman invaders, and the Anglo-Saxon settlers have united to form a new entity, one might say under the influence of a local deity?<sup>23</sup>

This is not to say that Joyce was utterly and consistently detached from all and any forms of race consciousness. Clearly, being Irish always meant something terribly important to Joyce, and there were times, especially in the early years, when the sheer currency of race categorisation proved irresistible. Much of the 1912 lecture ‘Race and Realism in English Literature (Daniel Defoe–William Blake)’, for example, was based on an extended historical and cultural race historiography that has William III’s reign as a ‘crisis of race’, an ‘ethnic revenge’ taken by the German spirit because it had been usurped – ‘from the days of William the Conqueror onwards, no monarch of Germanic stock had wielded the English sceptre’. In a curious cultural dialectic, Joyce sees the emergence of Defoe, simultaneous with this Germanic ascendancy, as the appearance of ‘the true English spirit in literature’, a spirit of materialism contrasted conventionally, and following Matthew Arnold and Ernest Renan, against the Celtic. On Defoe’s attempt at a ‘spiritualist study’ in *Duncan Campbell* (1720), which is concerned with ‘an interesting case of clairvoyance in Scotland’, Joyce accounts for Defoe in the presence of Duncan as ‘the realist in the presence of the unknown . . . the Anglo-Saxon in the presence of the Celt’. Clearly, Joyce was not entirely immune to the temptations of race discourse, or to the soporific effects of ‘peat smoke’.<sup>24</sup> But he was enough of a new modern and a radical, even in 1907, a long time before he became an icon of modern literature, to recognise that national identities, let alone racial ones, were complex, often irrational and based on dubious ideas. The idea of race might have remained workable at times, but Joyce decisively



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challenged the notion of purity of race and clearly distinguished it from the concept of 'nationality'. Nationality might easily be a 'convenient fiction', and must 'find its reason for being rooted in something that surpasses and transcends and informs changing things like blood and the human word' (i.e. language).<sup>25</sup>

By the time Joyce came to write the *Wake*, it seems certain that this early radicalism had become hardened and even more sensitive to the constructionist nature of social and cultural knowledge about race and nationality – this in the contexts of both living in Europe and joining the very front rank of European artistic and intellectual life. The notebook evidence can be very suggestive here.<sup>26</sup> It shows Joyce making many notes about race history and racial classification, especially in the earlier stages of *Work in Progress*. *JJA*, VI.B.5, 142 contains a table that indicates Joyce thinking about how race classification, far from being a matter of science, is culturally relative. Thus while in 'France' the Frank identity is notable for its 'civic' qualities, in 'Ireland' civicness becomes attached to the 'English'. The notebooks also show that Joyce, certainly in the mid-1920s, was particularly interested in both scientists and social scientists who wrote about race. Quite often, these were very much on the left, as was J. B. S. Haldane, for instance. Haldane's futuristic, and optimistic, account of social and scientific development, *Daedalus or the Science of the Future* (1924), a source for the *Wake*, was later used to produce Aldous Huxley's dystopia, *Brave New World* (1932) – an unfortunate usage in many ways because Haldane was a scientist who attacked the kind of naked social Darwinism that Huxley saw as being operated by the state of the future. Far from recommending eugenics, Haldane protested against those who 'having discovered the existence of biology . . . attempted to apply it in its then very crude condition to the production of a race of supermen . . . They [eugenis] certainly succeeded in producing the most violent opposition and hatred amongst the classes whom they somewhat gratuitously regarded as undesirable parents.'<sup>27</sup> His comment that '[i]t took man 250,000 years to transcend the hunting pack. It will not take him so long to transcend the nation'<sup>28</sup> was noted by Joyce at *NBB*, VI.B.1, 61 (c) as '250,000 to transcend/hunting pack/ – nation'. More important still in this respect was Leon Metchnikoff's *La Civilisation et les grandes fleuves historiques* (1899). Metchnikoff was a radical social scientist, associated with anarchism and important to Joyce because of his work on I.viii, the ALP and 'rivers' episode of the *Wake*. *La Civilisation*, which Joyce was reading in 1924, was a work that examined rivers in terms of their social and cultural influence. But Metchnikoff was also a vociferous opponent of scientific racism.



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His book included a chapter entitled 'Race' (chapter four) which demolished 'all possible arguments for racist theories by showing the inadequacies of classifications based on skin colour, on the form of the skull, or on language'.<sup>29</sup> Some of the passages that interested Joyce were as follows. The first was noted at *NBB*, VI.B.I, 75 (a) as 'races – hair/skull [hue]':

Depuis le siècle dernier, on a souvent essayé de séparer le genre humain en groupes distincts et catégoriquement définis. Certaines de ces tentatives se basaient sur la coloration de la peau, et, cependant, nul ne songerait à déterminer d'après la nuance de son pelage à quelle race appartient un chien ou un cheval; d'autres classent les hommes d'après la section du cheveu [. . .]; d'autres encore d'après la forme du crâne. [Since the previous century, frequent attempts have been made to separate the human species into distinct and categorically defined groups. Some of these attempts were grounded on skin-colour and yet no one would dream of determining which race a dog or horse belonged to on the basis of their fur-coat. Others classed men according to the cut of their hair [. . .] yet others according to the shape of their skull.]<sup>30</sup>

This second was noted at *NBB*, VI.B.I, 75 (b) as 'change language/ – marry.

les races se sont divisées, dispersées, mêlées, croisées en toutes proportions, en toutes directions, depuis des milliers de siècles; la plupart ont quitté leur langue pour celle des vainqueurs, puis l'ont abandonnée, pour une troisième, sinon une quatrième [races were divided, dispersed, mixed and crossed in all proportions, in all directions, for thousands of centuries. Most of them abandoned their language for that of their conquerors only then to abandon that one for a third, if not a fourth.]

Notebook evidence is notoriously difficult to interpret, for many reasons. Not least, the nature of Joyce's notes, usually taken without any comment or contextual information, makes it impossible to know whether approval, disapproval, or some entirely different mechanism is at work. At the very least, however, the notebooks confirm the importance of placing the *Wake* in a diversity of histories and, because of the many modern and European sources that Joyce utilised, help to develop a sensitivity to the fact that *Finnegans Wake* was constructed and published not just during a critical phase of Ireland's colonial/postcolonial history but also at a turning point in the history of both the modernising project and of racism. The most grotesque manifestation of the modern spirit, the industrially organised death camp, occurred in close chronological proximity to the writing and publication of the *Wake*. Racial identity had never been more vital, nor the implications of being of the 'wrong' race more grave. As Poliakov puts it, 'the most important differentiation between the inhabitants of Europe was that between Aryans and Semites: the former were permitted to live,

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the latter condemned to die'.<sup>31</sup> This polarisation affected Joyce in close and personal ways. It brought new urgencies to already difficult family circumstances, determining the final move from Paris to Zurich and compelling Joyce to explain at the Swiss border that he was not in fact '*juif de Judée mais aryen d'Erin*'. At least one of Joyce's friends, Paul Léon, was murdered by the Nazis for his race and, as is well known, Joyce used his contacts in Paris to help some sixteen Jews escape from the country he invariably referred to at this time as 'Hitlerland'.<sup>32</sup>

Even without these personal dimensions, however, it is hard to imagine any significant cultural intervention of this period, let alone the book supposed to include everything, not taking position on the race issue in its most modern European form. It is unsurprising, then, that at one level illustration of the *Wake's* engagement with race politics is a relatively straightforward matter. The *Wake* registers many references to German race pride and Nazism, almost all of them insulting – like 'erst curst Hun' at 76.32; 'Achdung' at 100.5; the reference to 'Finn MacCool' being 'evacuated at the mere appearance of three germhuns' (127.12–13), and the splendid mockery of the Nazi slogan ('Heil Hitler! Ein Volk, ein Reich, ein Führer') at 191.7–8 – 'heal helper! one gob, one gap, one gulp and gorgor of all'. The Nazi salute is darkly mocked in 'Seek helles' (228.6); the Nazi leader cult diminished and made childish to the rhythm of 'Ten Men Went to Mow' in 'hun men wend to raze a leader' (278.21). Storm troopers, jackboots worn by Tim Finnegan, the Gestapo, the Strength Through Joy movement,<sup>33</sup> Hitler's road-building programme and so on, are all meted out a similar treatment.

If the *Wake's* participation in race politics was restricted to these lively insults, however, it would be of limited interest. The argument here is more complex and substantial. Far from being so self-referential as to be *apolitical*, the *Wake* locates ideas of racial origin and language classification in terms of the Western intellectual tradition and interrupts these with a subversion that is astonishingly original in its form. Notions of pure racial identity, for example, so much at the heart of scientific racism, are thoroughly disposed of in unique ways. Hilarious versions of race origin, race dispersal and race meeting – often seen as being somehow just Irish – become parodic assaults on an academy that for more than two hundred years had tried to establish race as an essential condition; to classify, scientifically, racial difference and similarity and to chart history in racial terms. In this kind of context, the treatment of race in the *Wake* cannot be limited to 'allusiveness' to the Nazis. On the contrary, it goes to the very heart of the *Wake* and the kind of radical cultural practice in which it