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Finnegans Wake and Familial Memory

Adam Piette

This paper bases itself on three impossible presuppositions. The first presupposition is that you have read *Finnegans Wake*. The second is that you are fathers with children. And lastly, that you are prepared, for a while, to take fatherhood seriously. In proper Wakean style, I would like to suggest twelve random propositions (as an exemplar of the twelve academics who haunt *Finnegans Wake*), which I will then attempt improperly to disremember.

I

James Joyce as a family man, not only had to wait till he had children, but also until they had accumulated a family stock of memories before being capable of fully exploiting the childhood of language, history, adamelegy. Fatherhood also enabled him to deal with his own father. This is because he wanted to superimpose his own nuclear family onto his father's. HCE, the father of the book, is at once John Joyce, and James Joyce. The two brothers, Shem and Shaun, are at once James and Stanislaus, and a schizophrenic Giorgio (Joyce's son). Issy, as the rainbow girl, represents the crowd of Joyce's sisters; as single voice, she is Lucia (Joyce's daughter). "The days of youyouth are evermixed mimine," says HCE (as Mercius) to Shem (*Finnegans Wake*, 194).

II

One of Joyce's projects, with this doubled family, was to explore the possibility of familial memory, a memory system shared by family members that is pitched between the concealments, privacies and drives of a personal memory store and the fully conscious, public world of cultural memory. Familial memory is constructed in the twilight state between the dramas/dreams of the unconscious and the wide-awake conscious stories a

culture tells itself. Teaching one's children to speak (often with thunderwords) "reminds" one of the ways one learnt language in one's first family. Watching them play, have nightmares, suffer jealousy, enact Oedipal dramas, learn their lessons, all these familiar family dramas give words and flesh to the forgotten world of one's earliest years, the danger zone of childhood amnesia. When one talks to one's child, one's words are ghosted by the echo of one's own parents' voices. Joyce, by living out his fatherhood in the *Wake*, felt his flesh creep within the bodies of his mother and father.

III

The big question, for Joyce, was the timing of shame in the mind. "Sleep reveals the worst side of everyone," says Bloom, "children perhaps excepted" (*Ulysses*, 497). The *Wake's* "shamebred music" (*Finnegans Wake*, 164), written by a shameful sham Shem, posits the possibility that the parents' own shame is awakened by their projection of their post-Freudian, post-adolescent sexual desires upon the network of their own family, and, as a rhyming consequence, back upon their own first family and their forgotten role in it. This textual complex constitutes the shared memory system, based on shame, that superimposes fathers upon sons, mothers on daughters. This sense of double vision is created by the sound of the father's angry voice, echoing back off the first family, Joyce's voice doubling John's, awakening shame, and remembering the "sin business," "perpetrified" in the parents' "offsprung" (*Finnegans Wake*, 5, 23) – "through the ghost of the unquiet father the image of the unliving son looks forth" (*Ulysses*, 186).

IV

Karen Lawrence argues that the later chapters of *Ulysses* are characterized by the dominance of an open textual memory system: "Somewhere in the middle of *Ulysses*, style goes 'public', as language is flooded by memories of its prior use" (8). "Circe" is the most spectacular example of this, with its phantasmagoric memory networks re-enacting and transforming much of the textual material of Bloom's and Stephen's day. The text of "Circe" merges both of their private episodic memories into its complex weave. What is being dramatized is their shame and shameful desires, Bloom hallucinating a mock trial for sexual crimes, Stephen a dance of death with his departed mother and the prostitutes. Both suffer from what the bogus sex specialist Doctor Mulligan in "Circe" calls "a family complex" (*Ulysses*, 465) –

Stephen attempting throughout the day to evade his role of mother's son by weaving a myth of self-generating genius; Bloom trying to forget his wife's adultery and his mourning for his son through fantasies of sexual licence. The family complex of *Ulysses* is therefore based, in the later chapters, on a textualization of the shameful private memories that have been running the machine of the streams of differing consciousnesses. By dramatizing both Bloom's and Stephen's private repressed memories together in "Circe," a new family complex of memories is created in which Bloom and Stephen become, fleetingly, father and son.

V

This reading may be linked to current thinking about *Finnegans Wake* as a system of slips of the tongue, i.e. the text as the arena for the incursion of the unconscious into language. Shem, as mobile producer of the text, is a "lapis linquo" (*Finnegans Wake*, 178), the inception, descent and endswell of the text being "temporarily wrapped in obscenity" (*Finnegans Wake*, 150). Shari Benstock, pondering the incestuous nature of the *Wake*'s stories, argues for an interpretation of the book as a "repressed countertext of sexual-textual slips:"

The more illicit the love, the less amenable it is to conscious suppression: incestuous longing of father for daughter, daughter for father, sister for sister, slips through the language. At issue are sexual difference, the enforcement of family ties and patriarchal privilege, and the vulnerability of wives, sisters and daughters under patriarchal law. (101-102)

HCE's stutter is a "*lapsus linguae*, the site of a linguistic falling away, already figured in the fall that opens the way to babelization and Anna Livia's babbling brook [. . .] the enunciation is delayed and deformed, signifying the failure of its own effort to signify and producing an aphasic lapse, a 'blank memory' or the blanks in *m'm'ry*, a hole" (Benstock 107). His story, his text, and his accusations are heard "in the wind, on lips, in slips of the tongue, in kisses and lisps" (111), the private suppressed memory system spectacularized in the form of textual word play and phonemic repetitions ("*l*, *p*, and *s* inscribe the children and are identified with penis and lips" [112]). Reading *Finnegans Wake* becomes, for Benstock, a patriarchal act, a seeking out of the father's secret, a prurient exposing of Issy and Anna's "sexual/textual vulnerability" (116-117).

VI

Freud's *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* defines slips of the tongue as products of

a disturbing influence in addition which comes from something outside the intended utterance; and the disturbing element is either a single thought that has remained unconscious, which manifests itself in the slip of the tongue and which can often be brought to consciousness only by means of searching analysis, or it is a more general psychical motive force which is directed against the entire utterance. (103)

Slips of the tongue betray a "counter-will" (206) internally opposed to one's own utterance which, though its manifestation tends through what Freud calls the "defensive trend" (199) to cancel out its own intentions, exposes an inner insincerity, becomes "a mode of self-betrayal" (131).

Long cycles of acoustic similarities dodge and echo the repressed element, paramnesia, or false recollection, acting as an internal current (57), an alien train of thought (80) that diverts the attention away from "an inner condition that attaches to the psychic material" (44). But in so doing the alien train of thought leaves a trace open to strict analysis, leaves "echoes in a disturbance" (51). The unconscious is the hidden helper behind the scenes, dramatizing the repressed material in the forms of elusive trace, gaps, holes, stutters and word-play.

VII

Joyce, by *constantly* allying sin and speech, by dramatizing at every step the disturbing element, *there* on the page for all to read, brings the hidden helper out into the open, surfacing the unconscious, making it semi-conscious and familiar. The voices, traces, memories and characters in the *Wake* are all semi-conscious of the lapses "they" indulge in, for their dream work is enacted within the familiar context of the shared privacies of a family textual complex. HCE "thries to cover up his tracers" (*Finnegans Wake*, 129), but all his crimes occur under the family gaze, becoming a weird cultural form of private language. The *Wake's* puns bring the shame into the public joking arena of family memory, of familial textual memory. If everything becomes "suggestive" under the "pudendascope" of the book's script (*Finnegans Wake*, 115), it is because suggestiveness has become the textual equivalent of a family's shared secrets, innuendoes, danger signals and jokey shame.

VIII

The text of *Finnegans Wake* begins with a “vocative lapse,” and ends itself in an “accusative hole,” and its course is stutteringly studded with “the aphasia of that heroic agony of recalling a once loved number leading slip by slipper to a general amnesia of misnaming one’s own” (122). Its sexophonologicals (123), by constantly enacting the lapses, holes, slips, misfires and amnesic misnomers of the father, are “selfevitant” (186), that is, self-evidently evading and revealing the textual self under the scrutiny of the familial gaze. The hidden helper is every family member, including the reader who is coopted into the familial memory system. The slips of the tongue become selfevitant text, a “sinspeech” (421) “telltold” in the “tittle-tell tattle” (597) of family memory.

IX

For everything is heard in the house of fiction, all ears wag (*Finnegans Wake*, 496), and the children’s games register the sins and shames of the parents:

This liggy piggy wanted to go to the jampot. And this leggy peggy spelt pea.
And these lucky pluckers played at pooping tooletom. Ma’s da. Da’s ma.
Madas. Sadam. (496)

The incest taboo underwriting the nuclear unit can be heard and read in the adult fictions written as dark palimpsest over the text of the modern family. The dark text hears its own slips in child’s play, and remembers its past games with words and family relationships in the family of Ma and Da (our first family being always an anagram of Adam’s). At the fingertips, held off but known in the open privacy of family exchange, are the sexual games and voyeuristic forbidden dramas of the fictional family of our shames.

X

It becomes our public family memory game, domesticating and integrating the textual sinspeech into our own family dramas. We mime the father, son, mother, daughter in the game, and remember their crimes in our shameful pleasure in the wordplay. A foreigner to the text at first like HCE, we are accused by the text and vindicated by it. We slowly adapt its alien memory

system into the familiar family complex of our semi-unconsciousness, making ourselves at once the patriarch of the multiple meanings of the text, and its vulnerable victim. We become the text's hidden helper, there on the surface of the page, and reading becomes child's play, a playful shameful rereading of the redisremembered body of our pasts.

XI

The reader becomes the text's "interlocutor *a latere* and private privysuckatary" (*Finnegans Wake*, 177), privy to the sin in the speech, yet lamely resisting the text's accusations like Bloom before his enemies: "Slander, the viper, has wrongfully accused me" (*Ulysses*, 465). Used to reading in private, we would wish to respect certain conventions about the secrecy of our behaviour in private: "Disrobe clothed in the strictest secrecy which privacy can afford" (*Finnegans Wake*, 586). But we cannot conceal our nakedness in the public privacy of our two families, the family we submit to in our memory, and the family we rule in our heads. Most texts give body to those families, involving us in their network, reminding us both privately and publicly of our "inverted parentage" and the "prepossessing drama present" in our pasts (*Finnegans Wake*, 115).

XII

Resisting the familial pressures of the text is like struggling to deny accusations of incest and patriarchal abuse when one has no memory of the crimes. The accusations themselves create the shame, construct a mimic memory of a criminal scene that sticks to our conscience and semi-unconscious like the broken confessions of a member of one's family. *Finnegans Wake* is a book about fictional shame, dream shame in the family as agent of all story, all history. It is a man's book, for the shame turns round a father's fears of incest and the struggle among brothers for the favours of their sister(s). Like many post-Freudian texts by men, reading the *Wake* creates a family complex of forbidden male desire inscribed within a patriarchal familial memory system. It proves, shamefully and over-familiarly, that "*father* in such virgated contexts is not always that undemonstrative relative (often held up to our contumacy) who settles our hashbill for us" (*Finnegans Wake*, 115).

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