

A WORD IN YOUR EAR.
How & Why to Read James Joyce's Finnegans Wake

by Eric Rosenbloom

After Ulysses was published in 1922, installments of what Joyce called Work In Progress soon started to appear. The final title was a secret kept between the writer and his wife, Nora Barnacle. The finished book was published in 1939, and Joyce died less than two years later, leaving a work the reading of which is still very much "in progress."

The language of Finnegans Wake is confounding. Consider, for example:

O here here how hoth sprowled met the duskt the father of
fornicationists but, (O my shining stars and body!) how hath fanespanded most high
heaven the skysign of soft advertisement!

The language is like that of a dream, not quite conscious or formed, shimmering with layers of possible meaning. Yet this is a return to possibility, shaped by the experiences of the world we have fallen (into sleep) from. One of the many sources Joyce drew from is the Ancient Egyptian story of Osiris, who was torn apart by his son or brother Set, the pieces gathered and reassembled by his wife or sister, Isis, with the help of their sister or daughter, Nephthys; their other son or brother, Horus, emerges to slay Set and rises as the new day's sun, as Osiris himself. So in Finnegans Wake, we have fragments and allusions and confusing messages that the reader must, like Isis, put together into a recognizable form as the book progresses towards dawn.

The book begins with the fall of Finnegan, a hod carrier, from a scaffold. At his wake, in keeping with the American vaudeville song, "Finnegan's Wake," a fight breaks out, whiskey splashes on Finnegan's corpse, and he rises up again alive. Note how the simple removal of the song's apostrophe emphasizes and universalizes the theme of awakening: At Finnegan's wake, Finnegans wake.

But Joyce has Finnegan put back down again ("Now be aisy, good Mr Finnimore, sir. And take your laysure like a god on pension and don't be walking abroad"). Someone else is sailing in to take over the story: Humphrey Chimpden Earwicker, whose initials HCE ("Here Comes Everybody") lend themselves to phrase after phrase throughout the book.

HCE is a foreigner who has taken a native Irish wife, Anna Livia Plurabelle (whose initials ALP as well are found in phrase after phrase), and they settle down to run a public house in Chapelizod, a suburb of Dublin named for the Irish princess Isolde. HCE personifies the city of Dublin (which was founded by Vikings), and ALP personifies the river Liffey, on whose banks the city was built. In the popular eighth chapter -- the end of which Joyce has been recorded reciting -- hundreds of names of rivers are woven into the tale of ALP's life. Joyce universalizes his tale by making ALP and HCE stand as well for every city-river pair in the world. And they are, like Eve and Adam, the primeval parents of all the Irish and all humanity.

ALP and HCE have a daughter, Issy, whose person is often split, and two sons, Shem and Shaun, eternal rivals for replacing their father and for Issy's affection (among other things). Shem and Shaun are akin to Set and Horus of the Osiris story, as well as the biblical pairs Jacob & Esau and Cain & Abel, not to mention Romulus & Remus, St. Michael & the Devil, and so on, each defined by the other. They often are seen with or as a third fellow in whom their two halves join against HCE or in winning Issy. This third son-character is likened, for example, to Napoleon Bonaparte against HCE's Duke of Wellington and to Tristan in the triangles with Iseult (of Brittany and of Ireland; Issy) and King Mark (HCE). This is just a small hint of the many roles that each of the main characters finds him- and herself playing, often several at the same time, often exchanging roles.

Scandal concerning an incident in Phoenix Park (across the river from Chapelizod and featuring the phallic Wellington Monument) threatens HCE's reputation, perhaps his life. The exact nature of the "crime" is not clear. Sometimes it seems to be political, other times sexual. It might have been witnessed by two young women (Issy) when they briefly left the company of the two or three young soldiers (Shem and Shaun) escorting them. It might not have occurred at all, a fabrication to bring down HCE, although HCE is characterized by a stutter that suggests guilt. The stammer also represents the discomfort of the Irish being forced to speak (and act) English, which fits like an ill-made suit (a running joke in the book) or the difficulty of all languages to adequately express what we want to say.

In a midden heap, a hen named Biddy (the diminutive form of [Brigid](#), the goddess at the end of whose new-year feast days Joyce was born) finds a letter that ALP has dictated to Shem and which Shaun is charged with carrying to the ruling power of the time, which may be HCE himself. It is a letter that is hoped will redeem his past, just as *Finnegans Wake* is a vast "comedy" that seeks to redeem human history.

The progress of the book, however, like life, is far from simple as it draws in mythologies, theologies, mysteries, philosophies, histories, sociologies, astrologies, other fictions, alchemy, music, color, nature, sexuality, human development, and dozens of languages to create the world drama in whose cycles we live.

Finnegans Wake is divided into four parts. The first, consisting of eight chapters, deals primarily with the falls of Finnegans and HCE. The second part, with four chapters, is more familial. The first chapter involves children's games, the second school studies, and the third the pub. The fourth chapter flows from the third and the departure of both the young and the old. The third part, which Joyce designated λ abcd, using the "siglum" for Shaun, because it is about the rise of that character, akin to the rise of Horus in the Egyptian story. The fourth part consists of only one chapter. It is a look back at the arrival of HCE as ALP, or the river Liffey flows through Dublin and out to the sea before the sun rises. Famously, the first word of *Finnegans Wake* finishes the last sentence, suggesting an endless cycle of falls and rises.

What makes the book at all manageable is Joyce's use of archetypal "characters" as in a travelling theater troupe. On the other hand, in the need to make every story that is pulled into *Finnegans Wake* fit its stock of players, they are often doubled and recombined and even switched, making it quite a bit less clearcut. Besides the "family" characters already described, there are:

- 4 old men, who correspond to the provinces of Ireland, the gossellers, and chroniclers of Irish history
- 12 customers
- 29 girls, schoolmates of Issy

Another recurring motif is the number 1132, which may be the time (11:32 p.m.) when HCE's supposed crime occurred, and it echos through the book in myriad forms. The late Clarence Sterling has noted (see the link above from the word "Brighid") that the the 16th-century Annals of Loch Cé describes the destruction of the Abbey of Kildare and rape of its abbess on new year's day, 1132, a month before the feast of St. Bridget, which continued that of the goddess Brighid as the start of the prechristian year. Kildare was founded by Bridget as an artistic center and school for girls, and the abbess embodied her and thus the goddess, too. The expedition to destroy it began the violent rise of Dermot McMurrough, who went on to invite the English to fight with him in Ireland.

Thus ended the "golden age" of Irish christianity. Many readers have tried to force Finnegans Wake into the structure of Giambattista Vico's cycles of history, and indeed Joyce borrows heavily from Vico's work. But Finnegans Wake is not an historical novel. It embodies a postconscious midden heap from which, like the ashes of the phoenix or the ash tree from which humanity will be reborn after Ragnarok, the germ of a new round of history will emerge, a new generation as the old one fades, a new day after a long sleep. Thus the book wakes every reader, too.

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