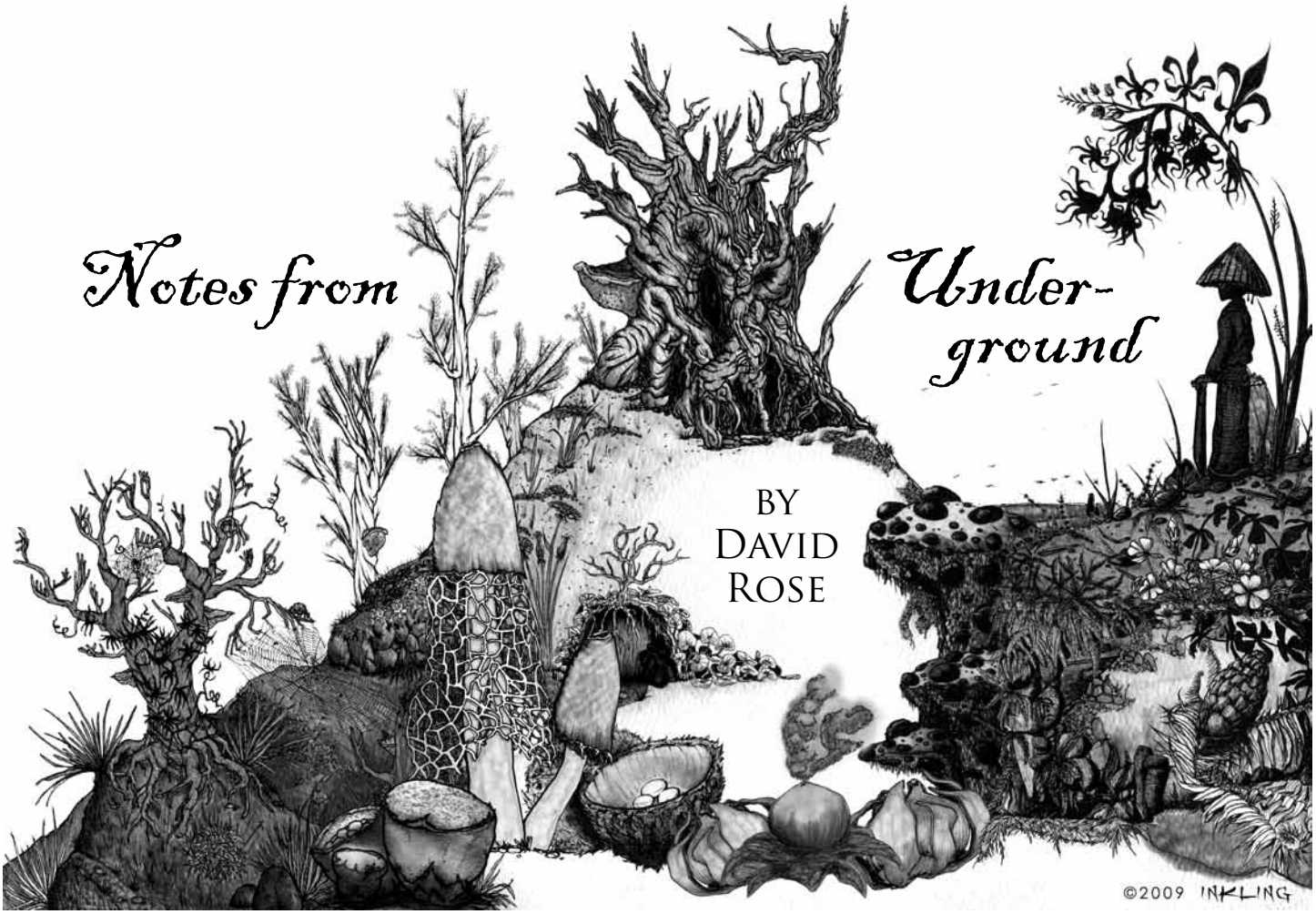

Cryptogrammic Cryptogams: Fungi in *Finnegans Wake*

There is a certain parallel between the collection of Myxomycetes and the exegesis of *Finnegans Wake*. In both cases the trick is to acquire an instinct for the potentially most profitable areas to search. – Roland McHugh, *The Finnegans Wake Experience*[1]

Imagine a book, written in English yet incorporating dozens of languages, whose constant demand of the reader is the need to look up the meaning of nearly every word. One may seem to know the words; they are familiar…yet largely unfamiliar. Strange constructions like *hierarchitectitiptitoploftical* and *cryptoconchoidsiphonostomata* erupt into this de-realized wordscape with unforgiving regularity. The words appeal both to eye and to ear, but the overall effect is one of befuddlement, hypnosis, or perhaps *delirium tremens*. Welcome to the world of *Finnegans Wake*. The story? If story there be, it involves an Irish barkeep named Humphrey Chimpden Earwicker, his wife Anna Livia Plurabelle, their sons Shem and Shaun, and their daughter Issy, the Rainbow Girl. Earwicker (coded as HCE) is Everyman. Anna Livia (ALP) is the River Liffey, which flows through Dublin, Ireland. The Wake takes place at night, and the language strongly partakes of dream. So strongly that pausing to recover the meanings embedded in each word and sentence becomes much like trying to remember the shred of a dream on the verge of its ebbing away from memory. The Wake has been dismissed as word salad, and its reputation as linguistic gobbledygook has brought forth as much scorn from detractors as passionate devotion from admirers. Without question, *Finnegans Wake* is one of the most sublime and exasperating adventures in reading, and anyone who enjoys the art of reading should try it on for size.

James Joyce spent seventeen years writing *Finnegans Wake* in the wake of the publication of *Ulysses* (1922), the indubitable masterpiece of twentieth-century novels. Joyce once commented, "The demand that I make of my reader is that he should devote his whole life to reading my works."[2] This is a bit more devotion than most would care to award one author, even if he is James Joyce. But *Ulysses* and the Wake are extraordinary books, each requiring more careful study than the typical reader ordinarily cares to make. The Wake, in particular, requires a relentless microanalysis and simultaneous encyclopedic telescoping for meaning that is dizzying in the extreme when grappling with a text of such broad interconnectedness and deep ambiguity. *Finnegans Wake* is circular: water flowing to the ocean and returning to source. With meanings smeared polysemically across every word and

sentence, the oceanic interconnectedness of all and everything in the Wake becomes a predominant key to making sense of it. Yet the operant structure of the Wake is reminiscent of the internet and of fungal mycelium – vast networks of threadlike process lacking a center and leading everywhere. In fact, when the internet first reached a critical mass of popularity in the mid-1990s, Joyceans were quick to realize the potential for hyperlinking the text of *Finnegans Wake* in ways that would streamline our probing its interconnectivity. Why? Because *Finnegans Wake* was already hyperlinked! Rhizomatic Joyce had anticipated hypertext by seven decades.

Marshall McLuhan claimed the Wake is a verbal universe where all technologies and media merge, anticipating and encompassing the effects of media in the 21st century. By capturing the psychic and social dynamics of all media, the Wake replicates the sensory effect of media environments. Imagine the totality of television, radio, and digital signals (electronic streams of image and discourse) passing unperceived through one's personal space at any instant; and imagine human consciousness replicated on the internet at millions of computer terminals, from millions of servers. The Wake's *verbivocovisual* (341.18) environment approximates the effect of capturing these streams at one stroke and fixing them in language, in a language that is recombinant like DNA, where words are encoded with the semantic flux of all the echoing multi-transmissions (as well as all the static, discontinuities, and glitches) at every moment *in* and *through* time, all while seeming to tell a regular story.[3] Some have wondered whether a story gets told at all and protest the tendentious belief that *Finnegans Wake* has virtually anticipated digital media, like an exponential expansion of Wikipedia re-routed through vaudeville via string theory understood from the perspective of the Egyptian Book of the Dead. Exploring this masterwork is rather like calculating the square root of God. *Finnegans Wake* has been called Joyce's *summa semiotica*. The Wake is the terminal book.

Joyce's inoculation with the mycological spore may at first seem subclinical. Yet since the Wake encompasses all and everything, including a coded reference to your name (yes, you, the reader), it is tantalizing to mull over the fungal references therein to ask if Joyce was really up to something, mycologically speaking. One writer has insisted that the Wake is nothing more (or less) than a treatise on fly-fishing – to everyone his own hobbyhorse. Murray Gell-Mann pinched the word *quark* (383.01) from the Wake and revolutionized particle physics with it, and John Cage recirculated the Wake through his own quarky mesostics in *Writing through Finnegans Wake* and several aleatory compositions. Cage's *Roaratorio*, for example, might serve as the audiobook of *Finnegans Wake*, and his *Mushroom Book* begins straight off by juxtaposing a recipe for *Polyporus frondosus* with the voices of Joyce's ten thunderclaps, a reference to the ten "thunder words" of *Finnegans Wake* that intimates a folkloristic theory of the origin of fungi (thunder causes the fruiting of mushrooms) found in Robert Gordon Wasson.[4] So, too, the enterprising Parallel Mycologist will find here an "autonomous event system" where *twoodstools* (40.23) and *holocryptogams* (546.13) are emergent signposts to the evolutionary history of the fifth kingdom.[5] One may study evidence of mushrooms in the woods, in the archives, on Mushroom Observer, in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts; why not in the Wake? Admittedly, this may at first seem like reading Alexander Smith's *Mushrooms in their Natural Habitat* to tease out all the Joyce references. Less a foray into the high-brow canon of yesterday than an exercise in cryptotaxonomy, our devotions may bring us to either the Holy Grail of Mycology or a simulacrum of smoaked maitake. And, as we drift toward the foggy bottom of the Wake's turbid river-sentences, we might witness the sexual conjugation of Achlya or overhear the busy buzztrack of antediluvian myxomycetes streaming oozefully in the bituminous muck in the "depths of the Cambrian fen."[6]

In *Ulysses*, Joyce contextualized the display of commercial mushrooms with his characteristic historical accuracy: "punnets of mushrooms" in the Dublin Corporation Fruit, Vegetable, and Fish Market are flanked by "flaskets of cauliflowers, floats of spinach, … pomellated apples and chips of strawberries." *Punnets* are baskets for collecting berries and fruit. "Kerwan's mushroom houses" in the Lestrygonians episode were low-cost housing units (shaped like mushrooms, presumably) erected for the Dublin Artisans' Dwellings located near Phoenix Park, which still holds claim to being the largest urban park in Europe.[7] Phoenix Park was once a royal deer park; to Joyce it was a *large fungopark* where a *shrine of Mount Mu* (51.19-20) marked the spot at which the *tumptytumtoes* (3.21) of the giant Finnegan protruded like Ptychogaster from the roots of a Tumtum tree. The telltale fungi of *Finnegans Wake* indeed crop up at the very beginning of the book, and they are, significantly, related to fermentation and decay: *rot a peck of pa's malt* (3.12). Rotting and fermentation, two economically important processes associated with fungi, appear together in this, the third sentence of the Wake. *Serpula lacrimans*, or dry rot, also known as the "house fungus," destroys timber and wooden structures even in the absence of water. Another, *Coniophora puteana* (wet rot) spreads like a sheet over moist wood. In a general sense, rot is associated with various forms of decay and by extension refers to the universe of wood-decaying and parasitic fungi. Joyce returns to this introductory theme a few lines later: *oranges have been laid to rust upon the green* (3.23) a reference to plant diseases caused by parasitic fungi of the order Uredinales: rusts that destroy cereal grasses, conifers, and ferns. The fungi, subvisible but dangerous, lurk at center stage in the vast midden heap of civilization.

Fermentation is the phenomenon that truly captured Joyce's imagination. It captured his duodenum, too – he was an ardent drinker of ardent spirits, particularly a Swiss white wine known as *Fendant de Sion* that he affectionately called the "arch-duchess's urine." The influence of Guinness & Company and John Jameson & Son in Irish history and in *Finnegans Wake* is pervasive, and Joyce suggests that his polyglot manipulations of language are tantamount to the processes of brewing and distilling. In a passage where Shem (a self-parody of Joyce) cooks eggs in his kitchen, *fermented words* (184.26) refer to the language of *Finnegans Wake* itself. Fermentation has a host of implications in the Wake, from Noah's drunkenness to breweries, alehouses, and famous Irish malt products like Guinness stout.

The fermentation of alcohol occurs when yeasts (unicellular fungi in the genus Saccharomyces) break down sugars, as in partially germinated barley, to make malt that is used in brewing and distilling (*rot a peck of pa's malt*). Joyce was captivated by the metaphoric potencies of fermentation, and he told his friend Frank Budgen, "Fermented drink must have had a sexual origin. … In a woman's mouth, probably. I have made Bloom eat Molly's chewed seedcake."[8] This is a reference to the moment in *Ulysses* where Leopold Bloom recalls Molly's early infatuation, kissing him and passing a bolus of chewed seedcake from her mouth to his. Joyce takes the metaphor of *fermented words* to even greater extremes in the Wake: Shem uses his own feces to write all over his body, and the excremental self-creation of shit-writing mockingly subverts the Victorian convention of the "language of flowers" where the lowly mushroom symbolized suspicion and lichens dejection or solitude. By comparison, Shem's alchemical operation of changing feces to indelible ink seems congruent with the inky deliquescence of *Coprinus comatus*, and the corrosive sublimation of his Swiftian endeavor recycles back again to fermented words.

Flowering plants and trees of all kinds inhabit Finnegan's cosmos. The Wake's botany is rampant, but essential. Joyce bent the conventions of the "language of flowers" to his own ends just as he appeared to draw on the Celtic mythology of trees. He pilfered from obscurities like S. A. Binion's *Phyllanthography: A Method of Leaf and Flower Writing* (1909) and even adumbrated the historical grammar of poetic myth found in *The White Goddess* (1948) by Robert Graves. Joyce's placement of mushrooms at the darker interstices of his night world accords with the tangential valuation awarded the fungi by non-mycologists and mycophobes: mushrooms are hated and therefore overlooked when they appear. The Wake's "language of mushrooms" is deeply rooted in his botanical vision, but like any slightly regarded ort in the Wake a *twoodstool* twinkling in the margins might suddenly occupy centrality of station, as in Book 1, chapter 3 where we find our disreputable hero Earwicker implicated in a dubious and unspecified "crime in the park:"

> Those many warts, those slummy patches, halfsinster wrinkles, (what has come over the face on the wholebroader E?), and (shrine of Mount Mu save us!) the large fungopark he has grown! Drink! (51.17-20)

Fungo is an obsolete term for mushroom or fungus; *fungopark* must then be any park where mushrooms grow, but in this case it is specifically Phoenix Park. There was no systematic survey of flowering plants (or the cryptogamic ones) of Phoenix Park until 1988, though the early Dublin botanists Caleb Threkeld (1672-1768), John Rutty (1697-1775), and Walter Wade (1770-1825) were the first to publish findings that included some of the Phoenix Park flora.[9] Joyce implicitly recognized this lack of attention to the park by Irish botany, yet alludes to stranger flora yet: namely, Amanita. Carefully subverting the commonly known characteristics of Amanita – *warts*, *slummy* (slimy) *patches*, and *wrinkles* – he then adds ritual elements: supplication at the shrine of *Mount Mu*[shroom] and the imperative *Drink!*, adumbrating the shamanic use of *Amanita muscaria* in Siberian cultures where the urine of a person under mushroom intoxication is recycled by the acolyte to perpetuate its intoxicating effects. This is later recapitulated in *Mount of Mish* (131.01) and *sacred sponge* (516.25).

Did Joyce know *Amanita muscaria* conclusively? It seems he did; for in the "Museyroom episode" he brings forth a Tom, Dick, and Harry trio, one of whom he calls *Touchole Fitz Tuomush* (8.26-27), disguising the French word for fly agaric, *Tue-mouche* (pronounced "too moosh"). In *Annotations to Finnegans Wake* Roland McHugh gave this phrase a military/sexual gloss instead of the mycological one suggested here; however, *Tue-mouche*, "too much," mushrooms in general and *Amanita muscaria* in particular are all indicated. *Tuomush* also portends *twoodstool* (40.23) in an orthographical interlinkage that intensifies this interpretation as a mycological realization. In *Soma: Divine Mushroom of Immortality* (1968), R. Gordon Wasson set forth his celebrated theory that *Amanita muscaria* was the Soma of the RgVeda. Over thirty years later yet, Peter Lamborn Wilson compared the Vedic and Irish literature to postulate that an *Amanita muscaria* cult may have existed in prehistoric Ireland. Notwithstanding that *Finnegans Wake* appeared in print three decades prior to Wasson's *Soma* and seven prior to Wilson's *Ploughing the Clouds: The Search for Irish Soma*, it seems that the most tantalizing evidence for "Irish Soma" may in fact lurk in *Finnegans Wake*. Did Joyce have an intimation of the ethnomycology of Wasson in the *fungopark* passage? Of course, this is preposterous. Or is it? The uncanny possibilities become curiouser and curiouser as we press forward, for in Book 2, in *megafundum of his tomashunders* (229.21), we relish another direct hit on a favorite Wasson hypothesis: the association of mushrooms and thunder. An anagram for "soma thunders," *tomashunders* elevates the mycological to an archetypal theme: thunder is the cryptogrammic embodiment of technological change that reverberates in the ten thunder words of the Wake.

If wayward speculation about *Amanita muscaria* in the Wake nettles the abecedarian reader, one can easily cling to a shred of stability by way of *Amanita phalloides*, the infamous deathcap. At 198.32, Joyce takes us to *giant's holes in Grafton's causeway and deathcap mushrooms round Funglus grave*, referring to unique formations of basaltic columns: Giant's Causeway and Fingal's Cave in northern Ireland and the Inner Hebrides, respectively. *Funglus grave* (conflating "fungus + Fingal") refers to Fingal's Cave, a huge sea cave on the uninhabited island of Staffa, near Mull and Iona. Discovered by Sir Joseph Banks in 1772 and visited by Felix Mendelssohn in 1829, the cave is 250 feet deep, 70 feet high, and was formed when basaltic rock cooled to form hexagonal columns. Myxomycetologist Roland McHugh glosses *Funglus* as "Finglas," a district of Dublin, near the Glasnevin Botanic Garden in Phoenix Park; and the word *round* suggests mushrooms growing in a fairy ring, intensifying the imagery of poisonous mushrooms growing in a circle around a grave. It is doubtful that *Amanita phalloides* actually grows on Staffa, but Joyce's *deathcap mushrooms* here form a metamorphic shift of the fungal toward the geological, an approximation of hylozoic belief and a drift toward a cosmic vision where the

most toxic mushroom known becomes our totemic ancestor. There are further hints of this at *deathcup* (450.30) and *cup champagne* (462.09).

As we all know, *toadstool* is a common synonym for *mushroom*, usually having a negative connotation, although the familiar usage that mushrooms are edible and toadstools poisonous has no scientific validity whatever. When Joyce sets a *twoodstool on the verge of selfabyss* (40.23) he validates the observation that mushrooms grow on wood: constructive fragmentation of *twoodstool* produces "two + wood + stool." A handy gloss might be *toadstool (growing on wood)*. The deeper meaning, however, derives from William Blake, taking into account the association of the toadstool with the *abyss*. Blake, in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, depicts a fungus as an emblem of the material world: "I remained sitting in the twisted root of an oak, he [an Angel] was suspended in a fungus which hung with the head downward into the deep...By degrees we beheld the infinite Abyss."[10] For Blake, fungus manifests the materialism in which the spiritual world is mired, an early intimation in the Romantic Era of the attempt to gain philosophical perspective on the perplexing flux of organic life, to begin to fathom its meaning in human terms apart from the developing regime of scientific knowledge and the trend toward evolutionary thought. Joyce himself, in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, had used the metaphor of *fungus* to depict the quintessential horrors of Hell.[11] Obedient as we are today to the paradigm of science, these usages will seem either quaint or metaphysical. But the literary tendency toward philosophical speculation runs in far different channels than the everyday empiricism of differentiating one species from another. Yet, one almost wishes to burst the bubble of Joyce's and Blake's mycological metaphysics by seeking to know just what species of fungus was suspended over that dark abyss. Did Blake's vision originate in a passing glance at *Grifola frondosa* at the base of an oak in Lambeth? The inclination toward specificity is a tempting (and always positive) direction to take, but ultimately unsatisfying to the mental traveler seeking to broaden literary perspectives on mycology. We may as well wonder why British mushroom guides characterize *Grifola frondosa* as smelling of mice and cold mashed potatoes – subjective perceptions that tell us more about our hunger for knowledge than our taste for maitake.[12]

From the *umwelt* of the Wake's *quashed quotatoes* (183.22) the ricorso of pan-etymological meanderings through the preconscious formation of meaning is oceanic and fluid, recycling through mind and history, recycling through the words themselves. *Finnegans Wake* is not a disquisition on mycology, but a mycelial mat in which fruiting bodies are knotted deep in the sclerotia of words. Joyce's ultimate vision of the fungal world appears in a portmanteau construct of wider botanical significance: *fungoalgaceous muscafilicial graminopalmular planteon* (613.17). The passage in which this tidy botanical compendium appears deserves placing in its larger context:

> A spathe of calyptrous glume involucrumines the perinanthean Amenta: fungoalgaceous muscafilicial graminopalmular planteon; of increasing, livivorous, feelful thinkamalinks; luxuriotiating everywhencewhithersoever among skullhullows and charnelcysts of a weedwastewoldwevild…

The compression of the several divisions of cryptogamous (fungi, algae, mosses, ferns) and vascular (grasses and palms) plants introduces a veritable *planteon* of botanical life. McHugh has noted that calyptra refers to the hood of the spore case in non-flowering plants (though this meaning does not apply to the fungi). In *Joyce's Book of the Dark* John Bishop provides an incisive analysis of this passage as a "compressed history of the evolution of botanical life."[13] Joyce's *weedwastewoldwevild* delineates a ruderal environment in which toadstools are weeds that mimic and reflect the gestalt of popular mycology. In the Wake's closing pages, Earwicker himself, normally in the guise of an earwig (*Forficula auricularia*), makes a sudden appearance as a mushroom: "Mch? Why them's the muchrooms, come up during the night" (625.19). Note that the 90-degree counterclockwise rotation of "M" in *Mch* gives us "ECH," an anagram of HCE, recapitulated in *muchrooms*. Mushrooms in the Wake, scarcely noticed, crop up time and again: *paddish pretties* (31.24), *pilzenpie* (37.32), *mussroomsniffer* (142.10), and even characters such as Mildew Lisa and the Mookse (*mykes*) and the Gripes (*grib*) harbor mycological readings in which the rhizosphere surfaces in consciousness through the cipher of Joyce's immense poem. As Marshall McLuhan pointed out, Joyce solved numerous problems which science had not yet formulated as problems.

Finnegans Wake ends with the word *the* (628.16), forever bringing us back to the beginning again: *riverrun, past Eve and Adam's, from swerve of shore to bend of bay, brings us by a commodius vicus of recirculation back to Howth Castle and Environs* (3.1-3). The Wake has attracted its share of excellent readers; among them are John Lennon, Joseph Mitchell, and Sam Savage. In *Up in the Old Hotel*, Mitchell claimed, "I am an obsessed reader of *Finnegans Wake* – I must've read it at least half a dozen times – and every time I read the Anna Livia Plurabelle section I hear the voices of my mother and my aunts as they walk among the graves in old Iona cemetery and it is getting dark."[14] In Savage's tale *Firman*, the eponymous hero is an intellectual mouse born in a bookstore on a litter fashioned by his mother on the torn-up pages from *Finnegans Wake*. And even mycologists have playfully bantered with the Wake's potential for appreciating the multifarious panoply of the fungi:

> Every evening at lighting up o'clock sharp and until further notice in the mushrump marsh the mushworm worms its way down riverrun, past Eve and Adam's, past

marsh beacons and inky caps,
along the dead man's fingers trail of
luminescent filaments of love and
desire…[15]

Joyce's compatriot Arthur Power once asked him if he ever thought of the afterlife. Joyce commented dryly, "I don't think much of this one." Lest one think that's a jaded remark casually tossed off by an egotistical writer (and it is), also remember that Joyce suffered from iritis and other ocular diseases that left him in a condition of near-blindness for much of his adult life; his self-imposed exile from Ireland and peripatetic life-style did little to mitigate the sense of hostility and neglect his books engendered; and his odd familial relationships and troubled daughter brought him only acute personal grief. In exile, Joyce died in Zurich in 1941 and was buried there in Fluntern Cemetery. He considered literature a perpetual affirmation of the human spirit, and if you agree with John Cage then *Finnegans Wake* is without question the greatest work of literature of the century just past. Like the journals of Henry David Thoreau, like Cage's compositions themselves, *Finnegans Wake* is a lively and rewarding place to meditate on the mystery of mushrooms. In 1922, Joyce had occasion to meet Marcel Proust, whose *In Search of Lost Time* remains to this day another lofty pinnacle of literary modernism. Much was made of the encounter – here were the two living geniuses of literature meeting in Paris for the first and only time. There are differing accounts of the meeting, but most agree that the two scarcely spoke to one another. One thing was mentioned: Proust asked Joyce if he liked truffles. Joyce replied, "Yes, I do." Arthur Power complained, "Here are the two greatest literary figures of our time meeting and they ask each other if they like truffles."[16] So what else would they need to talk about?

Endnotes

1 Roland McHugh, *The Finnegans Wake Experience* (1981, California), p. 39.
2 Richard Ellmann, *James Joyce* (1959, Oxford), p. 716.
3 Reference to words, phrases, and sentences in *Finnegans Wake* are commonly indicated by page and line number as follows, e.g., "gentle as a mushroom" (618.27). The text used here is James Joyce, *Finnegans Wake* (1976, orig. 1939; Penguin).
4 R. G. Wasson, "Lightningbolt and Mushroom," in *Persephone's Quest* (1986, Yale) pp. 83-94.
5 Terence McKenna, *The Archaic Revival* (1991, Harper Collins), p. 51.
6 Langdon Smith, *Evolution* (1915, L. E. Bassett).
7 James Joyce, *Ulysses* (1990, orig. 1922; Vintage International), p. 294, p. 164.
8 Frank Budgen, *James Joyce and the Making of Ulysses* (1991, Oxford; orig. 1934), p. 108.
9 F. C. Hassell, "The Early Irish Mycologists, 1726-1900" *Irish Naturalists Journal* (1957), 12: 116-120.
10 William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, in *The Early Illuminated Books* (1993, Princeton), plates 17-18, pp. 172-72.
11 James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1964, Viking Compass; orig. 1916), p. 120.
12 Marcel Bon, *The Mushrooms and Toadstools of Britain and North-western Europe* (1987, Hodder & Stoughton), p. 314.
13 John Bishop, *Joyce's Book of the Dark* (1986, Wisconsin), pp. 116-17.
14 Joseph Mitchell, *Up in the Old Hotel* (1993, Vintage), p. xii.
15 Gary Lincoff, personal communication; June 16, 2010.
16 Richard Ellmann, *op. cit*., p. 524.

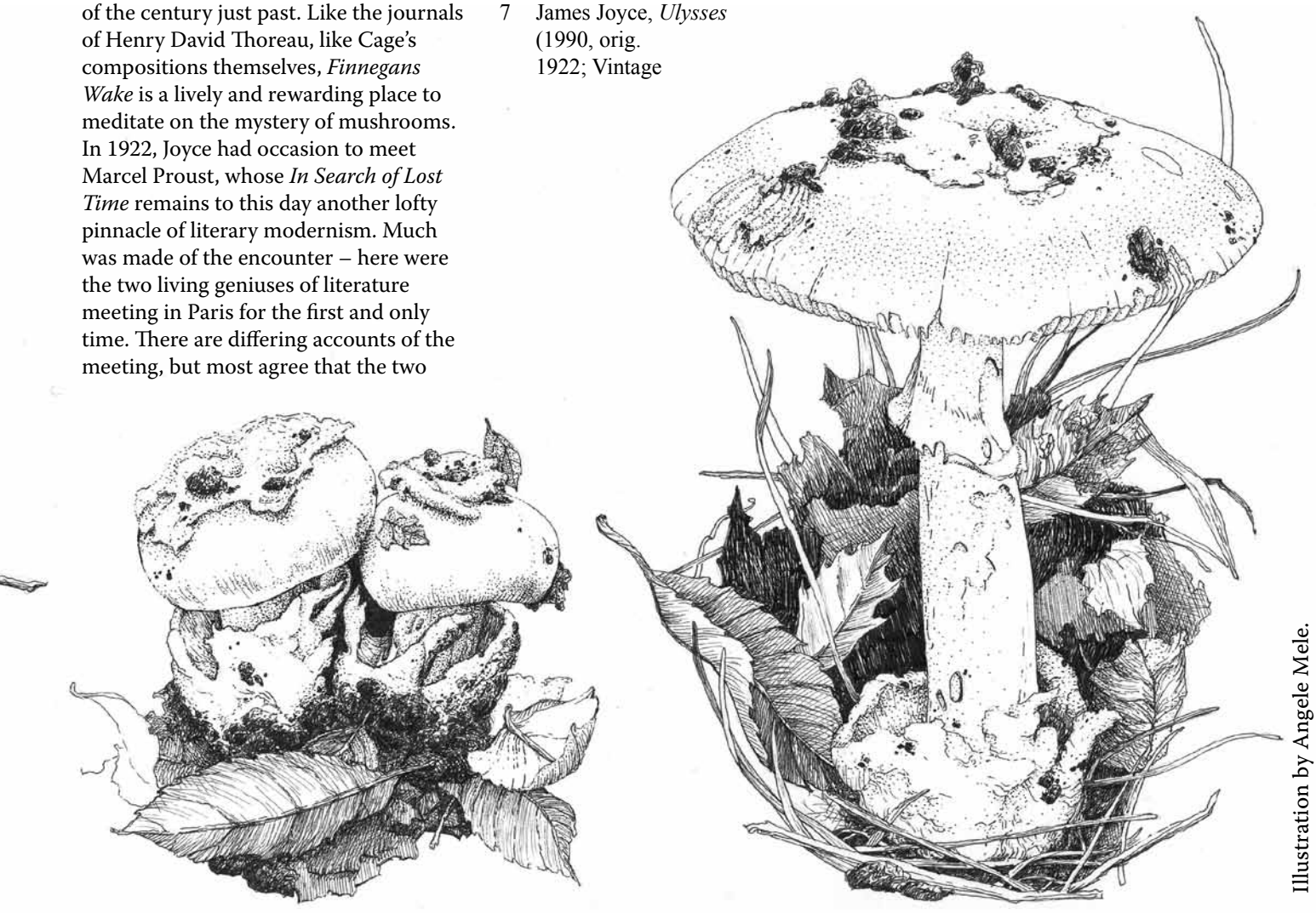

Illustration by Angele Mele.