

A Sutra for the West (among other things).

A Short Commentary on *Finnegans Wake* by James Joyce

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***So you need hardly spell me how every word
will be bound over to carry three score and ten toptypical readings
throughout the book of Doubleends Jined.***(FW 20/13)

According to James Joyce himself, he has been able to condense *Finnegans Wake*, a book of 43,960 pages, down to a more manageable 628. (Incidentally, 628 is twice Pi (314). A suitable number for a circular book)

This extreme economy has produced a spring-loaded, n-dimensional text that can burst from its expected containers at any moment, free from the constraints of logic, or convention, and ally itself with your experience, education and imagination.

The combination of Joyce's grand holistic ambition and his dense prose does not add up to a easy read, and people typically lunge for quick explanations in their hunt for understanding, however there is no use in trying to pull the language toward any one of the myriad meanings between which it hangs. (Hugh Kenner Dublin's Joyce, (Beacon Press, 1962). *Umberto Eco* considered *Finnegans Wake* an "open" work, a work that can successfully integrate any number of interpretations while remaining true to its original ambition. Joyce and his readers co-create the quantum field of all possibilities.

His producers are they not his consumers? (FW, 497/01)

Joyce invented a variant of the English language to accomplish his mission. It is filled with the sounds of humans, (and a donkey and a river and an earth spirit too). It's all talk, and like all talk, it doesn't always make sense, or get received in a useful way. And yet, we naturally accept that a communication is being attempted, along with the attendant ambiguity. Joyce plays with our innate tendency to look for patterns that we can understand. It's his dramatic tension.

Joyce set out to wander *through and among the winding ways of random ever*; to look at this life without flinching...by accepting all of it. His writing is not overly concerned with describing time and place. It is not always obvious who is speaking or who or what the object of their communication might be, but he is always pointing to the eternal river of life, in which, this interaction must take place. It's the flow that interested him. He uses puns and riddles, invented words, portmanteau words, comic book characters, songs, poetry, references to everything imaginable, and an exhaustive list of rhetorical devices to seduce his readers into the breathing talking language of human life. The original media.

***here keen again
and begin again
to make soundsense and sensesound
kin again.*** (FW, 121/15)

He wants to make a connection with the most ancient and human of interpersonal qualities; our voice and all that it contains. With Joyce, any particular is an expression of the universal. Reading the book aloud, in a group if possible, brings our breath and our alert mind into the equation, and the experience leaps into the present tense. Joyce the musician is always mindful of the breath and its rhythms.

Joyce realized that the silent black words of the printed page have lulled us into a sense of certainty that he knew does not exist here in the present moment.

*For if we look at it verbally
perhaps there is no true noun in active nature* (FW, 523/10)

He realized that any visual description he might offer could only be an approximation, and would only serve to hinder, not help, the imagination of his readers. He set the book at night, and meticulously darkened his prose to invoke the sense of immanence and mystery and closeness that the night contains. He rejected the go-along plot in favour of a more cubist approach where stories rise and fall and re-appear, changed but recognisable, in a jumble of other stuff.

Kenner has observed that Joyce's way of emphasizing the presence of something is always to strew the text with its dismembered parts. Sometimes referenced directly, sometimes obliquely, sometimes symbolically, these references are aided by repetition and play; often riddled into invisibility, but never abandoned. They lurk just out of reach behind the text in the deep timefield.

*Where are we at all?
and whenabouts in the name of space?* (FW, 558/23)

It is unlikely that any one reader could be able to recognize all of these presences, but readers will bring their own education and experience to the task, and are often able to pick out references to aspects of life that are of interest to them; in our case, references to the legend, as well as the remembered words, of Gautama Buddha. This is the quality of the book that gives rise to the endless array of interpretations that people have proposed for dealing with it. There is nothing to say that any one interpretation is "wrong" and, in fact, these solutions only add to the richness that Joyce offers. However, as Samuel Beckett offered, "Finnegans Wake is not *about* something. It *is* that something itself." Joyce accepted the challenge of sharing an experience of life directly, through the use of words and the sounds of words. *His words are gestures of being rather than mere signals of concepts.* (Joyce & Aquinas, Wm. T. Noon, S.J. Yale U. Press, 1957)

Western interpretations of Buddhist philosophy were just starting to arrive in Europe in the decades around the turn of the twentieth century partly through the efforts of the Theosophical Society; active in Dublin during Joyce's school years. Joyce's curiosity would not have failed to notice. While he used the stories, he rejected the fantastic tales surrounding the Buddha as a supernatural being, capable of all manner of miracles. He did however find a natural affinity for the understanding that the Buddha has presented. Over the centuries, the message of the Buddha has been expanded into a complex body of beliefs, doctrines and rules spread over three great traditions and countless local variants, but his original understanding is simple; there is no permanence in existence. This common human understanding is what informs our approach and has proven to be a rich vein of exploration in *Finnegans Wake*. These bits that reference the Buddha can be found here, there and everywhere throughout the book.

You might very well notice something different entirely.

A quick primer. There is a family of 5: Father (Humphey Chimpden Earwicker or HCE, or here comes everybody)
Mother (Anna Livia Plurabelle or ALP, or all women)
Twin boys (Shem and Shaun or any other pair by any other name)
and a daughter (Issy or life)

They live above, and run, a pub on the outskirts of Dublin, along with a bewildering parade of characters of *baffling description*. Joyce intends that this cast of characters will stand for all people anywhere and anywhen. None of this should be taken literally.

The first thing to notice in Joyce's masterpiece is the title. It's important to realise that it's not the possessive phrase we expect, it's declarative and plural. And this is not the funeral celebration of a man named Finnegan. It's a declaration that the arising and passing of identifiable forms is actually a mysterious, unformed, flowing.

*in the buginning is the woid
in the muddle is the sound-dance
and therinofter you're in the unbewised again,
vund vulsvolsy. (FW, 378/29)*

People have always pointed to the fact that all apparent things are changing. Quantum physics can now declare that there are no separate things, only the flowing of one great body of energy. In the past, various groups have called this flowing the great Spirit. Joyce points to this flowing in his title. Fin is the root word for finite. It is also the French word for end. Finnegans, or more succinctly, Fin Again and Again, is simply the arising and passing of finite forms. Joyce states that these forms are the movement of a mysterious flowing, like the movement of ripples in water, or a wake behind a boat.

The water of the face has flowed (FW, 361.35)

*Why why why
Weh oh weh
I'se so silly to be flowing
but I no canna stay (FW, 159/17)*

Finnegans Wake can be understood as the arising and passing away of apparent forms in a flowing that has no particular form.

This is further expressed in the first line of the book.

*riverrun,
past Eve and Adams,
from swerve of shore to bend of bay,
brings us
by a commodius vicus of recirculation
back to Howth castle and Environs.*

There is an ancient river, a flowing, older than Adam and Eve, that repeatedly brings us to the large village (the commodious vicus) of house, castle, and environs, the many things of earth, heaven, and everything in between.

There is a repeating urge (a recirculation) to interpret the one flowing as many objects. Let's call that urge H.C.E., or Here Comes Everybody. It's a preoccupation with thinking. The thinking process then interprets the one flowing, the river Liffey, (or Lify, or life eh?) as the existence of many things, a life of plurals, so H.C.E. is inextricably linked with, or married to, Anna Livia Plurabelle.

*...black looking white,
and white guarding black?
in that siamixed twoatalk...(FW, 66/21)*

*a very fairworded instance
of falsemeaning adamelegy. (FW, 77/25)*

*He knows for he's seen it in black and white through his eyetrompit
trained upon jenny's and all that sort of thing
which is dandymount to a clearobscure.* (FW, 247/32)

Joyce uses the Buddhist rebirth teaching to explain that our stories about people, and things, are fantasies based on ignorance of the unformed flow that actually is. The Buddha stated that ignorance (of the unformed) gives rise to a belief in formations, and that gives rise to stories of consciousness, name and form, contact, feelings, craving, clinging, being, birth, death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair.

Or, as Joyce restates it:

*In the ignorance that implies impression
that knits knowledge
that finds the nameform
that whets the wits
that convey contacts
that sweeten sensation
that drives desire
that adheres to attachment
that dogs death
that bitches birth
that entails the ensuance of existentiality.* (FW, 18/24)

In short, ignorance gives rise to our stories of human existence.

Finnegans Wake is a deep examination of storytelling; the stories we tell others but also the stories that we tell ourselves. We commonly relate to existence through these constructed narratives. They serve to structure our individuality, our situation and our purpose in life. Joyce explores the fact that these stories must necessarily be fantasy due to their origin in ignorance, and, in fact, all stories are the same fantasy, built on a basic archetype.

*Every dimmed letter in it is a copy
and not a few of the silbils
and wholly words I can show you in my Kingdom of Heaven...
the last word in stolentelling.* (FW 424/32)

There extend by now one thousand and one stories, all told, of the same. (FW, 5/28)

*since in this scherzarade of one's thousand one nightinesses
that sword of certainty which would indentifide the body
never falls.* (FW, 51/04)

*Thus the unfacts,
did we possess them,
are too imprecisely few to warrent our certitude* (FW 57/16)

Our stories are created from dualistic thinking: light/dark, up/down, good/bad, and so on. This process constantly divides the one flowing into two things. It is constantly doubling the event of life. As Joyce points out, all of our stories are set in Dublin, or doubling.

Dublin existents! (FW, 578/14)

H.C.E. (the urge to think) and Anna Livia Plurabelle (the thinking process) constantly produce two offspring (a duality). But there is also a third child that arises.

As dualistic labeling occurs, it gives the impression of objects that are known, as well as the impression of someone doing the knowing. The archetypal basis of these false interpretations is a fundamental trinity, consisting of a knower, a knowing, and an object known. Every story then is the fantasy of a consciousness that is knowing and understanding the existence of other people and things.

*Every those personal place objects is nonthings where soever
and they just done been doing being in a dromo of todos
withouten a bound to be by* (FW, 598/01)

The most basic duality that arises is the feeling of “isness”, the impression of existing, as opposed to not existing. Let’s call her Issy, for short. And Issy, the idea of existing, is further interpreted as three things, an observer, an observing, and something observed. The basic duality always leads to this trinity.

How their dual makes their triel. (FW, 238/31)

Every story is a dream, a fantasy, because, as physics points out, there are no things, there is only flowing energy.

nought that is has bane. (FW, 614/07)

*Every person, place and thing
in the chaosmos of alle anyway connected with the gobblydumped turkery
was moving and changing every part of the time.* (FW, 118/21)

The belief in our archetypal stories is a fantasy that keeps us from acknowledging the unexplainable flow that life actually is.

These fantasies also bring conflict. They bring comparison and judgement. They create stories of an independent self that is understanding, and directing, existence. Stories of success and failure. Concerns about death. They bring the conflict of different opinions. They ignore the mysterious flowing, instead focusing on the inevitable conflict of opposing egos and beliefs. They bring an active darkness to the simple mystery.

How this looseaffair brimsts of fussforus! (FW, 505/32)

The speechform is a mere sorrogate. (FW, 149/29)

Some seem om some dimb arras. (FW, 53/02)

Every one of our stories is set in the darkness of ignorance and its inevitable conflict.

*From the night we are and feel and fade with
to the yesterselves we tread to turnupon* (FW 473/11)

*They know how they believe that they believe that they know.
Wherefore they wail.* (FW, 470/11)

The stories also bring self-glorification.

*For we all would fain make glories.
It is minely well mint.* (FW 313/27)

We believe that human will accomplish many things. We seldom consider, as Schopenhauer did, that we will what we want to will, but we don't create our wants, so our behaviour is the working of something larger than ourselves. Many declare that we are expressions of nature and, as Einstein put it, we don't direct our lives any more than a tomato plant directs its life.

*where on dearth
or in the meddle of this expending umniverse to turn
since it came into my hands.
I am hopeless off course to be doing anything concerning.* (FW. 410/16)

Again, though, most of us live in the fantasy that we are directing our lives. As Joyce states,

Now yiz are in the Willingdone Museyroom.(FW 8/10)

The arc of all human life rises from an unexplainable flowing in the fantasies of storytelling. Every story is the story of the great Fall, that moment when there is the urge to eat of the tree of knowledge (a focus on ideas) and we are driven from the garden where everything is simply given in an unexplainable occurrence presenting itself.

*In the pancosmic urge
The allimmanence of that which itself
is itself alone
exteriorises on this our herenow plane in disunited solod,
likeward and gushious bodies
with perilwhitened
passionpanting
pugnoplagent
intuitions of reunited selfdom
in the higherdimissional selfless allself.* (FW, 394/32)

Our essential flowing, where everything is given, is plunged into stories of personal doing, success and failure, birth, death, conflict, clinging, loss, sorrow, and despair.

*Our wholemole millwheeling vicocicrometer,...
receives through a portal vein
the dialytically separated elements of precedent decomposition
for the veryetpurpose of subsequent recombination
so that the heroticisms, catastrophes and eccentricities
transmitted by the ancient legacy of the past,
type by tope, letter from litter...* (FW, 614/27)

This is the implied crime, in the garden, when H.C.E. (the urge to think) and his daughter Issy, (the first interpretation) give rise to all of human existence in false stories. In these interpretations, the unexplainable becomes a witnessing consciousness, built on three steadfast soldiers, the false ideas of a knower, a knowing, and objects known.

*Or whatever it was they threed to make out
he thried to two in the fiendish park.* (FW, 196/09)

*One's upon a thyme
and two's behind their lettuce leap
and three's among the strubbeley beds* (FW 20/24)

All psychological pain is found in this process of storytelling and, as Joyce states:

when we shall have acquired unification [isness]
we shall pass on to diversity [every separate thing]
*and when we shall have passed on to diversity
we shall have acquired the instinct to combat
and when we shall have acquired the instinct of combat
we shall pass back to the spirit of appeasement* (FW, 610/23)

Moving into stories of isness, then diversity and conflict, brings a desire for unity, the spirit of appeasement, the urge to reconcile diversity. The only possible reconciliation, though, is a return to what is actually here, the great Spirit, the undivided flow.

*let us leave theories there
and return to here's here.* (FW, 76/10)

In *Finnegans Wake*, Joyce is explaining that all stories are an essential fantasy, built on archetypal dualities and trinities. He is constantly pointing to the flow of water, rivers and oceans, that are the essence of life, a mysterious flow, along with the conflicted stories of thought, the trials and tribulations of human lives, the fantasies of love and betrayal, birth and death, the sacred and the profane, troubled nights in dark and wild taverns.

Our stories give rise to ideas of separate solid entities and the feelings of many separate selves, blanched with fear, aching with want, and loud in their pugnacious conflict.

*The mad long ramp of manchind's parlements,
the learned lacklearning,
merciless as wonderful.* (FW, 252/04)

By the end of the book, Joyce is describing the end of fantasy and its agonies, the death of Anna Livia Purabelle. It is freedom from fantasy, a return to the flow.

The death of fantasy is a return to life's mystery. The undivided flow of now is called up, revealing our false stories, the dementia praecox of the false trinity, the false costumes of our true Father and Author of our doing.

*...spake of the One
and told of the Compassionate,
called up before the triad of precoxious scaremakers
the now
to usher mythical habiliments
of Our Farfar and Arthor of our doyne.* (buried in FW, 52/13)

On the last page of the book, Anna Livia Plurabelle, the fantasy, is asking the flow to take, but softly, the memory of me, the idea of me, 'til *thou*, the mysterious flow, ends *the*, the many things of existence. It's the keys to heaven, the place of the one presence, the *lone*. It is the place of no story, the absence of conflict, the openness of love.

Take.
Bussoftlhee,
mememormee!
Till thousandsthee.
Lps.
The keys to.
Given!
A way
a lone
a last
a loved
a long
the

That's the end of this story, a return to mystery, the flow, but not ultimately, because the flow continues. So, the last line of the book, the return to the flow, is also the opening line of the book, the continuing flow and its repeating tales of earth, heaven, and everything between.

More than simply describing the fantasies and conflicts of thought, Joyce gives us the actual experience of our conflicted fantasies arising and passing. There are portions of the book that seem to make sense, but are always confusing, and leave us conflicted in our understanding. Those portions of frustrated meaning are interspersed with portions that apparently make no sense at all; apparently, meaningless sound, and, eventually, nothing more than a clap of thunder, Joyce's thunder words.

The experience of moving in and out of understanding is the actual experience of worlds arising and passing away.

If this was all that *Finnegans Wake* presented, it would already be one of the wonders of the literary world. A book of apparent gibberish that lays bare the bones of storytelling itself, expressing the nonsense of it, the darkness of it, the conflict inherent in it, giving us the experience of moving in, and out, of conflicted fantasies, all the while pointing to the unexplainable.

Wrings upon wrings
among incomputables
about an uncomeoutable.(FW, 367/31)

But that's not all it offers. Nestled within the apparent gibberish we find games, puzzles, witticisms, and truisms. A master humourist, a master of human language, expressing an explosion of intellect that is unlikely to be seen again. It's the realisation, and celebration, of life's mystery and dance. This is Joyce's Bible, beginning with Genesis, the arising of existence from unformed waters, in mistaken interpretations. It ends like Revelation, where, in its last paragraphs, it is revealed that down the center of the city of God (existence) runs the river of life and it is revealed that people are not the doers of anything.

This is a master storyteller celebrating his own freedom from fantasy. *Finnegans Wake*, the flowing, is also Finnegan's Wake, celebrating the death of finite form and all stories about form.

It is an opening to the unformed, "*The allimmanence of that which itself is itself alone.*" It's the ending of a "*fishy fable lissaned out*". Realisation of the flow. "*Every person place and thing in the chaosmos of alle ... was moving and changing every part of the time.*"

This is Joyce's enlightenment poem, in which he expresses his own deep sense of peace after a lifetime journey through the fantasies of thought. It's his return to the unexplainable flow. It was his last writing.

A few more Quotations:

Gautamed Budders deossiphysing our theas.(FW, 277/L14)

*Then's now
with now's then
in tense continuant.* (FW,598/29)

*Byhold at ones
what is main
and why 'tis twain* (FW, 143/17)

*For where there's is will
Theres his wall.* (FW, 175/14)

*fishy fable lissaned out,
the threads simwhat toran and knots in its antargumends.* (FW, 245/9)

*Burning body
to aiger air
on melting mountain
in wooing wave.* (FW, 132/07)

*We may come, touch and go, from atoms and ifs
but we're presurely destined to be odds without ends.* (FW, 455/16)

*Willed without witting
Whorled without aimed.* (FW, 272/04)

*But tellusit allasif wellasits end.
And the lunger it takes
the sooner they tumble two.* (FW, 331/06)

*Singlebarrelled names
for doubleparallel twixtytwins.* (FW, 286/ ^{footnote4})

*Holy messonger angels be uninteruptedly
nudging him among and along
the winding ways of random ever.*(FW, 405/07)

*Retire to rest without first misturbing your nighboor,
mankind of baffling descriptions.* (FW, 585/34)

*And still a light moves long the river.
And stiller the mermen ply their keg
It's pith is full.
The way is free.
Their lot is cast.
So,
to John for a John,
Johnajams,
Led it be!* (FW, 399/16)

*Countlessness of livestories have netherfallen by this plage
flick as flowflakes
litters from aloft
like a waast wizzard all of whirlworlds* (FW, 17/27)

*And then.
Be old.
The next thing is.
We are once amore as babes awondering in a wold made fresh
where with the hen in the storyaboot
we start from scratch.* (FW,336/15)

Begorror, I get the jawache, James Joyce complained regarding those
who are, *always cutting my phrose to please their phrase.* (FW, 423/17)
(Guilty, with a plea for forgiveness.)

As the Korean Zen master, T'aego, also expressed, in the 1300's:

*It goes on without stopping,
through thousands and thousands of turns.
A moment before thought is already wrong thinking.
To try to say anything further is embarrassing.*

