9: In the End is the Word

Finnegans Wake is a work of literature and hence, theoretically at least, a subject for literary criticism. The trouble is that, though we may legislate for the literature of waking life, it is impossible to lay down rules for books of dreams. In the foregoing chapters I have attempted to do little more than say what, as far as I can see, is going on in Earwicker’s dream, and my view of what is going on is greatly conditioned by my desire to struggle out of the dream and pretend that we have all really been awake all the time. The language of simple exposition cannot cope with Joyce’s ten-or-twelve-part counterpoint, and I have been forced to ignore much that is important—the metaphysics, for instance, that is personified in the characters; the vast array of historical personages that are dragged out of Mr Deasy’s time and made to ride the Vicovian cycle. To attempt a critical appraisal would, at this stage of my own understanding of the book, be an impertinence. I have enough to do, and so has everybody else, in trying to comprehend Joyce’s seventeen-year palimpsest.

What I must try to do here, though, is to attempt to confute Joyce’s critics, meaning those who, failing totally to appreciate what Finnegans Wake is trying to do, attack it where, by ordinary literary standards, it seems most vulnerable. I had better start by saying that there seems to be a great deal of dream-literature in existence—the dream was a popular literary convention in the Middle Ages, for instance; two of the world’s best-loved books, Pilgrim’s Progress and the Alice diptych, recount dreams—but that there is usually very little of the true dream about it. Bunyan’s book is a waking allegory, as is The Pearl or The Vision of Piers Plowman. Genuine dream-stuff is, before Finnegans Wake, to be found perhaps only in Alice, Clarence’s big speech in Richard III, Kafka (though he presents less dream than sick hallucination), Dostoevsky, and the Bible. Joyce is the only author who has tried, in a work of literature as opposed to a work of science, to demonstrate what a dream is really like without making any concessions at all to those who will accept a dream as a literary convention, an intermission between waking states, or a bit of fanciful garnishing, but not as the whole essence of a work of epic proportions. Thus, when the classical critics turn on Finnegans Wake the beams of their bull’s-eye lanterns, they see nothing unique, unsubmitting to their waking rules, and hence to be condemned for what it does not pretend to be rather than appraised in terms of what is is. They denounce night because the sun is not shining; they upbraid the eternal because their watches cannot time it; they produce their foot-rules and protest that there is no space to measure.

The first thing that conventional criticism cries out against in Joyce is his alleged unintelligibility. Critics have always been howling about unintelligibility, though, if a difficult book has existed long enough (like the Book of Revelation or Gargantua and Pantagruel or Tristram Shandy or Blake’s Milton), they will not complain too loudly of what they say they cannot fully understand. The moss that attacks classical statues is a wonderful mitigator of unintelligibility. The late, revered T. S. Eliot was once in the van of unintelligibility, but age and the Order of Merit enlightened a lot of his readers. No important and difficult work of art is permanently unintelligible, since great writers create both the sensibility of the future and the language of the future, but there is a sense in which the author of Finnegans Wake must always murmur ‘Mea culpa, mea maxima culpa’ to the priests of clarity, since it is in the very nature of his subject-matter to be elusive and difficult. For one who will say ‘O felix culpa’ there are ninety-nine who will give no absolution. But, before we go any further, let us be entirely clear in our minds as to what we mean when we say that a piece of writing is unintelligible.

A writer may fail to be understood when he is either incompetent or demented. No one will deny Joyce’s competence and, as far as I know, only Mr Evelyn Waugh has asserted that Joyce went mad, and then, said Mr Waugh, it was because certain influential Americans asked him to go mad. A writer may be unintelligible when he is seeking a verbal equivalent for a state of mind not yet fully understood or a complex psychological experience that will not yield to ordinary language. He will be unintelligible when he is essaying extreme naturalism, trying, for example, to capture the quality of real-life language which is blurred through distance, drink, sleep,
or madness. He will be unintelligible when he is deliberately separating language from its referents (the objects or concepts of real life to which language refers) in order to create a quasi-musical pattern. Finally, he may be unintelligible when he is so loading words with referents (usually a number of secondary associations that cluster round the denotation, or dictionary definition) that the reader becomes bewildered and does not see what the primary referent is. Joyce, if he is unintelligible at all, is unintelligible in all these non-pathological ways, and they seem, on analysis, to be all artistically legitimate—in other words, they seem to aim at a mode of communication rather than a wanton muffling or quelling of sense. Is the traditional critic, then, quite sure what he means when he accuses Joyce of unintelligibility?

Our educational tradition, both in Britain and America, has conditioned us to look on words as mere counters which, given a particular context, mean one thing and one thing only. This tradition, needless to say, is geared to the legalistic and commercial rather than to the aesthetic. When a word is ambiguous we are uneasy, and we are right to be uneasy when that word is set in a contract or official directive. But the exploitation of the ambiguity of a word is, as Professor Empson has been pointing out for a long time, one of the joys of the literary art. Gerard Manley Hopkins says: ‘Brute beauty and value and act ... here buckle’, and that word ‘buckle’ conveys two opposed notions—the sense of fastening a belt for action; the sense of becoming distorted and broken, as when we talk of the buckling of a bicycle-wheel. Conflict is of the essence of Hopkins’ poems—glory and guilt, confidence and doubt—and, in this other great Catholic writer, we have the same (though far more self-conscious) urge to convey opposed principles of life simultaneously, in one and the same word or expression. When life is freed from the restrictions of time and space, as it is in dreams, the mind makes less effort to sort out contradictions, or gentler ambiguities, and a word may ring freely, sounding all its harmonics. This free ringing, in a zone of psychological experience which has all the doors open, may well set jangling all the phonetic and etymological associations which the mind is capable of accommodating—foreign languages not taught in public schools, songs little known in the great world of singing, scraps of conversation almost forgotten, dead slogans, posters long torn from their walls. Joyce was psychologically right in refusing to limit: the associations of dream-words to what some abstract image of a reader or critic could most easily take in. In

throwing vocables of great, though arbitrary, complexity at us he was being true to his principle of artistic communication. Paradoxically, when an essential word or phrase in a book about a dream is least intelligible, then it may be most intelligible.

Waking literature (that is, literature that bows to time and space) is the exploitation of a single language. Dream-literature, breaking down all boundaries, may be more concerned with the phenomenon of language in general. Living in the West, I have little occasion to use Malay, a tongue I know at least as well as I know French. In dreams, I am no longer in the West; with the collapse of space, compass-points have no meaning. Hence English and Malay frequently dance together, merging, becoming not two languages conjoined but an emblem of language in general. A better linguist than I may well make his dream-picture of language by mixing six or seven tongues. We can only learn about dreams by introspection. I do not see how Joyce could have made his great piece of dream-literature without looking into his own polyglot mind.

It is the wealth of this mind that is most persistently attacked. Joyce’s great crime, apparently, is to know too much. Blows against Finnegans Wake are often oblique thrusts at Ulysses, another monster of erudition. Erudition was once Eliot’s crime: since Wordsworth had done well enough without benefit of Sanskrit, it was unforgivable to make the thunder of The Waste Land say ‘Datta Dayadhavy Damayata’. But, as our world grows smaller, we become less satisfied with what an insular tradition can teach us. We are English-speaking first, but we ignore at our peril what is enshrined in the phonemes and rhythms of Europe and the great (mostly untranslatable) religious monuments of the East. Now, Eliot may be forgiven since his learning is apparently harnessed to an end of high seriousness; Joyce, on the other hand, seems to throw his library about to promote froth (which is all a dream is) and facetiousness (what the Irish call wit). It would appear that, obscure or lucid, he cannot win. We are still unwilling to concede profundity to the deeper places of the mind; we cannot quite forgive Christ for (as Joyce himself put it) founding His Church on a pun. We have a lot to learn.

If difficulty seems to reside in Joyce’s language rather than in the reader’s own brain, the reader may have a legitimate grumble when he says that Joyce might at least explain a little and not seem to revel in the mystification. But was explanation in the form of notes or author’s signposts really possible with Finnegans Wake? A barrage of glosses, whether concentrated at the end, as with The Waste
The Man-made Mountain

Land, or silly worked into the text would have made the whole book look even more fearsome than it looks already; moreover, it would have impaired the artful spontaneity, rendered the dream less dreamlike. And, like all good poets, Joyce aspires to be God rather than mere man; God sets His creations all about us, but He leaves the glory of interpretation to fallible minds. The ultimate meaning of *Finnegans Wake* rests with ourselves; the communication of artists is not the communication of government departments.

But Joyce, who died only two years after the publication of *Finnegans Wake*, had time to leave one clue. His book, he said, would come clear to the reader if the reader listened to its music. Indeed, Joyce demonstrated how potent this music is when he made a recording of part of the end of Book I, the *Anna Livia Plurabelle* section. But, alas, *Finnegans Wake* does not disclose a great deal of its music to a reader unschooled in interpretation of the artist's notation; the script is not phonetic, so that we are often unsure how to pronounce a word, and much of the richness and complexity is only revealed to the eye. We cannot chant a geometrical figure, an E on its back, or a hundred-letter thunder-word (paradoxically, it is only the eye that can recognise the thunder). Many of the puns have a strong visual element, 'hesitancy' and 'hesitency' sound the same, and the whole point of the Shem-Shaum lesson is that we should imagine ourselves looking at a book with marginal glosses and footnotes. But the appeal is ultimately to the auditory imagination, which is what Joyce probably meant, and the book is music perhaps in the sense that the orchestral score one reads in bed is music. A bad score-reader tackling, say, Wagner's *Ring* (which *Finnegans Wake* in some ways resembles) may not be able to hear much with his inner ear, but he may be able to recognise the recurrence of the *Leitmotiven* by their configurations on the stave. So when we see an allomorph of the 'ppt' which Swift used when he wrote to Stella, we can be pretty sure that Jusef la Belle is somewhere around.

When the great initials HCE⁴ appear, often imperceptible when the enshrining phrase is read aloud, we know that, however much we may seem to have modulated, we are really not very far from home. Sometimes, on the other hand, sheer sound triumphs. The bird that traditionally calls 'More pork' cries instead 'Moor Park', and we are with Swift, caged in the home of Sir William Temple. Hidden verselines only come out of the prose when hearing is switched on. In other words, we need two things for the full appreciation of the

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⁴ HCE is a genuine musical phrase, incidentally; in Germany, H is B natural.
The Man-made Mountain

Only in one respect is Finnegans Wake more solidly spatial than real dreams. I once dreamed of a plate which had seven slices of bread and butter on it; I took away three and six remained. This sort of thing never happens in Earwicker’s dream. Joyce often spoke of his book as mathematical, and one thing in it that the vast chaotic dreaming mind never impairs is number. Half of 1132 is always 566, and out of that basic figure of fall and recovery some of the significant numbers of the book are made: 1 for HCE, 1 for ALP, 3 for the children, 2 for the sons. $1 + 1 = 2; 3 \times 2 = 6; 6 \times 2$ gives us the eternal twelve. $1 + 1 + 2$ gives us the four old men. The sum of the four figures of 1132 is 7, number of the rainbow girls. 4 x 7 gives the 28 days of February, the number of the St Bride’s girls, divisible by 4 to bring back the rainbow. Every four years comes the leap-year girl. The two girls in the park and the three watching soldiers, HCE and his enemy—all are in the ricorsa-and-fall number; the three and the two are always there to remind us that falling bodies, whether of Finnegans, Parnell, HCE or Humpty Dumpty, go down at 32 feet per second per second.

It is this devotion to number which makes Finnegans Wake the long book it is. Joyce had enough of algebra, with its generalising letters, in Ulysses; in Finnegans Wake he glorifies humble arithmetic, dwelling with a kind of awe on the rich multiplicity conveyed by the number of ALP’s children, for instance, so that each of the 111 is fully named and the 111 gifts (fruit of the father) specified. Even the mention of Ulysses is enough to make Joyce want to dream-enumerate the chapters. Number is the reality behind the illusion of name and appearance. Critics have spoken of the book’s diffuseness, but that seeming sprawl is really numerical exactness. The counting fingers are at their work, however deep the sleep, and those thunderwords always have exactly a hundred letters, no more, no less. This is not childishness; the profundity of the meaning of number, set out seriously beneath the joke of the lesson-chapter, permeates the whole book.

If critics will accept the logic of Finnegans Wake, hidden beneath what seem to be mad words and intolerable length, they will still shy at the lack of what they call action. This, they say, is presented to us as a novel, and in a novel things are supposed to happen. Very little muscle is excreted in either Finnegans Wake or Ulysses, but we have to avoid lamenting the fact that Joyce was never strong on action of the Sir Walter Scott kind, that, though he was drawn to epic, he early rejected the bloody substance of epic. We have seen in his work how even the least gesture of violence will provoke earthquakes or Armageddon, even shiver the universe to atoms—events too apocalyptic to be more than static, comic rites, final mockeries of action as the best-sellers know action. He did not reject such action as a vulgarity, only as a property that might damage language by inflating it. The representation of passion or violence had best be limited to thought or speech, since the thrust of fist or phallus, being a physical cliché, seems to call for a verbal cliché in the recounting. The clichés of Dublin pub-talk or an advertising canvasser’s interior monologue are mere naturalism; the frame of symbol and poetry is a new creation out of words and the rhythms of words, static rather than kinetic. The novel should aspire to Shakespeare’s language, not Shakespeare’s stage-directions.

But, of course, Joyce was a family-man, and the small events of the family day had far more meaning than the big passionate public events of the books on the sitting-room shelves. In both Ulysses and Finnegans Wake he attempts to cut history down to size, measure it against his son’s cold or his daughter’s toothache, his wife’s plea for more housekeeping money and the broken dental plate he cannot afford to have repaired. He committed himself to glorifying the common man and his family, anointing them with a richer language than the romantics, whose eyes were full of the universe, ever gave themselves time myopically to amass. Examine that stain on the table-cloth, the crescent of dirt in your thumb-nail, the delicacy of that frail cone of ash on your cheap cigar, the pattern on the stringy carpet, and see what words will most exactly and lovingly render them. The words that glorify the commonplace will tame the bluster of history. The moon is in a cup of cocoa and the Viconian cycle turns with the sleeper on the bed with the jangling springs. At the same time, take words as well as give them, so that eternal myths are expressed in exactly caught baby-talk, the slobbering of the crane in the jug-and-bottle, or a poor silly song on the radio. This is Joyce’s art.

It is, finally, an art of scrupulous rendering. I do not mean by this that Joyce’s great achievement was solely to find the right word and the right rhythm for the thing that was already there, waiting in the DBC tea-shop where Parnell’s brother ‘translates a white bishop’ or on the banks of Shakespeare’s Thames where the pen is ‘chivying her game of cygnets’. I mean rather that he set himself the task of creating exact and inevitable language for the conceivable as well as the actual, and that Finnegans Wake is an exercise in rendering the
almost inconceivable. From this point of view alone it cannot be ignored, though imaginative writers continue to ignore it, being perhaps frightened of admitting that they, like young Stephen Dedalus, have much, much to learn. Joyce continues to set the highest standards of any author except Shakespeare, Milton, Pope and Hopkins to those who aspire to writing well. His mountain looms at the end of the street where so many of us work with the blinds down, fearful of looking out. So long as we ignore his challenge we can go on being content with what the world calls good writing—mock-Augustanism, good manners and weak tea, the heightened journalistic, the no-nonsense penny—plain, the asthmatic spasms of the open-air invalid, the phallic jerks of the really impotent. But when we have read him and absorbed even an iota of his substance, neither literature nor life can ever be quite the same again. We shall be finding an embarrassing joy in the commonplace, seeing the most defiled city as a figure of heaven, and assuming, against all the odds, a hardly supportable optimism.

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