

## Bulgarian Joyce Teaching and *Wake* Boundary Breaking During the Quarantine

*Jonathan McCreedy*

Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski” (Bulgaria)

*Джонатан Маккрийди*

Софийски университет „Св. Климент Охридски“ (България)

*Jonathan McCreedy*. BULGARIAN JOYCE TEACHING AND *WAKE* BOUNDARY BREAKING DURING THE QUARANTINE

<https://doi.org/10.60055/phl.2024.46.40-56>

**Abstract.** In this article, I provide a study of my experiences as a lecturer teaching the works of the Irish author James Joyce to university students in Bulgaria, at BA and MA levels. As a complete body of research, it provides insight into the specifics of how Bulgarian students idiosyncratically view and appreciate Joyce. I provide as my initial case study Bulgarian students who have completed a semester-long elective course on his 1922 novel *Ulysses*. It outlines the difficulties that they have encountered within the course; for instance, how Irish culture and its history provide an obstacle since few parallels exist between it and the Slavic world. I have incorporated students’ responses to an in-depth questionnaire which inquired about what challenges they faced as readers and how they surmounted them. Throughout the text, I detail the pedagogical methods I have employed to engineer it towards their specific educational demographic largely focusing on how to make the book as “unintimidating” as possible. The second section is a case study of work carried out by a group of 5 students who comprise a *Finnegans Wake* reading group in Bulgaria, specifically during the time period of the COVID-19 pandemic “lockdown”. It is my conclusion that they embraced radical interpretive methods of tackling Joyce’s final work, *Finnegans Wake* (1939), involving highly experimental concepts, to feel a sense of freedom during the difficult psychological stresses brought upon by the pandemic.

**Keywords:** Joyce, *Ulysses*, COVID-19, *Finnegans Wake*

Джонатан Маккрийди. ДА ПРЕПОДАВАШ ДЖЕЙМС ДЖОЙС В БЪЛГАРИЯ. ЕКСПЕРИМЕНТАЛНИ ПРОЧИТИ НА „БДЕНИЕ НАД ФИНЕГАН“ ПО ВРЕМЕ НА ПАНДЕМИЯТА ОТ COVID-19

**Резюме.** В настоящата студия представям анализ на опита си в преподаването на творби от ирландския писател Джеймс Джойс на български студенти в бакалавърски и магистърски програми. Под формата на пълноценно академично изследване студията разкрива спецификите и особеностите на прочита и рецепцията на Джойс у българските студенти. Първоначален обект на изследването представляват самите български студенти, завършили едносеместриален избираем курс, посветен на романа „Одисей“, и трудностите, пред които са изправени те в него – като оскъдния брой паралели между ирландската култура и история, от една страна, и българската, от друга. Включени са и техните отговори на подробен списък от въпроси относно предизвикателствата, с които са се сблъскали като читатели, и как са ги преодолели. На редица места в изследването подробно описвам приложените от мен педагогически методи с цел адаптиране на курса към студентите и техните познавателни и културни специфики, с най-голям фокус върху представянето на тази трудна творба като възможно най-достъпна. Втората част на студията представя отделно изследване, дело на петима български студенти, участващи в кръжока, посветен на „Бдение над Финеган“ по време на пандемията от COVID-19. В заключение посочвам, че студентите се възползват от радикални интерпретативни похвати в изучаването на последния роман на Джойс, включително определени особено експериментални идеи, които им дават изследователска и психологическа свобода, за да се справят с трудностите, породени от пандемията.

**Ключови думи:** Джеймс Джойс, България, педагогика, експериментални прочити

*Research/Научно изследване*

## **Introduction**

In this article, I will provide an outline of my personal experiences teaching James Joyce to university students in Bulgaria, with a focus upon the difficult time period of the COVID-19 pandemic when it became a necessity to use online classrooms, social media platforms and brand-new digital resources in place of in-person learning. Firstly, the text examines the difficulties of teaching Joyce to a Bulgarian audience. This concerns issues such as the inherent challenges of teaching his novel *Ulysses* to secondary language speakers of English. More-so, however, Bulgarian students often require an introduction to Ireland and its culture ‘from scratch’ since few direct connections exist between it and their Slavic world—which requires extensive expository work and class time. The second part of the article is an in-depth study of the experimental, interpretative research of the Sofia University *Finnegans Wake* reading group, which was formed at the beginning of the pandemic. Using their own words, within social media posts, I can show how these Bulgarian stu-

dents infused their *Finnegans Wake* studies with radical vitality through their usage of twenty-first century technology. In effect, therefore, Joyce allowed for them to ‘break free’ from the confines of lock-down and to join together in a close digital community, where no limits could be placed upon their interpretive imaginations.

Firstly, I will detail in full how students in Bulgaria have engaged with Joyce’s works under my tutelage at Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski”. Bulgarian students are very open about their education experiences, which is why so much of the subsequent content is taken directly from exchanges with them. Much of this has been through questionnaires, which I prepared, as well within online discussions. Those who have taken part in my research are all students from Sofia University and are citizens of Bulgaria. Bulgarian is (almost exclusively) their primary language, and English is their second. The majority are students whom I taught at third-year year BA level within my elective course “An Introduction to James Joyce’s *Ulysses*.” However, many others belong to various Masters programs at the university, specifically those who study with Sofia University’s *Finnegans Wake* reading group.

#### *The Sofia University BA Ulysses Course and the Challenges of Teaching Slavic Students.*

The Department of English and American Studies has an elective course in its third year BA program titled “An Introduction to James Joyce’s *Ulysses*”. This course, of which I am the coordinator, is a semester-long, singular study of Joyce’s novel that strives to present the work in a way that is as unthreatening as possible. Over the eight years that I have taught it, I have followed certain different approaches based upon the reactions of the students to certain chapters, themes and stylistics. However, overall, I have framed the course around the protagonist Leopold Bloom, his relatable character, loveable humanity, and domestic life with his wife Molly—to whom most students *initially* dislike owing to her infidelity. The “episodes” (Joyce’s name for “chapters”) covered in class, over a period of roughly twelve weeks include “Calypso”, “Lotus Eaters”, “Hades”, “Nausikaa”, and “Penelope”. These are, chronologically, episodes 4, 5, 6, 13 and 18 in the novel. These are the core sections that construct the examination content of the course, which incorporates a Q and A midterm test, a coursework essay, and an oral presentation, which is to be delivered in front of the entire class. I have introduced the “Telemachaid” episodes (the first 3 in the novel) to students on only two occasions whereupon we studied “Telemachus” and “Nestor” in full. These were found to be episodes that divided the class and they openly divulged that they preferred the warm and sympathetic company of Bloom to the cold and aloof Stephen Dedalus, who is the main character in this part of the novel<sup>1</sup>.

---

<sup>1</sup> On only one occasion have students requested to do the highly challenging “Proteus” episode with its notorious difficulty spike that often acts as a “final straw” to struggling readers.

The reasons why these specific Bulgarian students signed up for the course in the first place varied, although sheer curiosity was a driving factor for some. One student responded within the questionnaire: “I wanted to see what made [*Ulysses*] such that it required a course exclusively for itself”<sup>2</sup>. The first year BA’s compulsory Modernism course introduces students to Joyce through a study of “The Dead”, in conjunction with Realism. This course piqued student interest in my course. Also, as Kamelia Yaneva writes: “Learning about Joyce’s non-standard style during the obligatory course in English modernism made me curious about what challenges the infamous book *Ulysses* could offer”<sup>3</sup>. The infamy of *Ulysses*’s purported difficulty was also a factor that was weighed into choosing the course as an elective: “[...] I even heard people warning me about *Ulysses* being too complicated, so I was a little intimidated”<sup>4</sup>. The issue of difficulty, naturally, was at the front of my mind when designing the course since if the workload was perceived to be too heavy then my aim to present *Ulysses* as an “accessible” book would be a failure. Therefore, I deliberately set up the course to have an “easy mode” of sorts, to use a student-friendly “gaming” term. As I will illustrate, lots of labor-saving mechanics are provided to the students during the course in the form of edited Word files and economically presented secondary criticism. This technique may help students to pick up important stylistic concepts faster, and my experience has shown that they can sometimes grasp them within the space of only a month or so. The ultimate goal is to make the penny drop with each of them that *Ulysses* is not as especially difficult compared to what they assumed and feared. That is, however, not to say that *Ulysses* ever truly becomes accessible to the students, as Vassilena Genova outlines in detail. This is because to a Bulgarian reader the nuances of Irish history and culture are somewhat alien with few direct connections existing with the Slavic world. Genova writes: “[*Joyce*] is extremely difficult to understand due to the different social background, time-span, culture [*and*] even ideas”<sup>5</sup>. She continues, fittingly with reference to Bulgarian character traits that few outside the country would be aware of: “I mean, is an Indian going to understand why Bulgarians think so “separately” about themselves or why we have such a huge disbelief in politics?”<sup>6</sup>. Indeed, she acknowledges, in conclusion, that reading *Ulysses* without extensive supplementary materials and instruction would be much too difficult a task: “[...] but the point is, without the proper intellectual and background ‘tools’ or preparations, one wouldn’t understand Joyce”<sup>7</sup>. Upon reading her comments, I felt relief that my efforts to make the *Ulysses* course accessible were in fact *necessary* for my

---

<sup>2</sup> Andrey Antanasov, email to the author, 17<sup>th</sup> October 2022.

<sup>3</sup> Kamelia Yanova, email to the author, 31<sup>st</sup> October 2022.

<sup>4</sup> Denitsa Mutafova, email to the author, 11<sup>th</sup> October 2022.

<sup>5</sup> Vassilena Genova, email to the author, 11<sup>th</sup> October 2022.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

Bulgarian students who have unfamiliarity with the kind of Irish cultural content which Anglophone readers often take for granted. Therefore, it is somewhat essential that this initial “stumbling block” is taken into account when teaching Joyce to Bulgarian students, with constant instruction about (say) Irish English lexis, the geography of Dublin and the island, Irish history and political strife, national cuisine and music being required in class.

The first episode introduced to the students is “Calypso”, which is accompanied by a Word file, uploaded to the class Moodle page, that we use to read the text. Since students find the innovation of “interior monologue” very difficult initially, I edit the “Calypso” text so that colour-coding indicates the points when Bloom’s thoughts are inserted into the narrative. For example, in the following text, I have emboldened sections to demonstrate this:<sup>8</sup>

**Another slice of bread and butter: three, four: right. She didn’t like her plate full. Right.** He turned from the tray, lifted the kettle off the hob and set it sideways on the fire. It sat there, dull and squat, its spout stuck out. **Cup of tea soon. Good. Mouth dry.** The cat walked stiffly round a leg of the table with tail on high.

- Mkgnao! (U 4.11–16)<sup>9</sup>.

My experience is that by seeing the text in a different font color, students are able to “hear” the text differently. Bloom’s “voice” or interior monologue permeates through the narrative but the stylistic integrity of the work remains intact. Having a Word file additionally allows for annotations to be inserted or “tagged” into specific points in the text. This is vital when providing explanations about culturally specific Irish terminology. Once we complete a read-through of “Calypso” in class, which takes four academic hours, the students develop a good feel and instinct for when interior monologue appears elsewhere in the novel. This is largely through “picking up” the characteristic sound and feel of Bloom’s inner speech. We move on to “Lotus Eaters” next, by which time the students know where much of the initial reading difficulties lie.

In response to “Did/does collaboration with your [*Joyce*] colleagues help with your studies, and if so how do/did you do it?” in the questionnaire, students revealed the importance of working together within seminars in a range of surprising ways. On a basic level, Genova writes “[...] if we didn’t have seminars, and if we didn’t analyse chapters [*in depth*] [...] I wouldn’t have understood anything”<sup>10</sup>. In connection to col-

---

<sup>8</sup> In my original versions, I use a red coloured font.

<sup>9</sup> Other examples of this include my incorporation of a blue font to the words in “Hades” which indicate the position of Bloom’s carriage in Dublin: “Mr Power’s choked laugh burst quietly in the carriage. **Nelson’s Pillar**” (Joyce, 1984: 78).

<sup>10</sup> Vassilena Genova, email to the author, 11<sup>th</sup> October 2022.

laboration with her colleagues, however, she states “It absolutely helped, as sharing our thoughts and interpretations was (and is) basically giving a new point of view to others”<sup>11</sup>. Denitsa Mutafova’s take on collaboration has a similar emphasis upon the charitable benefits of working together: “When I hear others’ viewpoints and get to express my own opinions, I feel like there is more clarity and a sense of shared community. Whether it’ll be via chat or in person, I think cooperation can be beneficial to education”<sup>12</sup>. Yaneva, in her response to the question, highlights the *social* aspect of Joyce studies, which is linked up with being part of *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake* (1939) reading groups, primarily in one’s spare time: “Personally, I love collaborating with my colleagues over a nice warm cup of coffee or tea [...] and I think what makes it fun is precisely that there are no rules to it”<sup>13</sup>. On a related subject, multiple Bulgarian students divulged their disgruntlement with their country’s (apparent) conservative academic institutions, which they first encountered in high school. Joyce was seen by many to be an escape from this unpopular (and to them “outdated”) approach to reading literature. For instance, Mutafova writes: “When it comes to other authors I’ve studied [...] I’ve always felt like there is an unspoken expectation to “stick to the canon” or the established readings”<sup>14</sup>. Indeed, many students, through an exposure to unusual and radical theories within criticism, came to a collective understanding that it was possible to contribute experimental ideas, allowing them to unleash their creativity and passion. Mutafova adds: “I am left under the impression that untraditional suggestions are, in fact, appreciated. It is precisely this freedom that I think distinguishes the “Joyce experience” and makes it so special to me”<sup>15</sup>. Students, perhaps because of their youthful rebelliousness and curiosity, are open to reading Joyce in ways that appeal to their sense of liberty and not knowing where exactly they are in life. Gabriella Kamenova writes “I found it best to go with the flow [*when interpreting Joyce*]. Part of ‘understanding’ Joyce comes with age and experience and another part—with letting go of pre-established ways of explor[ing] the text as you see fit at the moment”<sup>16</sup>. The interpretive freedom that the Bulgarian students evidently crave (in other words) does not have metaphorical nets flung at it, within Joyce studies, to “hold it back from flight”. Instead, Joyce studies allows them to explore their original unfiltered ideas, which does not go unappreciated. Mutafova summarises the situation succinctly: “If you offer a bizarre interpretation, it would be quickly dismissed [*within conservative Bulgarian literary criticism*]. But within Joyce studies, it is quite the opposite”<sup>17</sup>. To illustrate, in practice, how the Bulgarian students take advantage

---

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Denitsa Mutafova, email to the author, 11<sup>th</sup> October 2022.

<sup>13</sup> Kamelia Yanova, email to the author, 31<sup>st</sup> October 2022.

<sup>14</sup> Denitsa Mutafova, email to the author, 11<sup>th</sup> October 2022.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Gabriella Kamenova, email to the author, 15<sup>th</sup> October 2022.

<sup>17</sup> Denitsa Mutafova, email to the author, 11<sup>th</sup> October 2022.

of their opportunity to produce experimental interpretive research, I will outline Kamenova's 2018 class presentation for the BA *Ulysses* course entitled "Joyce's World of Scent in *Ulysses*". The work heavily employed realia, with a PowerPoint slide accompaniment. However, what made it unique was its incorporation of *real* scents into the classroom to make the talk a multisensory educational experience. The presentation began with the dissemination of "handouts" to the class, which were highly unusual in that each page had 10 cotton balls affixed to it, arranged in rows. Upon closer inspection, each ball was soaked in an individual scent. These included the oils from citrus peels, mint leaves, drops of almond oil and rose water (which is common in Bulgaria). She lit matches to create a smoke smell, a fruity body mist was included as well as an alcoholic spirit solution for the strong smell. To quote Kamenova: "The idea was that most of these smells were mentioned by Joyce and I wanted to allow the public to smell and remember them, because smells are often connected to memory"<sup>18</sup>. The presentation was, therefore, largely framed around the concept of smell being connected to memory in the novel, with Diane Ackerman's scientific study *A Natural History of the Senses* (1991) being used as a secondary source to provide necessary theory. On the hand-out, a specific "type" of smell, (according to theoretical terminology), consecutively soaked each one of the balls. They were: "1. Fragrant 2. Woody/Resinous 3. Non-citrus fruity 4. Sharp/pungent 5. Chemical 6. Minty 7. Sweet 8. Popcorn 9. Sickening 10. Lemon"<sup>19</sup>. Colour-coded excerpts from *Ulysses* were then shown on powerpoint slides, allowing for a remarkably immersive multi-sensory educational talk.

**Roses**,<sup>Fragrant</sup> I think. She'd like scent of that kind (Joyce, 1984: 306).

To smell the gentle **smoke of tea**<sup>Woody</sup>, **fume**<sup>Woody</sup> of the **pan-sizzling**<sup>Popcorn</sup> butter (Joyce, 1984: 50).

Know her smell in a thousand. Reminds me of **strawberries and cream**<sup>Citrus</sup> (Joyce, 1984: 307).

Most of all he liked grilled mutton kidneys which gave to his palate a fine tang of **faintly scented urine**<sup>Sharp</sup> (Joyce, 1984: 45).

Living all the day among herbs, **ointments, disinfectants**<sup>Chemical</sup> (Joyce, 1984: 69)<sup>20</sup>.

Needless to say, Kamenova's paper was highly deserving of an отличен<sup>21</sup> or "excellent" grade.

---

<sup>18</sup> Gabriella Kamenova, email to the author, 9<sup>th</sup> January 2023.

<sup>19</sup> Gabriella Kamenova, email to the author, 9<sup>th</sup> January 2023.

<sup>20</sup> "The cold **smell of sacred stone** called him" (U 5.338) understandably received three question marks "(???)" within her presentation owing to its seeming incompatibility with the smell type system. (Kamenova email to the author, 15<sup>th</sup> October 2022).

<sup>21</sup> Pronounced "otlichen".

Upon completion of the “Introduction to James Joyce’s *Ulysses*” course, many students express a desire to continue reading the novel during the summer semester, taking on more challenging episodes that they heard of by reputation, including “Cyclops” and “Ithaca”. This would take place in the form of weekly meet-ups, with the popular focus on collaboration being at the fore-front of every analysis. The groups were composed of close friends, which encouraged these study sessions to become more loose and informal than the previously held official seminars. The chemistry is/was, therefore, unique to each group with different styles of interpretation methods being employed by each. In 2018, five members took part in the Embassy of Ireland’s “Bloomsday” festivities whereupon they dressed up in period costume and performed sections from the novel<sup>22</sup>. Gabriella Kamenova and Svetlana Dimiereva-Roberts, for instance, performed the opening “overture” of “Sirens” as a duet, dividing up the text logically between two readers. In preparation for the event, Kamenova stated:

[...] we experimented for a bit, reading out loud, testing our intonation and trying to imagine the conversation that some of the sounds might imply. In some cases we imagined we should be finishing each other’s sentences, while in others – exclaiming, asking, explaining it etc. [...] It gave us the opportunity to showcase the dynamicity [sic.] of the text. In retrospect, “Sirens” might have worked better with a third voice, but we did our best to voice act as much as possible<sup>23</sup>.

*The “Wee” Finnegans Wake Group and their Quarantine Interpretation Adventures.*

The group, which graduated from the course in 2019, would become especially prolific in their continued and collective Joyce research. They are known officially as “the wee group” and consist of the members: Kamelia Yaneva, Denitsa Mutafova, Darina Peneva, Christine Ghaddar and Petriela Bacheva. Initially, “the wee group” worked on *Ulysses* on a weekly basis, however, during the spring of 2020, they shifted their interests towards his final work *Finnegans Wake* in a very surprising yet (in hindsight) very organic development. On Friday March 13<sup>th</sup>, a full lockdown was enforced in Bulgaria to combat the COVID-19 pandemic which closed the university and all cafes and social hangouts. The lockdown was very strict which meant that face to face reading groups were no longer possible. This necessitated moving our meetings on to digital platforms including Zoom, Web Ex and, most regularly, the SU’s Moodle-based version “Big Blue Button”. “Big Blue Balkan” (as we would nickname it) served as an excellent platform for hosting

---

<sup>22</sup>I would like to thank His Excellency Michael Forbes, former Irish Ambassador for Bulgaria, for his organisation of “Bloomsday” events during his tenure and his encouragement of student involvement.

<sup>23</sup>Gabriella Kamenova, email to the author, 10<sup>th</sup> January 2023.

our reading group owing to several of its built-in features, which I will mention later. The students' interest in *Finnegans Wake* was initially piqued by a mysterious posting of mine on our Facebook group page. Up to this point, I had used the page to upload Joyce Youtube videos, Irish cultural information, and content regarding conferences and symposia. I did not expect the post to “go viral”, in a sense, and inspire such curiosity. It began with me writing:

“I’m just looking through [*Finnegans Wake*] and found some nice quotes. Can you tell me what the link is between them?” “bulgeglarying”, “Spry him!”, “sweeth prolettas on his swooth prow!”, “sopprused though he is”, “Sayyessik”. “As said as would”, “sbogom, roughnow about about the first equinarx”, “blodidens and godinats of them”, “whatlk of wraimy wetter”, “blaguadargoo”, “and his roaming cartridges, orussheying and patronning”, “Sinya Sonyavitch-es!” “jittinju triggity shittery pet”, “Are you not somewhat bulgar with your bowels?”, “studently drobs led”<sup>24</sup>.

The lexis posted here is largely code-mixed Bulgarian—if the “matrix” language of *Finnegans Wake* is considered to be English—and there are additional puns on the name of the country. They largely originate from the Slavic oriented section “Buckley and the Russian General”, located in Book II chapter 3 from pages 338 to 355. It did not take long, in the chat, for the group to come up with responses. Unbeknownst to me, at the time, they worked together in a private chat to determine the possibilities. The posts began with the realisation that Bulgarian lexis constructs the *Wake* words on the list. Darina Peneva and Kamelia Yaneva provided two of the earliest responses:

So I started with “and his roaming cartridges, orussheying and patronning”. And we have cartridge, оръжие<sup>25</sup> (weapon) and патрон<sup>26</sup> (ammunition). Also thought of these possibilities. Roughnow = равно<sup>27</sup> (Den[itsa] Mutafova had the idea of равноденствие<sup>28</sup>[*equinox*]), blodidens and godinats, bloody – bloody

---

<sup>24</sup> [Myself], “Club Ulysses SU” Facebook group, 7<sup>th</sup> May 2020.

<sup>25</sup> Pronounced “oruzhie”.

<sup>26</sup> Pronounced “pa-tron”.

<sup>27</sup> Pronounced “ravno”.

<sup>28</sup> Pronounced “ravno-dense-tvi-ay”.

денс<sup>29</sup>(ден<sup>30</sup> – days) and годинатс <sup>31</sup>(години<sup>32</sup> – years), whatlk of wraimy weter – walked of rainy weather. Blaguadargoos – благодарности<sup>33</sup> [*thanks*]<sup>34</sup>. I have two guesses – [Joyce is] making up words that don't exist OR he's trying to write Slavic words in English (Spry him!!! – спри го?<sup>35</sup> [*stop it*]<sup>36</sup>).

The students then developed their interpretations to determine *why* the Bulgarian words exist in *Finnegans Wake*, to which they centralised their reading around a hypothetical “character” who was learning (and struggling with) the Bulgarian language. This is what you could tentatively call a “sociolinguistic” reading of the novel, which is a very rare approach indeed, yet to the students it seemed intuitive.

Since I found a couple of those [words] like “prolettas” (weird English plural of the [*Bulgarian*] word for spring; studently – weird adverbial form of the [*Bulgarian*] adjective “cold”). I thought it was just that; but maybe it's just someone (a character) from the Balkans talking? That doesn't know much English? I'm guessing here<sup>37</sup>.

Maybe it's an Irish person who is trying to learn [*Bulgarian*] and they don't have an actual person to speak to. Probably they are just using a book and also they don't know Cyrillic. Could he be trying to relate the Cyrillic alphabet to the Latin one, and to combine the Bulgarian words within English grammar, and also combine lexemes<sup>38</sup>?

To my delight the group requested to begin work on *Finnegans Wake* within our online meet ups, with the specific request to continue researching Slavic words in the novel. The students upon completing their challenge were, I believe, highly surprised that Joyce would include their language and culture within his novel, which brought them no doubt emotionally closer and “connected”<sup>39</sup> to the text. Ianeva

---

<sup>29</sup> Pronounced “dens”.

<sup>30</sup> Pronounced “den”.

<sup>31</sup> Pronounced “godinats”.

<sup>32</sup> Pronounced “godnini”.

<sup>33</sup> Pronounced “blagodarnosti”.

<sup>34</sup> Darina Peneva, “Club Ulysses SU” Facebook group, 7<sup>th</sup> May 2020.

<sup>35</sup> Pronounced “spri go”.

<sup>36</sup> Kamelia Yaneva, “Club Ulysses SU” Facebook group, 7<sup>th</sup> May 2020.

<sup>37</sup> Kamelia Yaneva, “Club Ulysses SU” Facebook group, 7<sup>th</sup> May 2020.

<sup>38</sup> Darina Peneva, “Club Ulysses SU” Facebook group, 7<sup>th</sup> May 2020. Peneva introduces the sociolinguistic concept of “script-shifting” (known derogatorily as “schlockavitsa” in Bulgaria) into *Finnegans Wake* here, which is especially insightful bearing in mind that she had not read anything in the novel prior to this.

<sup>39</sup> Denitsa Mutafova, “Wee FW Club SU” Facebook messenger group, 11<sup>th</sup> January 2021.

added within the thread: “I think we’re going to be even more excited about FW<sup>40</sup> now that we know there’s Bulgarian involved”<sup>41</sup>. This necessitated that we work on the section with the most Bulgarian words (70+), “Buckley and the Russian General”, which is notoriously difficult and normally the *last* part of the book beginners should encounter. Regardless, the group and I tackled the full section over a period of many months, “discovering” many new Bulgarian words and cultural references in the process (roughly 10+ in all). The inclusion of the ability to physically “doodle” within “Big Blue Button” additionally offered the students the chance to experiment with *Finnegans Wake* in a very personal way. This would involve the compositional *Wake* “sigla”, which (arguably) became their favourite feature of the novel. Sigla, to quote Fagnoli and Gillespie, are “signs devised by Joyce to designate characters in *Finnegans Wake* [...] At first the sigla were a form of shorthand identification of characters, but they eventually came to indicate characterological and thematic motifs as well” (203).

The process of analysing *Finnegans Wake* online with the group took the following format. First, I would paste sections of the novel into a single powerpoint slide, usually 5–10 lines long. This would then be repeated onto subsequent slides, building up a larger portion of the book, eventually comprising an entire part, which in this initial case was “Buckley and the Russian General”. Our first ever slide, therefore appeared on “Big Blue Button” as follows, in a large font and in well-spaced out letters:

A public plouse. Citizen soldiers.

TAFF (*a smart boy, of the peat freers, thirty two eleven, looking through the roof towards a relevation of the karmalife order privious to his hoisting of an emergency umberolum in byway of paraguastical solation to the rhyttel in his hedd*). All was flashing and krashning blurly moriartsky blutcherudd? What see, buttywalch? Tell ever so often? (*FW* 338.4–10)<sup>42</sup>.

The special features of “Big Blue Button” included the ability for students to edit the slide, which meant that the uploaded text could be underlined in different colours, and pictures and simple sketches could be drawn in the margins. This was useful whenever sigla were located in the text. I would begin each meeting by providing a summary of the section’s content, together with a posting in the group chat of the plotline as retold by the *James Joyce Digital Archive*. This highly use-

---

<sup>40</sup> Within informal discussion, “FW” is commonly used by Joyce scholars as an abbreviation for *Finnegans Wake*.

<sup>41</sup> Kamelia Yaneva, “Club Ulysses SU” Facebook group, 7<sup>th</sup> May 2020.

<sup>42</sup> *Finnegans Wake* is unusual in that only one typeset configuration exists for the novel. Every edition on the market has the same page and even line number layout. Joyce studies uses the convention ‘(FW [page number]: [line number])’ to indicate quote locations, which I shall adopt throughout this article for the sake of uniformity.

ful resource served as our so-called “cheat sheet” and it kept the students focused throughout the consistently bewildering content. The *James Joyce Digital Archive* “chicken guides” (as they call their *Finnegans Wake* summaries) are, in fact, edited digital reproductions of the out of print narrative guide *Understanding Finnegans Wake*, by Danis Rose and John O’Hanlon<sup>43</sup>. About 15 minutes would be spent interpreting each individual slide, beginning with one student reading it out loud, trying not to giggle. This process would be repeated for a second posted slide, and so on. The chat function in “Big Blue Button” was constantly in use to facilitate the typing out of ideas or posting of hyperlinks to a range of websites. Each meeting would last roughly 2 hours which was often quite draining. However, “Big Blue Button” was only one of multiple online platforms that we used throughout this very educationally and research heavy time.

Their location of Bulgarian lexis within *Finnegans Wake*, undocumented within resources including Roland McHugh’s *Annotations* and Raphael Slepon’s “Fweet” database, was very prolific and I often struggled to write all of their findings down. Examples included “Me fol the rawlawdy in the schpirrt of a *schkrepz*” (*FW* 343.21–22) [my emphasis], which incorporates the Bulgarian noun “щурец”/“schturetz” for grasshopper. “Schpirrt”, therefore, is onomatopoeia for the chirruping sounds which grasshoppers make during the night. On a second code-mixing layer, “schkrepz” is an Albanian noun meaning a match that lights pipes (Joyce, 1978: 229)<sup>44</sup>. Another finding was in the line “[...] so *cruschingly* like Mebbuck and Messar” (*FW* 344.15–16) [my emphasis], which includes “круша”/“krusha”, or Bulgarian for “pear”. This creates a clash of meanings indicating that Taff is mocking the Russian General’s “crusch[ing]” military prowess on the battlefield by equating it to a squashable fruit. Other discoveries included the Anna Livia Plurabelle-alluding “ruekenased” (*FW* 344.35) with its fluid incorporation of “река”/“reka”, for stream. The location of “мъртъв”/“murtuv”, meaning death within “Shinfine deed [dead] in the *myrtle* of the bog” (*FW* 346.27) [my emphasis] further emphasises the location of the General’s body using code-mixing. “Sinya Sonyavitches” (*FW* 348.34) *perhaps* alludes to the second line of Ivan Vasov’s poem “Песента на синчеца”/ “Pesenta na Sinchetza” (or “The Song of the Cornflower”), which is “Az съм синя синчец”/“Az sum *sinya sinchetz*” [my emphasis]. The line “Whor dor the pene lie, Mer Pencho?” (*FW* 349.1–2), *could* reference the poet Pencho Slavaykov, which is a tantalising allusion that suggests Joyce was aware of contemporary Bulgarian writers through his Slavic acquaintances. Bulgaria’s national holiday “Шести

<sup>43</sup> The *James Joyce Digital Archive* is located at this URL: <https://jjda.ie/main/JJDA/JJDAhome.htm>. Eventually the students began to distance themselves from the *JJDA* “cheat sheet” defining it as “useful” yet subjective. The adroit question which they posed was “Can any single critic *really* determine a definitive plot summary for the novel?”

<sup>44</sup> The onomatopoeia linking the sound “schpirrt” to “match” represents the sound of a match being dragged and struck against a rough surface, creating a rasping effect.

септември” or “September Sixth (Reunification Day) is alluded to, it seems, with curious patriotic fervour within “go Sixt of the Ninth” (*FW* 347.18) (the sixth of the ninth month—meaning the sixth of September). Finally, they located Bulgaria’s national white cheese “сирене”/“sirene” which is dismissed as being disgusting in the line: “Not the Satanik stuff that slimed soft *Siranouche!*” (*FW* 338.23–24) [*my emphasis*]. Not only is it “satanic” but it is slimy too, which is a fair assessment because it is usually stored in water.

However, what became slowly evident, and very interesting within our group meetings was the gradual shift towards more experimental readings by the students. This began to manifest itself roughly at about page 349, or a couple of months into our studies of *Finnegans Wake*, whereupon occasionally they began to “find” (or rather create) links to pop culture within the novel. This was to TV shows, music and computer games which they were fans of. This, however, was in hindsight a logical progression due to their wish for freedom within academia and quest to break the boundaries that the old guard Bulgarian educational institutions set up to stifle their creativity. Within a relatively short period of time, having quickly learned much of the basics of *Finnegans Wake*, they began to explore the possibilities of unbridled interpretation in earnest. Indeed, as Yaneva writes: “I like the freedom to interpret segments [in *Finnegans Wake*] not just in a more realistic or intended way, but also to draw unexpected connections including some connected to pop culture”<sup>45</sup>. “References” to George R. R. Martin’s *Song of Ice and Fire* series of novels (adapted for TV as *Game of Thrones*) were found in abundance, especially on page 128, whereupon no less than four were located. First of all, “his game of dwarfs” (*FW* 128.18), which is a dual “allusion” to the TV show and first novel (*A Game of Thrones*) but also to one of the main characters, the “Imp” or “Half-Man”, Tyrion Lannister, who despite his small stature casts a long shadow throughout the series’ storyline. The second is to his villainous sister Cersei Lannister in the line “that superfine pigtail to Cerisia” (*FW* 128.14) whose long braided hair can be seen, on occasion, as being an elaborate form of this hairstyle. Her personal monstrous protector in the King’s Guard, Ser Gregor Clegane or “The Mountain that Rides” accompanies her on the page within the noun “mountunmighty” (*FW* 128.3–4). Finally, her nemesis, the “Queen of Dragons”, Daenerys Targaryen is name-checked using one of her many titles, specifically “Khalassal” (*FW* 128.32) or “Khaleesi”<sup>46</sup>. My response to the group as to how these impossible references kept getting found was very profoundly put by Ghaddar who wrote: “We can’t help it when Joyce is literally everywhere”<sup>47</sup>.

---

<sup>45</sup> Kamelia Yaneva, “Wee FW Club SU” Facebook messenger group, 19<sup>th</sup> September 2022.

<sup>46</sup> Specific Bulgarian/Sofia University “references” were located by chance, in addition. “Susuing” (*FW* 116.1) was found to allude to both the “SU” as well as “SUSI”, the university’s computer system that logs all student grades.

<sup>47</sup> Christine Ghaddar, “Wee FW Club SU” Facebook messenger group, 18<sup>th</sup> June 2020.

The major step into experimental reading was, in part, facilitated by the group's setting up of a Discord social messaging group for the purposes of recording research and the better cataloguing of material. The students developed a strong interest in sigla early on in our studies, after I gave the students a brief introduction to them and genetic criticism during one of our online meet-ups. This specific interest may have been ignited by their collective interest in gaming, (and computing in general), which they began to discuss in very original ways online. Christine Ghaddar's delightfully wacky "tin foil" theories were knowingly experimental, and were channelled with a tremendous sense of fun and love of bizarre (yet strangely *plausible*) concepts. "Maybe FW is just a string of code"<sup>48</sup> was a pivotal entry within the group's Facebook messenger chat that led to even more complicated theorising. The students led themselves gleefully down "rabbit holes" of their own highly creative making which sharpened up their interpretive abilities in dazzling ways that are hard to summarise. Ghaddar would excitedly summarise this process as follows: "Jesus Joyce!!! This was a bit off topic from our original treasure hunt. But that's what's fun about FW, you fall down different rabbit holes"<sup>49</sup>.

The beginning of their collective sigla research began, it seems, with Yaneva's idea to create her own sigla: "And on a more personal level, and in typical Joyce fashion, I was pretty happy with myself when I sat down one day and thought "Why not make my own sigla?—and it was super fun and it turned out not too shabby if I do say so myself"<sup>50</sup>. Yaneva's work, compiled within our Discord sub-section "#sigla-shapes" was highly productive, taking all of the complexities of Joyce's construction of sigla into account when creating her own. Her coinage for this unique process was specifically "The Symbolics of Sigla Making"<sup>51</sup>. Her eventual personal sigla became  $\mathbb{K}$ , which combines the "K" and "I" of her initials to create a "rewind" symbol. She added upon completion: "I really like how mine is related to music, music is my life"<sup>52</sup>. Adding more layers, she stated "I saw it as a replay button or a 'skip to last chapter' one"<sup>53</sup> which seems to hold even deeper meaning. We then worked numerological meaning in each of our sigla within the "#sigla-shapes" chat, in keeping with Joyce's creative modelling. It was my prompting that got Yaneva thinking about the concept, but it was her own memories, feelings, and by now personal link to the sigla that confirmed its official numerical assignment.

[Myself]: Because your [*"rewind"-shaped*] sigla indicates moving back 1... I think your number is -1. The square root of -1 is the letter "i" by the way!

---

<sup>48</sup> Christine Ghaddar, "Wee FW Club SU" Facebook messenger group, 12<sup>th</sup> April 2021.

<sup>49</sup> Christine Ghaddar, "Wee FW Club SU" Facebook messenger group, 16<sup>th</sup> September 2020.

<sup>50</sup> Kamelia Yaneva, "Wee FW Club SU" Facebook messenger group, 19<sup>th</sup> September 2022.

<sup>51</sup> Kamelia Yaneva, "Wee FW Group" Discord Group, 5<sup>th</sup> May 2021.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

Yaneva: I think it IS a 1, my grandma used to tell me that the number will follow and protect me (since 1 symbolises god’s perfection and unity, the universe etc.) is a 1 but I also really love 22, that’s my number for sure<sup>54</sup>.

In addition to this she wrote immediately after: “thinking of symbolism is very cool/I like doing that kind of analysis/using style and symbols”<sup>55</sup> Indeed, it seems that their “personal” sigla creation project triggered very fluid interpretive equations between Joyce’s sigla and 21<sup>st</sup> century “shapes”, symbols and pop culture. In particular, the students became fascinated with the box-shaped □ sigla, (representing *Finnegans Wake* itself), which is rarely studied in criticism. This was introduced by Ghaddar in the #sigla-shapes sub-section thusly: “the sigla themselves look like code! you know when your phone is missing certain characters, the missing characters look like □ □”<sup>56</sup>. Ghaddar’s interest in the □ had developed, it seems, because the students had just been introduced to the post-modern idea that *Finnegans Wake* appears within *itself*, during Book I chapter 5. Her interpretation of this radical structural idea initially focused on the metatextual theory that self-aware characters were trapped inside Joyce’s manuscript: “Maybe there is a character, maybe WE are a character in FW [...]. This is so exciting!!!”<sup>57</sup>. Determining the identity of these “trapped” characters, of course, could be seen as impossible to determine. However, by referring back to her work on *Finnegans Wake* concerning code strings and our collective research on pop culture references, a solution was found with infectious interpretive results. This was that □ *itself* was a physical character in the novel that had the ability to rework the code that it “lived” in. This idea was openly inspired by the 2017 psychological, postmodern visual novel *Doki Doki Literature Club!* developed by Team Salvato. In this dating simulator (but in fact fourth-wall breaking horror game), a bubbly and popular schoolgirl character known as “Monika” slowly reveals herself to be a self-aware virus, of sorts, who infiltrates your computer, with toxically obsessive motivations. “Monika” is a tragic figure, driven to insanity by being forced to live in a limbo state represented by an ever-repeating and resettable computer game. She is a sentient being, yet she has no free-will, and helplessly has to watch the “player” choose to date the other girls in the class instead of her. (This leads to her eliminating each one in turn, in gruesome fashions). The idea of equating □ with Monika developed around the overall concept of destruction and by having a sentient, virus-like sentient figure inside of *Finnegans Wake* who was moving around and corrupting its text, or as Ghaddar put it “Tearing apart everything”<sup>58</sup>. The following entry is a further hypothesised

---

<sup>54</sup> Kamelia Yaneva, Discord chat with the author, “Wee FW Group” Discord Group, 5<sup>th</sup> May 2021.

<sup>55</sup> Kamelia Yaneva, “Wee FW Group” Discord Group, 5<sup>th</sup> May 2021.

<sup>56</sup> Christine Ghaddar, “Wee FW Group” Discord Group, 21<sup>st</sup> April 2021.

<sup>57</sup> Christine Ghaddar, “Wee FW Club SU” Facebook messenger group, 12<sup>th</sup> April 2021.

<sup>58</sup> Christine Ghaddar, “Wee FW Club SU” Facebook messenger group, 15<sup>th</sup> April 2021.

interpretation whereupon the “Hen” character in Book I chapter 5 is fluidly linked with *Doki Doki*’s Monika, suggesting that the □ is actually the Hen’s sigla identity, rather than the “K” which represents “Kate”. She states: “And maybe everytime vowels with the subscript ûë appear, they’re actually being pecked. Ohhh, or a pen! Yes. Gives me Monika vibes if it’s a pen. Like she’s trying to network the code”<sup>59</sup>. Indeed, for a while even I became fascinated with these wild interpretations and I willingly joined them down the rabbit hole, as the following “tin-foil hat” wearing Discord exchange demonstrates:

[Myself]: To me [*the □ sigla*] is like a black hole. FW pulls itself inward with itself being a character. □. But it’s silent.

Ghaddar: the fact that it’s silent also reminds me of Monika, because she isn’t a love interest, so she watches from the sidelines. Just like □. And also when Monika takes over [*control in the game*] in the background we see windows with the cosmos outside?

Monika → a black hole.

□ → black hole<sup>60</sup>.

### *Conclusion*

This experimental work on sigla was, (to an extent), the zenith of the student’s pushing the boundaries of conventional scholarship to its breaking point. Perhaps an equation can be drawn between their being held under a strict quarantine lockdown and wanting to have the ability to “break free” metaphorically speaking in the form of interpreting Joyce in unlimited, extreme ways. Nowadays, in the group, post-lockdown, we continue to try new ways to read the novel, most notably through the practice of bibliomancy or by chance operations. This involves one of us lifting up a physical copy of *Finnegans Wake*, dropping it on a table, and we read the section where the text is most obviously “opened”. This has brought a mystical element to reading *Finnegans Wake* and one that has made us (half-seriously) consider it to be a prophetic text in light of some of the very eerie passages that we have encountered, predicting almost exactly tragic events that have just happened in the news.

It is clear that the “wee group” hold pride that they have a distinct (and most likely unique) “style” that is right for them as *Finnegans Wake* readers. It has been brought about by their very special chemistry and I believe that the format of the group is very unlikely to change in the years to come. I fear that other *Finnegans Wake* groups would be too tame for them now, in terms of truly thinking outside the box, and any encounters with “intentionalist” readers of Joyce would no doubt be an uncomfortable experience. In teaching them, and all the groups I have done so in Bulgaria, I have discovered that there is a clear forward thinking agenda when it comes to Joyce

---

<sup>59</sup> Christine Ghaddar, “Wee FW Club SU” Facebook messenger group, 15<sup>th</sup> April 2021.

<sup>60</sup> Christine Ghaddar, Discord chat with the author, 20<sup>th</sup> April 2021.

studies. Obstacles exist, principally the cultural differences between Ireland and Bulgaria, which require continued explanation, and the difficulty of the texts themselves, which they are reading in their secondary language. However, as illustrated, the students often branch off into more experimental forms of study once given the chance. I now actively encourage this having seen the benefits that it reaps within their education. The students whom I have introduced within this text may have perhaps strayed too far (into the lunatic fringe, no less) for more conservative readers of Joyce. However, my personal view is that the reason they break the rules is *because* they know the rulebook, which is the opposite of saying that their ideas are misguided, nutty and just plain wrong. It is inspiring to witness how a youthful desire for liberty (academic or otherwise) manifests itself within the creation of such fascinating new approaches to interpretation and thinking about Joyce. What is more surprising, and remarkable, is that I got to see such remarkable examples of this phenomenon in a place I'd never have expected to find it. Yet, on reflection, my underestimating of Bulgaria in this regard turned out to be very ill-conceived from the very start.

## Bibliography

- Fargnoli, N. A. and Gillespie, M. P. (1995), *James Joyce A to Z: the Essential Reference to the Life and Work*. Facts on File Inc, USA.
- Joyce, J. (1986), *Ulysses*. Edited by Hans Walter Gabler et. al. Vintage Books, New York.
- Finnegans Wake*. Great Britain: Faber and Faber, 1941.
- (1978) James Joyce's *The Index Manuscript. Finnegans Wake, Holograph Workbook VI. B. 46. A* Wake Newsletter Press Great Britain.

**Assist. Prof. Jonathan McCreedy, PhD**

mccreedy@uni-sofia.bg

Author ID (SCOPUS): 57226752789

ORCID ID: 0000-0003-2868-4216

Faculty of Classical and Modern Philology

Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski"

15 Tzar Osvoboditel Blvd.

Sofia 1504

Bulgaria

**Гл. ас. д-р Джонатан Маккриди**

mccreedy@uni-sofia.bg

Author ID (SCOPUS): 57226752789

ORCID ID: 0000-0003-2868-4216

Факултет по класически и нови филологии

Софийски университет „Св. Климент Охридски“

бул. „Цар Освободител“ 15

София 1504

България