

## FINNEGAN'S WAKE: AN INTERPRETATION<sup>1</sup>

by

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Though James Joyce's last long work, "Finnegan's Wake", is puzzling learned literary men all the world over, it has often been compared with children's books, in particular with "Alice in Wonderland" and "Through the Looking Glass", in which the poem "Jabberwocky" introduces jumbled words of the kind in which the whole of Joyce's book is written. For a change, I would suggest a comparison with Maeterlinck's "Blue Bird".

"The Blue Bird", like the "Alice" books, and like "Finnegan's Wake", is the story of a dream. The dreaming children visit all sorts of unearthly places and have the strangest companions but when they wake up in the morning and rub their eyes these creatures shrink back to familiar people and animals and objects in their home village. So also in "The Wizard of Oz". The spell is broken; but at the same time the children know that the dream was not just an illusion but really revealed something about these people and things that they hadn't been aware of before.

In "Finnegan's Wake", what is set before the reader is the sort of hazy scene one sees in dreams or in a half-asleep doze or daze. Everything is blurred and jumbled, and in this blur vast beings seem to move about --- giants and gods and goddesses ("Oystrygods gaggin Fishygods"), men who are like mountains and women who are like clouds and rivers; and everything is elusive and changes disconcertingly into something else --- even words change into other words before you have reached the end of them. Everything is out of focus, and one sees things at several different "levels" all at once, but nothing clearly. The book remains entirely in the dream world --- what you see when you wake up is not described. However, you can do that for yourself, and as you rub your eyes and generally pull yourself together, the vague monsters shrink, and what you see before you is a hearty Irish publican and his family, regarded through the eyes of one of his sons, who appears in the book as "Shem the Penman" (also referred to as "Shun the Punman"!).

The "moral" of all this is in the first place an anti-religious one. "God" is not a real person; or rather He is a very real person indeed, but not the being He purports to be. He is an obscure vision, as in a dream, of one or both of the quite ordinary people we once looked up to "when we were yung and easily freudened") as the authors of our being -- our parents. (A parody of the Lord's Prayer is addressed to "Anna the Allmaziful, bringer of plurabilities", or Anna Livia Plurabelle, who is the river Liffey in Dublin, and also Shem the Penman's mother). Scepticism about the supernatural is implicit in this book, which is among other things an attempt --- though probably not a deliberate one, Joyce being no propoganda novelist --- to {2} arouse similar scepticism in the reader by showing him his religious beliefs as part of a dream, and a dream so completely remembered that the subconscious sources of religion are also seen.

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<sup>1</sup> Edited by Sara L. Uckelman. The original is kept in the Prior collection at Bodleian Library, Oxford, Box 6. Page number from the original are put in curly braces.

As with "The Blue Bird", however, the dream is not sheer illusion, but really teaches us something which we would not have known without it about the ordinary people who pass through it so mysteriously transformed. Joyce's earlier work "Ulysses" was essentially a picture of a man, Leopold Bloom, seen from all sides, and also right through the middle in several cross-sections. "Finnegan's Wake", on the other hand, is essentially a picture of a family; and what the dream brings out is that apparently solid and clearly defined individuals like Bloom in "Ulysses" and the group of Irish folk we see when we wake up from "Finnegan's Wake" are only superficial and fleeting beings how, underneath, are lost as individuals in the family --- first of all in their own family, and then in the whole human family, and ultimately in the whole universe.

Joyce is not moralising here. He is not saying that we ought to lose ourselves in our family, in the race, or in the universe. On the contrary, he depicts himself, "Shem the Penman", as a thoroughly anti-social character, an unspeakably "low" fellow, a shirker, with no bonds of loyalty either to Irish nationalism or British imperialism, the Catholic Church or the communist revolution, or to anyone but himself. And while he takes on pride in this, and perhaps even does not wholly assent to this supposed outsider's view of himself, he takes an obvious mischievous delight in this apparent "lowness".

What he implicitly claims to be asserting is not a duty but a simple fact --- that every man is the product of constant interaction with other men, and indirectly of endless ages of such interaction, and ultimately even of interaction between mountains and clouds and rivers and seas. Throughout the book this interaction is brought out in countless ways --- e.g. by toying with the associations of words and phrases, or by the building up of composite personalities out of a particular individual and his own near and remote ancestors.

From this morally colourless fact something that might be called a "moral" does emerge. The moral is, simply, how exceedingly difficult it is, if not impossible, really to destroy anything. Every event in history has left its mark somewhere, be it only in the twist of some colloquial phrase, and attempts to wipe out the past are doomed to failure from the outset --- something small and unnoticed by the would-be destroyer will always bring it all back again. In the turmoil of the present time Joyce appears to have had a strong and quiet confidence about mankind's power to recover from shocks and to rebuild what has been cast down.

{3} Survival comes about, however, through constant transformation. The works of men remain, in one form or another, ("There'll always be a Dublin!"), but the men themselves do not; and their death, by which the unity of the individual with the universe is consummated in the waking world, remains a saddening thing, though one can achieve a certain resignation about it. The end of the book, when the grandiose dream is beginning to give place to humdrum waking reality, appears to be about the death of the author's mother, symbolised by the flowing of the river Liffey into the sea. Almost every possible human emotion in the face of death --- a forlorn and hopeless consciousness of being unnoticed and forgotten; sheer terror; a crazy desire to lose one's personal identity in death as in love; a cold dull calm --- are crammed into the last page, which demonstrates that Joyce's jumble language may be used for other things beside fun and fooling, and that there is more than fun and fooling in that "grand funferall", "Finnegan's Wake".