Introduction:
Languages of the Novel

The Age of Realism, in many ways the last great affirmation of the Enlightenment with its impressively self-confident faith in reason and in reason’s access to the real, drew to an end as the nineteenth century began to spill into the twentieth. In a turmoil of uncertainty prefiguring Eliot’s later wry conviction that ‘human kind / Cannot bear very much reality’, Modernism was born. A remarkable revolution swept through all the arts. The faith in representation, which for so long had shaped Western culture, was wavering; and, in Santayana’s famous phrase, mankind started dreaming in a different key.

In the arts this new key was determined by a widespread discovery – or, in some cases, rediscovery – of the medium as the message. From Cézanne onwards, painting turns its back on a long tradition of ‘truth to nature’ as it begins to focus on the materiality of paint on canvas. The theatre renounces its earlier attempts to create the perfect illusion and in the plays of Pirandello and his contemporaries embraces the space of the stage as stage (which to Shakespeare would have been nothing new). In Stravinsky, and even more so in Schönberg, music is no longer to be enjoyed simply as a melodic system but turns its attention to the very processes which produce melody.

And so it is only to be expected that literature, too, begins to foreground its own medium, language, first in the poetry of Mallarmé and Rimbaud, and the fiction of Flaubert and Henry James. Soon, from the ranks of early Modernists, amplified by that time by what Kundera (1988:63) calls the ‘polyhistoricism’ of Broch and the conjuring acts of memory performed by Proust, rose the definitive figure of James Joyce. As McGee (1988:2) phrases it, ‘At every phase in the development of recent literary theory, Joyce appears as an example and an authentic symptom of his and our historical moment.’

Starting with the early dissolution and reassembling of sentence structures to accompany the emotional ebb and flow in A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, moving with dizzying virtuosity through...
the ever-changing languagescapes in *Ulysses*, Joyce finally pushes language to an extreme in *Finnegan’s Wake*, perhaps the single greatest narrative monument of the twentieth century, comparable to Picasso’s achievement in *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon* or *Guernica*. As MacCabe, a pivotal critic in Joyce criticism, so convincingly demonstrated, Joyce’s writing radically changes the entire relationship between text and reader, moving from one of passive consumption to active engagement and transformation. Reading becomes ‘an active appropriation of the material of language’ (MacCabe 1978:11). In opposition to the nineteenth-century manipulation of ‘metalanguage’ by Eliot and others, (that is, an authorial language through which the many languages of different characters in the text are ultimately controlled in order to guide the reader in establishing what is real or true and what not),¹ Joyce offers no correctives, no final truths, and forces the reader to become actively involved in the free play of language through the various discourses of the novel. Even if, as McGee and many others have since indicated, MacCabe underestimates the functions of interpretation, his watershed reading of Joyce firmly established the primacy of language as language in the Modernist (and later the Postmodernist) novel. In many respects the whole of the Postmodernist novel — from Beckett to Nabokov, from Robbe-Grillet to Márquez, from Calvino to Barth, from Pynchon to Kundera — may be said to be spinoffs from *Ulysses* and *Finnegan’s Wake*. This is particularly important in the sense that ‘*Ulysses* and *Finnegan’s Wake* are concerned *not with representing experience through language but with experiencing language through a destruction of representation*’ (MacCabe 1978:4, my emphasis).

Not that one should underestimate the ‘story’ level in these two novels: there are magnificent narrative impulses throughout both of them, and purely in terms of an old-fashioned ‘plot’ they are among the richest texts in the genre. But ultimately all these various stories collapse, like old stars into a Black Hole, within the language in which they are told. Language becomes its own greatest story. In *Ulysses*, among so many other things, ‘the story of language’ is told in the hospital chapter, where the reader witnesses, and is drawn into, the evolution of the English language from Anglo-Saxon to American jazz-speak; and in *Finnegan’s Wake* the whole history of Ireland, telescoped into that of a hod-carrier, assumes the form of language. This must be understood quite