The completion of this volume last year corresponds with the seventy-fifth anniversary of the publication of *Finnegans Wake*, the serialization of Joyce’s *Work in Progress* culminated in book form in May 1939. In 2015, it seems timely to reflect on the *Wake*’s changing fortunes in the interval of these years and to reaffirm the book’s enduring significance in an increasingly plural, polyglot, and global culture. Many critics take note of the book’s early negative reviews and then proceed to remark on its later canonization, as epitomized by Harold Bloom’s designation of the *Wake* as the twentieth century’s highest aesthetic achievement. In 1998, the Modern Library ranked *Finnegans Wake* 77th on its list of the 100 best English-language novels of the century. Yet the notion of the *Wake* as a curiosity for the academic elite, a largely esoteric and acquired taste, is evidenced by the book’s thumbnail description on Amazon as “largely unread by the general public.” Many critics of the 1940s saw Joyce’s last work as an elaborate hoax, and this sentiment still endures as evidenced by a recent satirical article in the *Guardian* announcing, “World Exclusive! *Finnegans Wake* Nonsense!”

Much of the resistance to *Finnegans Wake* centers on the excesses it generates—the excess of time it took Joyce to produce his final work and the excessive expenditure of effort required to appreciate its multiplicities of meanings. Joyce himself alluded to the text’s linguistic prodigality by referring to his writing as a “splurge on the vellum” (179.30–31). Such excesses consequently provoked exasperated responses to the book, even among his friends, including Ezra Pound’s infamous conclusion that “Nothing, so far
as I can make out, nothing short of divine vision or a new cure for the clapp [sic] can possibly be worth all the circumambient peripherization” (LettersIII 145). Harriet Shaw Weaver wrote with concern to Joyce in 1927, critiquing “the darknesses and unintelligibilities of your deliberately entangled language system. It seems to me you are wasting your genius” (JIII 590). Joyce may have parodied these anxieties when he wrote, “where in the waste is the wisdom?” (114.20).

This sense of Joyce’s extravagant waste of time, to say nothing of his material expenditures of ink and paper, transfers from the artist to readers, who may spend countless hours tracking down intertextual allusions or etymological derivations. The process of reading the Wake may produce a feeling of being trapped in an “Allmaziful” structure (104.01)—an amazing maze of textuality, but one with no center and no clear way out once one has entered. Seventy-five years later, readers may justifiably ask whether the continuing “splurges” of time and energy seemingly demanded by the labyrinth of Finnegans Wake are defensible. Our response to the question is obviously affirmative, but it does require a certain mind-set: one must recall the positive meaning of prodigal as “giving or given in abundance; lavish or profuse.” Finnegans Wake, in this sense of the word, is indeed a prodigal text.

Critiques of the Wake that explore its prodigal experimentalism may provide more helpful entrances to the text than earlier models, by exposing the futility of a potential mastery of its mysteries, instead underscoring an unlimited and unruly proliferation of meanings—what Joyce called “Plurabilities” (104.02). One of our aims is to celebrate the verbal richness and excesses that the text generates. But Finnegans Wake is not nonsense, nor is it a system of clever but self-indulgent word play. Rather Joyce’s linguistic prodigality produces semantic excesses—pluralities of possibilities, in terms of meanings—that veer off in multiple, nonexclusive directions. These claims are not to deny the book’s notorious difficulty. Indeed, the Wake requires an appreciation of what W. B. Yeats lamented as “The Fascination of What’s Difficult.” Enda Duffy argues in his essay in this volume that the text also requires “courage” to read some of its sections. Such reading, however, amply rewards those who would undertake the challenge—the text’s neologisms and haunting resonances may intrude upon what Joyce calls our “wideawake language” (LettersIII 146) and permeate the dreams of even the most recalcitrant of Joycean insomniacs. Its radical re-visioning of absolutes may inspire alternative imaginings of entrenched political, linguistic, historical, and religious forms. Far from being apolitical, the Wake has been described by Philippe Sollers as “the most formidably anti-fascist book produced between the
In her contribution, Vicki Mahaffey suggests, “The revolution that is *Finnegans Wake* frees and constrains readers to experience revolutions of their own: upheavals that are at the same time historical returns.” The text is, in addition, potentially addictive: I (KJD) have had periods throughout my life when it is difficult to make it through the day without a sampling of zany Wakean language. Before he published his indispensable book of annotations to the *Wake*, Roland McHugh made a related claim about its strange readerly affect: “We never really understand what [ALP] is saying but the power in the words satisfies something and we continue resolute. Eventually [the *Wake*] can make all other reading feel inadequate. And it never runs out”—one more testament to the work’s positive prodigality.

The experimental dimensions of the *Wake* are beyond enumeration, although several will be explored by our contributors. We choose to focus briefly here on the one innovation that is used consistently in every chapter, on literally every page of the book: readers variously identify it as a technique within the tradition of Lewis Carroll’s portmanteaux words or of Sigmund Freud’s dream condensations. Thus, for example, when an unusual aroma is noted by an anonymous voice in III.1, it is described as “sharming” (427.14)—at once charming and shaming. One effect of such compacting of meaning is the expression and intensification of emotional ambivalence: condensations can paradoxically produce excess and brevity at the same time. “[E]vesdripping” (89.01) may conjure up the nosy practice of “eavesdropping,” but in the context of the *Wake* it may also refer to the titillating urination of temptresses, avatars of Eve. Portmanteaux often reveal coded references to the taboo. This simultaneous destabilization and profusion of meanings create what Margot Norris calls “double-talk,” although the implied limit to duality is slightly misleading. Another effect of portmanteaux is polyvocality: each of the many voices in the *Wake* frequently sounds as if it is speaking in tongues, producing triple talk, quadruple talk, quintuple talk—and even more plural evocations of layered diction. The term *polyvocal* is usually defined in terms of music, but in *Finnegans Wake* it is certainly applicable to writing and speech.

Joyce’s technique of the multilayering and compression of meanings in individual words may be conceptualized as an experimental revision of figures of speech. Derek Attridge persuasively points out that one should reconsider “the traditional analysis of metaphor and allegory as a relation between a ‘literal,’ ‘superficial’ meaning and a ‘figurative,’ ‘deep,’ ‘true’ meaning. The portmanteau word, and *Finnegans Wake* as a whole, refuses to establish such a hierarchical opposition, for anything that appears to be a metaphor...
is capable of reversal, the tenor becoming the vehicle, and vice versa.” One can even argue that the *Wake* has *only* figurative language, with no “literal” or stable identifiable ground. We (and other Wakeans), for instance, often refer to HCE as a “he” and agree that the acronym sounds like the initials of an unknown human name—unknown on account of their plurabilities in the text. But HCE has so many nonhuman forms, sometimes dissolving into funny linguistic phrases (“Have-you-caught-emerod’s” [63.18–19]), that his renderings deconstruct the technique known as “personification,” with its anthropomorphizing bias. “Heinz cans everywhere” (581.05) emphasizes HCE’s materiality—in addition to providing an uncanny proleptic vision of Andy Warhol’s art. More accurately and more neutralizing, HCE should technically be referred to as “they”—as his identification as “Here Comes Everybody” suggests, with the “body” taking relentlessly protean shapes (32.18–19).

Joyce implicitly addresses the central demand of his experimentalism in a phrase from the text’s opening chapter: “every word will be bound over to carry three score and ten toptypsical readings throughout the book of Doub-lends Jined” (20.14–16). This statement is hyperbolic, insofar as no word in the text carries, as a figurative load, seventy ways to read it, including even the lengthy thunderwords (which sometimes string together multiple synonyms for a single word in different languages). But words within words will pile up, as a brief look at toptypsical illustrates: one may see and/or hear in it top, topped, typical, topical, tipsy, and—given its immediate context of writing and drinking—type, typo, and tope. In his *Annotations to “Finnegans Wake,”* McHugh adds topsy-turvy.8 We wonder if toptypsical echoes the last part of hierarchitectitiptitoploftical (5.01–02), toploftical meaning “haughty.” Do readings, as productions of interpretive meanings, prove to be an imperious enterprise, as architectural building can be? (One need only to think of the raising of the Tower of Babel, an ongoing Wakean motif.) Or do they, like architectural structures themselves, provide and raise the foundations for multicultural existence? The mythic fall of the Tower of Babel produced the diversity of tongues that fascinated Joyce. Even though the word we just cited implies “hierarchies” and higher and lower positions within, such structures are difficult to establish in *Finnegans Wake* when reading its languages (as Attridge suggests). In the first passage above in this paragraph, which word within toptypsical modifies the word “readings”? Technically, we would argue, all of them: the phrase proves its point about overburdened signifiers and demonstrates that none of the possible modifiers are hierarchically privileged. It also generates polyvocal mysteries: what are “typical”
readings? Or “typo” readings? Or “tipsy” readings? (to ask only three of the questions implied).

The distaste for Joyce’s excesses sometimes correlates with a larger aversion to radical linguistic innovation itself; but the experimentalism in the *Wake*, of course, is a crucial part of its originality, ingenuity, and humor—as well as its seductive potential. Who can resist the compact and poetic charm of this philosophical insight: “First we feel. Then we fall” (627.11)? Joyce’s experimentalism represents a reinvention of ambiguity and, at its extreme, indeterminacy. The “fall” in the *Wake*, for instance, may be moral, economic, social, emotional, gravitational, and/or atmospheric; it may be caused by guilty deeds, financial disaster, loss of class status, disappointments in feeling, physical unsteadiness, and/or changes in the weather. For those who are resistant to the strange and excessive, *Finnegans Wake* can still have appeal: the key may be a focus on those lines, phrases, or words that one initially digests and appreciates and delights in—a focus we both deployed on early readings of the text. Even though there are many parts that stubbornly continue to elude the reader, every time we open the *Wake*—and read a paragraph, a few pages, or an entire chapter—we usually learn, hear, or see something new and interesting. Additionally, the sections of the text that we do understand—or can at least venture an interpretation of—are engaging, witty, and/or (even) moving. Readers may also find points of access by availing themselves of some of the invaluable guides to *Finnegans Wake*.

One major problem with some of the available handbooks to the *Wake*, however, is that they tend to “level” the text, that is, to take the work’s polyvocal languages and make them univocal, in the interest of making the work more accessible. No one would deny that these guides are useful—Joseph Campbell and Henry Morton Robinson’s pioneering attempt to provide *A Skeleton Key to “Finnegans Wake”* comes to mind, as does Danis Rose and John O’Hanlon’s more recent *Understanding “Finnegans Wake.”* But they do, in their linear narrative orientations, tend to diminish the richness and play of the *Wake*’s polysemous nature. We are told of the elusive letter—a synecdoche for *Finnegans Wake* as a whole—“The proteiform graph itself is a polyhedron of scripture” (107.08). It is not only protean in form but also a three-dimensional structure, a polyhedron being an object with many faces—not simply two, like an ordinary sheet of paper. *Finnegans Wake* is similarly multidimensional, as Joyce moves away from the horizontal pull of discourse with his vertical layerings. If one imagines the text in both spatial and temporal terms, one can almost visualize the language rising off the page as it produces strata of meanings. The letter is also described as “the