One of the main findings of genetic work on *Finnegans Wake* in Dublin, Paris, Madison and Antwerp, is that Joyce’s last novel is much more intertextual than even the most post-structuralist critics could have suspected. In many ways, Joyce was a reader before he was a writer: *Finnegans Wake* is made up of bits and pieces that Joyce took from a wide variety of sources, including reviews and criticism of his work. For an adequate understanding of the text, it is therefore crucial that we should find out what bits went into the text and where they came from. The answers to both questions may be found in the *Finnegans Wake* Notebooks, a set of workbooks that Joyce used between October 1922, when he began to write in Buffalo Notebook VI.B.10, and February 1939 when *Finnegans Wake* was finally published. Close analysis of these notebooks has revealed that the notebooks are not so much compositional or private documents, but an in-between station containing words and phrases which Joyce took from his reading and which at some point he intended to introduce into his new book.

A similar routine is described in *Finnegans Wake* itself, where Joyce’s alter ego with similar craftsmanship “kept on treasuring with condign satisfaction each and every crumb of trektalk, covetous of his neighbour’s word” (*FW* 172.29-30). Shem’s literary activities involve the misuse of “all the different foreign parts of speech” (*FW* 173.35). His den is appropriately littered (or “literatured” - *FW* 183.10) with “alphybettyformed verbage,” “quashed quotatoes” (*FW* 183.13) and “messes of mottage” (*FW* 183.22-23). He eats “cantraps of fermented words” (*FW* 184.26) and is “every day in everyone’s way more exceeding in violent abuse of self and others” (*FW* 183.02-3). A description of the manuscripts of this “insufficiently malestimated
notesnatcher” (FW 125.21-2) may be found in chapter I.5 of the
Wake with elaborate references to quite a collection of insertion marks
“amid the verbiage” (FW 121.03). This passage gives an accurate
description of its own drafts and the rest of the Wake manuscripts,
since every revisional stage in the composition of Joyce’s textual
mosaic moulded more notebook material into layers additional to the
basic patterns.

Quite literally, Joyce began writing his last book by (proof)reading his earlier novel. The first of the Finnegans Wake
notebooks opens with a number of misprints in Ulysses that Joyce
planned to correct in the third printing of the book.¹ But his interest in
the earlier book did not stop: notebooks VI.B.10 and following
contain regular references to Ulysses, especially to reviews of it, and
in his letters too Joyce voiced his concern for the welfare of the book.
This is most obvious in the earliest notebook. According to Danis
Rose’s chronology, VI.B.10 and a missing notebook (VI.X.1)
preceded the writing of two new pages, “the first I have written since
the final Yes of Ulysses,” which Joyce announced in March 1923
(Letters I 202).² VI.B.10 contains many references to his previous
work, as well as loose notes on diverse topics, but no concrete new
plans. In accordance with Joyce’s previous practice, protagonists and
episodes of his earlier work were used to tag some of his new notes,
for instance “smoke roseleaves (Naus)” on page 43 (JJA 31:100),
“Ul’s crew = Sancho Panza / = LB 1/2” on page 45 or “had Ul stayed
at / home??? (demobbed)” on page 46 (JJA 31:101). Some of these
notes may be reflections on his earlier work, or on aspects of the
material he had not covered, probably instigated by his reading. The
“U[lysses]” notes may be interpreted along these lines. Others, such
as the entry tagged with “Naus[sica],” apparently contain new
material but Joyce was still thinking and classifying according to the

¹ On 30 October 1922, Joyce wrote, “I was able to correct the first
half of Ulysses for the third edition.” Melissa Banta and Oscar A. Silverman,
eds., James Joyce’s Letters to Sylvia Beach 1921-1940 (Bloomington and
Indianapolis: Indiana U P, 1987), p.15. This remark provides us with an
accurate dating for the notes on the first page of VI.B.10.

² For the most reliable recent description of the early history of
Finnegans Wake, see Danis Rose, The Textual Diaries of James Joyce