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Laurels C...

James Joyce Finnegans Wake

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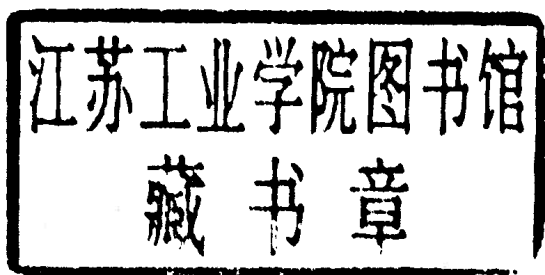
MODERN CLASSICS



JAMES JOYCE

FINNEGANS WAKE

WITH AN INTRODUCTION
BY SEAMUS DEANE



PENGUIN BOOKS

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Finnegans Wake

James Joyce was born in Dublin on 2 February 1882. He was the oldest of ten children in a family which, after brief prosperity, collapsed into poverty. He was none the less educated at the best Jesuit schools and then at University College, Dublin, where he gave proof of his extraordinary talent. In 1902, following his graduation, he went to Paris, thinking he might attend medical school there. But he soon gave up attending lectures and devoted himself to writing poems and prose sketches and formulating an 'aesthetic system'. Recalled to Dublin in April 1903 because of the fatal illness of his mother, he circled slowly towards his literary career. During the summer of 1904 he met a young woman from Galway, Nora Barnacle, and persuaded her to go with him to the Continent, where he planned to teach English. The young couple spent a few months in Pola (now in Croatia), then in 1905 moved to Trieste, where, except for seven months in Rome and three trips to Dublin, they lived until June 1915. They had two children, a son and a daughter. Joyce's first book, the poems of *Chamber Music*, was published in London in 1907 and *Dubliners*, a book of stories, in 1914. Italy's entrance into the First World War obliged Joyce to move to Zürich, where he remained until 1919. During this period he published *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916) and *Exiles*, a play (1918). After a brief return to Trieste following the armistice, Joyce determined to move to Paris so as to arrange more easily for the publication of *Ulysses*, a book on which he had been working since 1914. It was, in fact, published on his birthday in Paris in 1922 and brought him international fame. The same year he began work on *Finnegans Wake*, and though much harassed by eye troubles and deeply affected by his daughter's mental illness, he completed and published that book in 1939. After the outbreak of the Second World War, he went to live in unoccupied France, then managed to secure permission, in December 1940, to return to Zürich, where he died on 13 January 1941. He was buried in the Fluntern Cemetery.

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INTRODUCTION

FINNEGANS WAKE

The first thing to say about *Finnegans Wake* is that it is, in an important sense, unreadable. In order to pay it the attention it so impertinently and endlessly demands, the reader must forego most of the conventions about reading and about language that constitute him/her as a reader. The advantage to be gained from doing so is considerable; the conventions survive but they are less likely thereafter to dwindle into assumptions about what reading or writing is. Joyce's last great work is an extraordinary performance, a transcription into a miniaturized form of the whole western literary tradition; it is Joyce's outstanding mastery of that form and his amazing powers of transcription that show this to be an unrepeatable, solo performance that need, in a sense, only be looked at rather than 'read' to provide a sufficient impression of its radical, unique status. It is difficult to say that the *Wake* is a novel; equally difficult to deny it. Few works erase the author as individual voice and genius more effectively; none affirms that role more loudly and scandalously. It is a book that opens itself to all of history, culture and experience; yet no book is more closely imprisoned within a conception of art as a specialized activity that relies for its preservation and interpretation on a cadre of dedicated specialists. The *Wake* has a narrative drive that allows us to believe that it has

within it one governing and completed story; but it also has so many digressions and repetitions that it is only with some desperation that the reader can sustain a belief in the primacy of this narrative impetus. When its primacy comes into question, then the whole issue of what is central and what is digressive arises with such force that the practice of reading 'for the story' has to be abandoned. These conflicts are deeply embedded in the various traditions, literary and historical, that Joyce inherited and elaborated, but no writer excavated them with a comparable thoroughness and glee.

The language of the *Wake* is a composite of words and syllables combined with such a degree of fertile inventiveness that new sounds and new meanings are constantly ingeminated. Joyce involves himself and us in an extremely complex series of translations that are endless because there is no original and no target language to supply a limit to the visual and sonar transactions that are negotiated by the text. Indeed, it may be that the only assumption that permits us to embark upon the activity of translation is itself the source of the work's conflictual and prolific nature – viz. that the original language *is* the target language. The book is written in the English language and also against the English language; it converts itself into English and perverts itself from English. In the process it crosses and re-crosses the spectrum from sheer noise – the hundred-letter 'word' that signifies the annunciatory thunder that presages the fall into language and culture – to polyglottic babbling to lucid and lyric sense. It forces the reader to pay attention to the various genealogies of words and their functions – how they are, in the most basic sense, composed of letters and combined into syllables, how they are heard and how they are seen, what historical weight and valencies they bear, what psychological, political and social functions they perform, their proximity to and their distance from grunts and noises, their liberating and their repressive effects, their dependence upon syntax and

grammar and their capacity to generate meaning, wildly and anarchically, when freed from those systems of governance and communication.

Sometimes a single word, or part of a word, can present the reader with a problem; sometimes the unit that causes trouble may be a sentence, a paragraph, a whole interlude, a section, the relation of one Part to another within the whole work. It may be that the smallest problematic detail is an instance of the largest architectonic problems the work poses. Many readers of the *Wake* prefer to believe that it is so saturated in its preoccupations, so dominated by its own techniques of presentation and explanation, that the whole is contained within every part. That may be the case; but it is also possible that there are moments in the *Wake* where the text, so to speak, goes into free fall, where there is 'unlimited semeiosis', where the author is written by, rather than the writer of, the language. Further, since it is one of the narrative's implications that the myth of the Fall can be understood as a fall into language, then the secondary, post-lapsarian nature of language might be the very thing the *Wake* seeks to overcome by replacing it with that putative directness of communication that preceded the Fall. A language not patrolled by frontier guards, an English Pale not secure from the wild Irish beyond, a writing that is not performed under the shadow of the Censor is, appropriately enough, a species of dream language. The problem with dreams is that they are always re-presented in language; the priority of the dream over the language in which it is narrated cannot be established linguistically. That which is beyond language can only be indicated through language. This crux is absorbed into the *Wake*'s narratives, always posing a threat that is denied by the very action of posing it.

But the difficulties of reading the *Wake* are not separable from the pleasure we take in their enactment. It is a joyous work. Rather than being inhibited by the various problematic issues with which it deals, it is stimulated by their intractability

and the opportunities they offer for dwelling upon their capacity to paint themselves into corners. Joyce often renders philosophical and linguistic problems in the spirit of a great slapstick comedian. Some of the *Wake*'s most famous moments are those brilliantly cameoed situations in which large issues are disputed between brotherly pairs that belong more to the comic strip or the early cinema than to the tradition of Socratic dialogue or any other form of philosophical duologue. Mutt and Jute, the Mookse and the Gripes, Glugg and Chuff, Kevin and Jerry and the Ondt and the Gracehoper, not to mention the many variations played upon the Shem and Shaun opposition, are some of the best-known of these. Their blend of portentous matter with comic routines is reproduced and of course rewritten in a sharper and bleaker idiom by Joyce's friend and compatriot, Samuel Beckett, most especially in his plays. But in the *Wake*, these disputes, although they do come up out of the text like episodes that are brailled and highlighted like anthology pieces, also serve to frustrate and even bore the reader who wishes to bypass such digressions and get on with 'the story'. This in itself is an indication of a formal characteristic of the *Wake*, already anticipated in *Ulysses*, that might to some degree account for the boredom that afflicts many readers of both books.

It would be foolish to deny that this is a common reaction; indeed, were it not, these late works of Joyce would lose much of their point. For they are 'alternative' works, books in which a whole tradition of writing is, rather eclectically, recuperated and an alternative to it proposed. It is the force and presence of that tradition, by no means cancelled by Joyce's challenge, that creates the boredom to which I refer. Joyce was aware of the risk; indeed he could not be otherwise, so dispiriting was the reaction of his brother and many of his friends and supporters to the *Wake* as it emerged, in discrete episodes, in various journals under the title *Work in Progress*. In 1926 he wrote to Harriet Shaw Weaver, the woman who gave him the financial independence necessary for his survival as a writer, that:

One great part of every human existence is passed in a state which cannot be rendered sensible by the use of wideawake language, cutanddry grammar and goahead plot. (*Letters*, III, 146)

Finnegans Wake is constructed on principles other than these. Joyce supplied several analogues for what he was trying to do, among them the great Irish illuminated manuscript of the Gospels, the *Book of Kells*, famous for its fantastic elaboration of design. Digression and elaboration in Joyce are not divagations from a central developmental imperative, a 'goahead plot'. They belong rather to an art of exfoliation from a central device, construed with infinite care, highly dependent for its appreciation upon subtly graded inflections and expansions, all of which bear within themselves the figure of the originating device that endures like a watermark throughout repetition and alteration. In so far as literature can achieve synchrony, Joyce's writing does. He is consciously refusing to follow the linear impetus of the canonical novel-form, even though this remains as a shadowy presence in his text and as a more substantial one in its interpretations. Boredom is most often occasioned by what many readers experience as a loss of narrative impetus in the *Wake* (and also in *Ulysses*). But the impetus has not been lost: it was never there; it was absent from the beginning. As in a dream, where the conventions of time, grammar and plot are elided or unknown – almost in the sense that they have not yet been invented – and where the most astonishing elaborations can be produced around a central obsession, so the *Wake* dwells unrelentingly on a version of the Fall. But this is not the dream of one individual. This is a communal dream, a dream of the human family, with the 'history of the world' as its memory.

Not surprisingly, this is a highly literary version of world history that is remembered. The *Wake* echoes with the sounds of famous phrases and names from world literature.

James Atherton's famous *The Books at the Wake* (1959) is still one of the essential commentaries upon it, even though it has by now been amplified in a number of directions. But whatever the canonical status of the writers quoted or named (or misquoted or misnamed), there is no implied hierarchy of authors in the *Wake* as there is in *Ulysses*, where Homer and Shakespeare, although in quite different ways, assume an (ironized) patriarchal presence. Giambattista Vico is certainly a patriarchal figure in many important respects but, even though he was being rediscovered during the years of the *Wake*'s composition, he is not, like Homer, a father figure of the classical tradition, so-called, of the West. His *New Science*, as its title implies, inaugurates something alternative to, but not necessarily exclusive of, the classical tradition. Formally speaking, it is such a miscellaneous and apparently disorganized work that it broke every shibboleth of the test that 'classical form' set for art ever since Europe discovered in the Greeks that originary perfection that it claimed for its own. Vico's presence in Joyce's work does not signal the presence, intertextually implied, of a hierarchy or a hegemony of form over delinquency. The reverse is the case. The Viconian presence in the *Wake* legitimizes the work's subversion of dictatorial and authoritative modes, the executive orderings of experience that belong to the 'daylight' canon and not to the disorderly and uncontrollable experiences of the night. In the *Wake*, the Greeks don't get a look-in. The 'history of the world', as imagined here, is not the history of those 'imagined communities', in Benedict Anderson's phrase, that achieved an aesthetic perfection for which Attic Greece was the ingeniously invented model. It is, instead, a history of repression, both in its political and psychological sense, a history that concedes, in Freudian terms, to pay the high price of 'night-time' neurosis for the daytime of civilization. In similar vein, ordered language and novels driven by the motor of plot belong to civilization. Joyce is exploring in the *Wake* what civilization belongs to, what darkness produced such light,

what fertility of experience was sacrificed for such discipline. Thus the world's 'great authors' have to take their fragmentary chances with many lesser lights, literary language has to live within the market-place, the conscious with the unconscious, English with other languages and all languages with those scarcely articulate sounds out of which they all derived on the way to the development of civil society.

A refusal of the canon is not a repudiation of order; it is a repudiation of a coercive order. A conception of literature that constructs itself as a historically developed hierarchy is ultimately a defence of necessity. That is to say, it legitimizes the view that what has happened in literature *necessarily* took the form it did; there is, within an apparently chaotic realm of possibility, a sequence that makes sense, a sequence that happened because it had to happen. Such a sequence can be understood as providential; the history of a literature or of a nation or of a civilization is thus ratified as belonging to the order of things. So viewed, history is destiny. Canons, literary and other, are the narratives that explain the form destiny takes. Joyce, as a member of a nation that had for long been a victim of such 'explanations', sought ways to subvert them and, in addition, to subvert their equally coercive and destiny-bound counter-explanations. He was no more impressed by the Irish nationalist argument against colonialism than he was by the colonialist argument itself. Both shared the same premisses, each legitimizing itself in terms of a national, providentially ratified 'story' or 'history'. What was true for the British-Irish conflict was also true in a more general sense. Both Britain and Ireland were part of a European system that had established hegemony over others in the name of an historical necessity or destiny for which culture provided the most powerful sanction. Culture and, in this instance, literature in particular, provided an account of historical development that was based on the notion that, independent of particular regional circumstances, European civilization had produced the most fully developed account of the 'human spirit'.

Literature showed what was universal in the European achievement and thereby relieved it of the charge of being culture-bound and therefore only one among a number of possible readings or articulations of human experience. This European claim was threatened by those intramural disputes that endlessly disrupted its ostensibly coherent civilization but it was resourcefully sustained through cultural agencies until the First World War brought it to the point of collapse. Much modern literature is preoccupied with that collapse and with the search for finding systems of authority that would overcome it. But Joyce, unlike T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, D. H. Lawrence and many others, saw that collapse as a disintegration that was to be welcomed because it had been brought about by the coercive exercise of that very patriarchal authority that many other writers wished to rescue and re-establish.

The *Wake's* fragmentation of canonical names and citations is, therefore, more than a display of Joyce's learning. The shrapnel of voices follows upon the explosion of culture. Authors have their authority decimated and, as a consequence, narrative becomes problematic. History and culture can no longer provide fumigated versions of human experience. Instead they are to be understood as powerful detergent elements within it, not explanations of it. It is arguable that there are authors referred to in the *Wake* whose presence is, like that of Vico, more privileged because they are themselves subversive presences within the culture, authors who never became quite amenable to conscription into the canonical army. Primary among these would be Jonathan Swift (especially the young Swift of *A Tale of a Tub*) and Laurence Sterne – also Dublin-born – whose *Tristram Shandy* casts the whole problematic of writing and its relationship to experience in comic form. But Joyce's critique of writing has its roots, in the *Wake* as in his other works, in the phenomenon of the Irish experience of mutilation and catastrophe and the inadmissibility of 'go-ahead plot' as a form of narration that could encompass or characterize it. By offering Irish experience as a microcosm of

human experience, he destabilizes the official version of both Irish and world history, the story told by the victors and ratified by what the victors liked to think (or liked the defeated to think) was providence.

A zoom-lens shot of world history reveals Irish history. History is a strange object for contemplation since it is both a body of writing that has been formed in very specific ways according to the demands of certain principles – objectivity, the need to defend a particular position and so on – and yet it is also that unprocessed material that cannot be reached except through the activity of the writing that processes it. Irish historiography is a case in point. The British versions of Irish history and the Irish versions, however different they may be, share the same assumption – that there is a story to be told about the people who lived on the island of Ireland and that each ‘age’ is an unfolding of a chapter in the long saga. The question of periodization is important. It is one of the structuring principles in the *Wake* and it is the more so because Joyce had seen the transformation of Ireland in the period 1916–22 from a colony and a constitutional part of the United Kingdom into two states, the new Irish Free State and the equally new statelet or province of Northern Ireland, still a part of the United Kingdom. In other words, the contemporary period of Irish history, from 1922, the date of the Treaty that effected the transformation (and the date of the publication of *Ulysses*) and the beginning of the Second World War, is coincident with and absorbed deeply into the composition of *Finnegans Wake*. So arcane a work seems, by virtue of its obscure and hermetic nature, to be far removed from history and politics. Yet this is a deceptive appearance. History and politics, especially in their contemporary forms, provided startling examples of the ways in which a miscellaneous series of events could be converted into an historical pattern and could even be regarded as the final completion of a pattern that had been forming slowly over the centuries. In historical writing, as in literature, there are canonical interpretations.

Joyce includes these in order to inspect their authority and give voice to their tacit assumptions. The assurance of historical interpretation is destroyed by the disintegration of the language that was both created by and creator of that assurance. Many of the disputes in the *Wake* involve assaults on and defences of language; the most important division is that between male, patriarchal language that is always seeking to impose order on diverse materials and female language that revels in heterogeneity and ridicules authority. By transmuting the philosophical problem of historical (or any) writing into a gender division, Joyce finds a point of vantage that includes colonial oppression, the canonization of authority and the authorizing of canonicity, the relationship between fully formed language and the inchoate sounds from which it is derived and over which it is constantly reasserting itself. Ultimately, he also finds here the comprehensive figure for self-division, for a broken world in which the masculine and the feminine are separated, the first made dominant over the second, with the consequent and subsequent neuroses, rebellions, maimings and nightmares. Still, the *Wake* does not offer a reconciliation between masculine and feminine languages or divisions. Were there to be such, then (the implication would seem to be) there would no longer be history or narrative. For then we would not have to suffer any longer the consequences of the Fall into language. We would be redeemed back to that original directness of knowledge that preceded language, the mark of our inescapable secondariness. The secondariness of language is reproduced in every other form of secondariness that the world knows, most particularly the secondariness of female against male and thereafter all the varieties of oppression of which this is the most basic and enduring.

Given the immense scholarship generated by the *Wake* since its publication in 1939, the contemporary reader has a considerable advantage over those who first saw it in print. One of the features of modernist literature is its insistent calling upon the monuments of the very culture which it

believes the modern readership to have abandoned. It may be that 'the originality of a work is directly proportional to the ignorance of its readers'; today's reader is at least equipped to overcome that ignorance by adverting to the various guides, concordances, lexicons and annotations that have been provided for the *Wake*. Still, it is surely a strange experience to find that a book such as this one is so deeply indebted to earlier writings. In the earlier *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, the famous hell-fire sermon in Chapter III is so derivative of a standard Jesuit text that it might almost be called a plagiarism. But we tend to dismiss that as an inappropriate charge and replace it with more anodyne or glamorous descriptions such as 'quotation' or 'intertextuality'. It is indeed the case that *Portrait* deploys an intricate system of quotation throughout and that this instance of the sermon is a tactic in an overall strategy. But the earlier novel reminds us that this issue seemed to exert a certain fascination on Joyce. *Ulysses* and the *Wake* are saturated in quotations from and references to writings by other people. If we do not recognize these or their sources (and, for the most part, we do not without the help of guidance from Joycean scholars), are we in some sense disqualified as competent readers? It seems the answer must be 'yes', even though our incompetence is itself already incorporated into modernism's diagnosis of 'modernity'. We ratify these texts by being helpless before them and then are taught the full range of our incompetence by having the full extent of the plagiarism or system of quotation the texts encompass revealed to us. But since that revelation is one of the characteristic procedures of such works, we are obliged to recognize the high strategy involved in the plundering of the past ('The last word in stolentelling!' FW, 424.35) and rechristen it as one of the forms that intertextuality takes in modernist writing. The problem with this apotheosis of intertextuality is that it canonizes obscurity as one of the signs of 'Art' and institutionalizes those works (not just in literature) that very often found in just such obscurity a strategy of

subversion. Along with the institutionalizing of the work of art, there is a corresponding institutionalizing of the modern reader as a cultureless recipient. This in part explains the consequent withdrawal of art into a ghetto for specialists whose task it is to 'translate' the work in such a way that the cultural impoverishment of the mass audience can both be confirmed (otherwise there would be no need for such an army of specialists) and relieved. Finally, works of art, just in virtue of being so regarded in this context, are politically neutralized. They rejoin the canon they took so much trouble to subvert. This is part of the history of *Finnegans Wake*, as it is part of the general history of modernism in all the arts. The book is a titanic exercise in remembering everything at the level of the unconscious because at the conscious level so much has been repressed that amnesia is the abiding condition.

Joyce's Ireland was a perfect example of this dual state of remembering and forgetting everything. For fifty years before the publication of the *Wake*, the country had been engaged in rewriting its past in the hope of realizing for itself a future other than that of a peculiar kind of colony within the United Kingdom. The Irish Revival, with the Abbey Theatre as its centrepiece, the Gaelic League, with its programme for the revival of the Irish language and the de-Anglicization of Ireland, Sinn Féin, a political organization that took two forms, one constitutional and nationalist, the other revolutionary and republican, the IRB, the IRA, the political parties of the 1920s and 1930s in the new Free State were the most prominent of a number of movements that aimed at the reconstruction of the past and the present. In the period after the Civil War of 1922-3, revolutionary Ireland became a fortress island, aided by the Catholic Church in the establishment of a notion of Ireland as 'different', especially within the English-speaking world, because it had remained traditional, anti-modern, loyal to the old faith and to the pieties that the old faith claimed were integral to the Irish heritage and its own

teaching. In a sense, much of what Joyce had feared and written of came to pass – Ireland (or part of it) freed itself from the British yoke only to submit ever more slavishly to the Roman. But both the revolutionary and the conservative impulses shared the determination to define Ireland as a special place, radically different from all others – especially Britain – and definitively not of the ‘modern’ world. In each case, the Irish spirit was essentialized and a history of its emergence was widely propagandized. It was Celtic, Gaelic, Anglo-Irish, Catholic – the combination did not matter quite so much as did the readiness to seek and find within the past the destiny of any one or any combination of these pre-inscribed elements. It would be wrong to say that Joyce was the only Irish writer of this period to espouse a more heterogeneous version of the past; but it was he more than any who found a means of enacting it in fiction with a thoroughness that brought the issue of tradition, heritage, destiny and all the rest of those big words that make us so unhappy to the point of collapse – ‘the abnihilisation of the etym’ (FW, 353.22). This is truly the Dublin ‘where motley is worn’; instead of Yeatsian apocalypse, secret doctrine and aristocracy, here we have the sovereign rule of ‘gossipocracy’ (FW, 476.4).

Writing to his friend Arthur Power, Joyce declared:

For myself, I always write about Dublin because if I can get to the heart of Dublin I can get to the heart of all the cities in the world. In the particular is contained the universal.

Perhaps, with his usual blend of the astonishing and the trite, Joyce is here announcing a programme for both *Ulysses* and the *Wake*. To know something in all its particularity, to see it so that ‘the object achieves its epiphany’ (*Stephen Hero*, Chapter XXV) was the aesthetic ambition of *Dubliners*, *Stephen Hero* and *Portrait*. But in the later works, that ambition is not abandoned. Instead, it is recognized as belonging to one form of discourse, that of the heroic individual or