

FINNEGANS WAKE: MAPPING THE EMERGENCE OF A NATIONAL
CONSCIOUSNESS

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In James Joyce's *Finnegans wake*, the political and sexual mores placed upon Irish culture by the presence of the British Empire and the Catholic Church during the late colonial and early post colonial period of modern Irish history, are extirpated in a re-telling of the Biblical fall from grace. From a historical perspective, the political fall of Charles Stewart Parnell, the Protestant Irish Home Rule leader, in the late nineteenth century, which is echoed in Joyce's text, presaged the return of violence as a means to achieve independence from Britain. But Joyce sensed that despite the achievement of an Irish state, personal liberation in the terms that would later be defined by Frantz Fanon in his chapter 'On National Consciousness' in *Les damnés de la terre* (1961), did not accompany the emergence of Irish nationhood. *Finnegans wake* published in 1939, can be read as Joyce's mapping of the damaged terrain of a national consciousness, psychologically dominated by the Irish Free State polity and censoriousness of the Catholic Church of the 1930s. A brief exposition of the Parnell affair and its link to the emergence of a modern Irish consciousness expressed in the violence and literature of the *fin de siècle*, will presage a discussion of Joyce's last work.

The Fall of Parnell

On the 17th November 1890, in a divorce court in London, a verdict was given in favour of a Captain W. H. O'Shea against his wife Katherine 'Kitty' and her lover Parnell, who at the time was the leader of the pro-Catholic Irish Party in Parliament, the leader of the Irish Home Rule movement and at the height of his political power. The outrage provoked by the sexual politics of this Victorian age scandal was immediate. On the 26th November 1890, the British Prime Minister W.E. Gladstone leader of the English Liberal Party "drew up a letter notifying the Irish [Party] that they could not rely on him to pursue his programme for Irish Home Rule if Mr. Parnell continued to be their chief."¹ The Catholic Bishops of Ireland, who had backed Parnell's Party and his Home Rule movement, had him immediately denounced from the pulpit, and after a bitter political struggle Parnell was dropped as leader of the Irish Party on the 6th December 1890.² Scandalised, he did marry O'Shea, but died less than a year later in October 1891. After his fall and subsequent death, Parnell's political legacy migrated to urban centres, maintained by secret societies, which adhered to an ideology that married an

extreme form of nationalism to a mystical sense of Irish Catholicism. This was exemplified in the nationalist writings of Padraig Pearse, who "identified with the blood sacrifice of Christ".³

This potent ideology helped create willing acolytes to a cult of martyrdom in the cause of Irish liberation that manifested itself during the Easter Rising of 1916. From another point of view, Parnell's affair and its effect on the emerging consciousness of the Irish nation that presaged the abandonment of constitutional politics and the return to the republican physical force tradition, can be framed within the Sigmund Freud's *fin-de-sicle* psychoanalytical dialectic between Eros (the life instinct) and *Thanatos* (the death instinct). Freud held that to avoid or sublimate violence, the struggle between these two constructs, which he maintained were the 'locus of human conflict,' must be allowed the freedom of creativity. Within the context of Freud's own time, the presence of a repressive government coupled with the lack of any creative avenues of legitimate expression resulted in an overt manifestation of violence against the body politic.⁴ An observation by W.B. Yeats after the founding of the Irish Free State in 1922, places this Freudian dialectic in the historical context of the development of modern Irish consciousness:

*"The modern literature of Ireland, and indeed all that stir of thought, which prepared for the Anglo-Irish war began when Parnell fell from power ... A disillusioned and embittered Ireland turned from parliamentary politics and the race began, as I think to be troubled by that event's long gestation."*⁵

Indeed the gestation of the Parnell affair to Yeats' mind was symbolic of an unconscious psychic current that influenced both the literary and physical force visions of Irish national consciousness. Politically, this manifested into the Easter Rising of 1916 that led indirectly to the formation of an independent Irish state. In regards to its effect upon literature, a reading of Joyce's *Finnegans wake*, exemplifies the deeper psychic currents that the affair elicited in his mind regarding the collective unconscious of modern Irish culture.

James Joyce

Indeed, the fallen Parnell stood as a spiritual hero to the young Joyce and "in all his work there is an enquiry into the actual circumstances of [his] rise and fall, and a brooding on their implications and the legend that Ireland made of them".⁶ It can be seen in *Finnegans wake* that this 'long gestation' brought forth a 'visionary' evolution in his perception of an Irish national consciousness. This visionary perspective corresponds to Fanon's trope of liberation, which he contended would lead "the nation to play its part on the stage of history".⁷ As an adolescent Joyce had contemplated entering the priesthood during an extremely religious phase that had been brought about by feelings of remorse and guilt due to "a precocious patronage of . . . Dublin brothels".⁸ But later in a classical moment of poesis, he

left the Church when his true calling as an artiste was awoken in a sensual epiphany,

*"when he saw a girl wading on the beach; he had been looking for a sign of the potentialities of the secular life, and she supplied it, suggesting 'the gates of all the ways of error and glory'".*⁹

Accordingly, another feminine archetype, emerging in the figure of Anna Livia Plurabelle, would surface in the gateway of Joyce's imagination in the pages of *Finnegans wake*, as he struggled to re-piece the damaged body politic of the modern Irish nation, with his own idiosyncratic use of language.

Finnegans Wake (1939)

Over the course of the 1920s and 30s Joyce worked on a series of pieces that were published in segments, entitled *Our Exagmination Round His Factification for Incamination of Work in Progress*, by his admirers. He wrote the bulk of these texts in Paris, where he was living with his wife Nora in self imposed exile under the patronage of the London feminist and freethinker, and founder of the *Egoist*, Harriet Shaw Weaver.¹⁰ In addition to writing, he studied medicine and art in Paris and during the 1920s and 1930s, endured numerous surgical procedures on his eyes, and was deeply affected by the schizophrenic illness of his daughter Lucia.

In 1939 he assembled the various texts and published them under the title *Finnegans wake*, a pun on an Irish-American ballad about a labourer whose corpse is splashed at a wake with whiskey and is resurrected from the dead, allowing him to celebrate his own death.¹¹ Joyce wanted to make his last book, "a wake ... to defy the priests, and to enjoy the tale telling."¹² Joyce divided the *wake* into four parts, inspired by the Italian historical philosopher Giambattista Vico's (1668-1774) belief in the existence of Neo-Platonic historical cycles elucidated in his *Scienza Nuovo* (1725).

Vico held that historical evolution occurred in spirals that, "were opened...[and he]...was convinced of the individual character of particular societies, which was not blurred by the features it had in common with any other society at the same stage".¹³ Vico contended that societies developed through

"...epochs, which he named the ages of gods, heroes and men, [and] tended to recur in the same order . . . until the decline into a new 'barbarism of reflection' ('la barbarie della riflessione')." ¹⁴

This decline was followed by a *Ricorso*, which is marked by a fall from grace signalling the renewal of the cycles of history. In *Finnegans wake* 'there is one abiding story...that of the Fall, which is repeated over and over again,¹⁵ as a 'polylingual thunderclap...which is the voice of God':¹⁶

The fall (bababadalgharaghtakamminarronkonnbronntonneronntuonnthun-tovarrhounawnskawntoohooordenenthurnuk!)¹⁷

Yeats' observation that both the violent emergence of Irish *fin-de-sicle*

nationalism and Parnell's affair and his subsequent fall from power (which tacitly implied a willing trespass of Victorian - and by import British imperialist - and Catholic patriarchal sexual codes) were perhaps related on an unconscious level in the mindscapes of both the literary and physical force movements for liberation. Parnell's fall could be seen as sparking a cultural epiphany leading to what Fanon termed 'national consciousness'.¹⁸ For Vico, '...the interplay between the conscious and unconscious elements of history provided the means to discover the "course that nations run"'.¹⁹

Thus in Joycean terms, Parnell's fall from power could be read as instigating a *Ricorso*, from which the modern Irish nation would emerge. The affair's act of sexual transgression can be viewed as a catalyst for this type of epiphany, underlying Fanon's assertion that the elucidation of this type of consciousness was the "most elaborate form of culture".²⁰ Indeed, Michel Foucault (in a poetic analogy to Joyce's description of the Fall), contended that transgression is,

*"... essentially tied to intensity; it 'is like a flash of lightning in the night which, from the beginning of time gives a dense and black intensity to the night it denies'."*²¹

Joyce maintained that "one great part of human existence is passed in a state which cannot be rendered sensible by the use of wideawake language, cutandry grammar and gohead plot".²² Alluding to William James' contention that

*"consciousness, then, does not appear to itself chopped up in bits... it flows. A 'river' or a 'stream' are the metaphors by which it is most naturally described . . . let us call it the stream of thought, of consciousness, or of subjective life".*²³

Accordingly, Joyce created a 'dream language' in *Finnegans wake* to convey the interplay between the conscious and unconscious elements of history and culture, as well as to subvert the idiom of the colonising tongue - English. Ngugi Wa Thiongo comments that, "language as culture is the collective memory bank of a people's experience in history".²⁴ And Joyce employed sixty-five different languages (from Erse to Sanskrit) to construct a hyper real Hiberno-Anglo patois to illustrate the diverse cultural elements of this interplay, reflecting the 'Viking, Norman, Scots and Anglo-Saxon contributions alongside those of the "ancient Celtic race"²⁵ to map the island's collective cultural unconscious.

Riverrun

Joyce set *Finnegans wake* in the unconscious dream spaces of an ageing Anglican Publican named Earwicker from the Dublin hamlet of Chapelozoid, who lives in a pub over the river Liffey, with his wife Anna Livia Plurabelle, his sons Shem and Shaun and his daughter Issy. It can be noted that "the recesses of the domestic space become sites for history's most intricate invasions"²⁶, and in choosing the domestic landscape of a bedroom, a place where desire, the unconscious and the

realm of Morpheus intermingle

*"...the borders between home and world become confused; and, uncannily, the private and public become part of each other, forcing us a vision that is divided as it is disorienting."*²⁷

Underlying the disorienting narrative of the text is the *Oedipal* act of incest - committed by Earwicker, against his daughter Issy. The taboo on such an act 'marks the conquest of nature by culture'²⁸ and the denouement of such an act of

*"incestuous propagation leads to formless duplications, sinister repetitions, and a dark mixture of unnameable things: 'a monstrous commingling of fathers, brothers, sons; of brides, wives and mothers!'"*²⁹

Indeed, within the narrative's opening sentence, which echoes William James' metaphor of consciousness and completes the text's last sentence, thus recirculating the story of the Fall into a never ending stream of words. The opening sentence is in effect a jumbled topographical mapping of the course of the river Liffey through the city of Dublin. Indeed in Joycean cartography, the confluence of history, myth, the unconscious, time and personas clash, collide and 'commingle':

*"riverrun, past Eve and Adam's, from swerve of shore to bend of bay, brings us by a commodius vicus of recirculation back to Howth Castle and Environs."*³⁰

The subsequent transformation of the Liffey into the figure of Anna Livia Plurabelle is described in a "chattering dialogue across the river by two washerwomen who as night falls become a tree and a stone. The river is named Anna Liffey"³¹,

"O

Tell me all about

*Anna Livia, I want to hear all about Anna Livia..."*³²

Celtic mythology portrayed rivers as "womb openings of the Great Mother"³³ and the transformation of Anna Livia into the Liffey creates an omniscient 'Great Mother' who is "every person, place and thing in the chaosmos of alle...moving and changing every part of the time".³⁴ The iconographic image of a woman representing Ireland, had been historically invoked by nationalists, but Joyce based the figure of Anna Livia on his wife Nora, and set the cadence of the piece on her Galway County speech pattern. It was a passage she loved to hear him read out loud.³⁵ The surreal intersections, 'comminglings' and transformation of memory, people and place in *Finnegans wake*, evokes Fanon's observation that "the crystallization of the national consciousness will both disrupt literary styles and themes"³⁶, and Joyce in creating the figure of Anna Livia Plurabelle, was re-casting the nationalist appropriation of the feminine icon in his surreal and alternate mapping of modern Irish consciousness.

Rejecting the 'Colonial' Mother

Both the British colonial project and the hegemony of the Catholic Church conspired in creating an *Oedipal* like psychic dependence/rejection complex in Irish consciousness that after independence was fostered by the Irish Free State's polity. This can be seen as both a reaction to the 'flux and uncertainty' of the period as well as a latent form of psychic dependency on once existing colonial structures. Fanon's observation of this dependency of the colonial subject on the 'mother country' finds that, "the colonial mother protects her child from itself, from its ego, and from its physiology, its biology and its own unhappiness, which is its very essence".³⁷ By creating the figure of Anna Livia Plurabelle, which reflects "a model of *unity in plurality*: a 'bringer of pluralities'"³⁸ one can surmise that Joyce was also reflecting upon the *Oedipal* complex as it related to his upbringing as an Irish colonial subject in a Catholic household. The psychoanalyst Ernest Jones, a disciple of Freud's wrote a piece in 1923 (a year before Joyce completed the Anna Livia Plurabelle section of the wake) concerning the relationship between the creation of the Irish nation and the *Oedipal* complex. Regarding its geographical component, he noted:

*"The complexes to which to which the idea of an island home tends to become attached are those relating to the ideas...which fuse in the central complex of the womb of a virgin mother. This means, of course, one's own birth-place."*³⁹

Joyce had an ambivalent relationship with his own mother, whom had internalised elements of the colonial and Catholic authoritarianism of his birthplace. She

*"was no soft disciplinarian ...One of her punishments [he] boasted to a friend, was to stick her children's heads into the toilet bowl and pull the chain. She followed the teachings of her Church absolutely. She did not refuse to perform her conjugal duties, whatever her condition."*⁴⁰

In contrast, Joyce's partner Nora was sexually adventurous and indulged his eccentric carnal appetites, which earlier in their courtship involved scatological fantasies, perhaps related to his mother's punishments. He relayed these fantasies to Nora in a series of erotic love letters, whose contents were relayed in pornographic language that would re-surface in his interrogation of Irish colonial culture in his later writings.⁴¹ In this regard Joyce, in Fanon's terms is an *artiste*, 'who is willing to strip himself naked to study the history of his body [and in doing so] is obliged to dissect the heart of his people'.⁴² Consequently it can be seen that Joyce recognised a transfer of emotional dependency, analogous to the process of decolonisation, from a patriarchal authoritarianism, which characterized his mother's psychology, to the liberating mother/lover figure he found in his wife. Indeed in Nora he

"sensed his rescuer - a woman who would save him, satisfy him and forgive him. 'You were to my young manhood,' he later told her, 'What the idea of

the Blessed Virgin was to my boyhood'."⁴³

The recognition by Joyce that his own development of an eccentric consciousness paralleled that of the gestation and birth of the modern Irish nation, can be seen in the *avant-garde* style he employed in creating the narrative of *Finnegans wake*. Fanon explains that this technique is a reflex action created when an artist withdraws from the dialectic of the colonial discourse, and seeks a lexicon that more appropriately represents their experience. It is a technique that creates a "harsh style, full of images, for the image is the drawbridge which allows unconscious energies to be scattered on the surrounding meadows"⁴⁴, and it can be seen that by engaging such a stylistic technique in his last work, Joyce was illuminating the interplay between the conscious and the unconscious, as well as juxtaposing the *Eros* inherent in the creation of national consciousness, and the *Thanatos* embodied in the pun of the text's title to fully elucidate "the grotesque psychodrama of everyday life in colonial societies"⁴⁵, and the subsequent wounds left on the emerging consciousness of the post-colonial Irish society.

Conclusion

Framed within Fanon's description of the evolution towards a national consciousness that possesses a legitimate claim to the nation, the works of Joyce offer a modern interrogation and dissection of a latent unconscious dependency upon pre-existing colonial and hegemonic structures reflected in the 'flux and uncertainty' of the officially scripted consciousness within the Irish colonial and post-colonial landscapes. The nature of Joyce's exile from Ireland was emblematic of a generation of Irish writers who "felt the need to escape the stultifying air of the Free State"⁴⁶ and felt "a peculiar antipathy to the society that judged their work obscene".⁴⁷ Joyce describing his feelings in regard to his upbringing as a colonial Irish subject raised in a Catholic household wrote in 1904:

*"My mind rejects the whole present social order and Christianity - home, the recognised virtues, classes of life and religious doctrines...I make open war upon it by what I write and say and do."*⁴⁸

He "had a conviction...that in Europe he would see Ireland in perspective [and] document her more significantly under the stimulus of continental movements".⁴⁹ In addition he was sceptical about the Irish Literary revival's contributions to the nation's emerging consciousness:

*"He was amazed in 1901 to hear the senior men of the Irish literary ... 'paying lip service to Gaelic, although they could not use it; Yeats, Lady Gregory and AE were lauding the spirituality of the bog; and he was afraid that the dramatisation of the early epic cycles ... would flatter the Irishman into complacency rather than show him his own responsibility for his own problems'."*⁵⁰

He argued in 1914 that his collection of short stories *Dubliners* within which "the

odour of ash pits and old weeds and offal hangs round my stories"⁵¹, should have been published uncensored and remarked in a moment of pique:

*"I seriously believe that you will retard the course of civilisation in Ireland by preventing the Irish people from having one good look at themselves in my nicely polished glass."*⁵²

He never lived in Ireland after 1915, but Dublin did remain his eternal muse- and he once wrote to a friend - "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".⁵³ His intention to take "the first step towards the spiritual liberation of my country"⁵⁴, presaged Fanon's trope of *liberation* which finds that the native artist "turns himself into an awakener of the people; hence comes a . . . revolutionary literature and a national literature."⁵⁵ And it is within this context that *Finnegans wake* can be read as a mapping of an emerging modern, albeit damaged, Irish national consciousness.

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Notes

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- ² C.C. O'BRIEN, *States of Ireland* (New York: Pantheon, 1972)
- ³ R. KEARNEY, *Postnationalist Ireland: Politics, Culture, Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 1997), 112; P. MURRAY, *Long term memory, Short term memory and the fallen Parnell*, (Unpublished paper, 2002).
- ⁴ T. VRACHOPOULOS, *Eros and Thanatos: Notes on Human Conflict*, *NY Arts Magazine*, 7(2)
- ⁵ *States of Ireland*, 23.
- ⁶ *The Irish Writers*, 245.
- ⁷ F. FANON, *The Wretched of the Earth (Les damnés de la terre)* (London: Penguin, 1961), 199.
- ⁸ *The Irish Writers*, 249.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁰ B. MADDOX, *Nora: A Biography of Nora Joyce* (London: Minerva, 1988), 178.
- ¹¹ A. BURGESS, *A Shorter Finnegans Wake* (London: Faber & Faber, 1965)
- ¹² *The Irish Writers*, 272.
- ¹³ C. MILLER, *Giambattista Vico: Imagination and Historical Knowledge* (London: St. Martin's Press, 1993), 33.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁵ S. DEANE, 'Introduction' in *Finnegans Wake* (London: Penguin, 1992), xxix.
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- ¹⁸ *The Wretched*, 198.
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- ²⁰ *The Wretched*, 199.
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- ²² DEANE, Intro, xi

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- ³⁰ *Finnegans wake*, 3.
- ³¹ *Nora*, 334.
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- ³³ M. CONDRED, *The Serpent and The Goddess: Women, Religion and Power in Celtic Ireland* (Dublin: New Island, 2000), 26.
- ³⁴ *Postnationalist Ireland*, 117.
- ³⁵ *Nora*.
- ³⁶ *Wretched of the earth*, 199.
- ³⁷ *Ibid.*, 169.
- ³⁸ *Postnationalist Ireland*, 117.
- ³⁹ E. JONES, *Essays in Applied Psychoanalysis* (London/Vienna: The International Psychoanalytical Press, 1923), 401.
- ⁴⁰ *Nora*, 48-49.
- ⁴¹ *Ibid.*
- ⁴² *Wretched of the earth*, 170.
- ⁴³ *Nora*, 48.
- ⁴⁴ *Wretched of the earth*, 177.
- ⁴⁵ BHABHA, 'The Other Question: Difference, Discrimination and the Discourse of Colonialism' in R. Ferguson, M. Gever, N-h., In: T. TRINH AND C. WEST (eds.) *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1990), 71.
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- ⁴⁷ T. BROWN, *Ireland: A Social and Cultural History, 1922-1985* (London: Fontana 1985), 154.
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- ⁵¹ S. GILBERT, *Letters of James Joyce* (London: Faber and Faber, 1957), 62-64.
- ⁵² *Ibid.*
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- ⁵⁴ *The letters*, 62-64.
- ⁵⁵ *Wretched of the Earth*, 179.