

Reading *Finnegans Wake*

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No one tells a story unless there is a story to tell. That is, in its series of narrated events that involve one or more characters, a story is presumed to convey something of interest to its listeners. The key concept here is *tellability*, the quality that gives a story its worth.

It was with this general concept in mind that I approached the task of giving a dramatic reading of James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*. It is essential that when telling or reading a story to an audience, it be done in a "dramatic" way which will best convey the story's structure and hold the listener's interest by leading from one element of the story to another. In other words, the teller/reader should present the story in such a way as to convey its "tellability" to the audience, beyond depending on the mere narrative sequence itself. Now when one is asked to give a reading from *Finnegans Wake*, one would ideally read the entire novel to the audience, since the novel is nothing less than the whole story of the *Wake*, and to leave anything out of it would diminish the story, theoretically. Since this, however, was

not practical, I opted to present what may perhaps be considered the "essential tale" of the *Wake*.

The Prankquean Tale, which begins on p. 21, bears a number of characteristics for making it the "essential tale." First of all, it is given prominent place in Chapter One, preceded by considerable discussion of its background and interpretation. Furthermore, the first sentence appears to state it as an archetypal tale, placing it at the very beginning of human history: "It was of a night, late, lang time ago, in an auldstane eld, when Adam was delving and his madameen spinning watersilts, when mulk mountynotty man was everybully and the first leal ribberobber that every had her ainway everybuddy to his lovesaking eyes and everybilly lived alove with everybiddy else" The first sentence then introduces what appears to be the main character of this story, Jarl van Hooter.

As the story proceeds, it becomes apparent that, as in all of *Finnegans Wake*, there is a multiplicity of meanings, creating what is no doubt a multiplicity of stories. And yet somehow all these stories are the *same* story. Indeed, a story with a very similar structure, namely that of the Norwegian Captain, appears later in the book, with which this story explicitly identifies itself at the end: "How kirssy the tiler made a sweet uncloze to the Narwhealian captol."

Whatever the "essential tale" is, its three-part structure is obvious to even a superficial reading. Three times the Prankquean appears at Jarl van/von Hooter's door, and three times she poses a riddle. Except for the change in number, it is the same riddle: "Mark the Wans/Twy/Tris, why do I am alook alike a/two/three poss of porterpease?" It has been widely noted that this three-part structure is characteristic of many traditional tales (sometimes called the "three-is-a-charm phenomenon" note the narrator's rhetorical question, "And why would she halt at all if not by the ward of his mansion home of another nice lace for the third charm?"). Furthermore, according to the critics, this tale is a classic case of the Viconian structure of human history the three ages of man followed by the *ricorso* —that Joyce incorporates throughout the entire work. Another essential element of this tale is Bruno's theory of the interchange of opposites: when the Jarl refuses to

answer the Prankquean's riddle the first two times, she snatches up one of the twins ("jiminies") in turn and proceeds to turn each one into his opposite. As a dramatic reader, I found myself paying particular attention to the peculiar grammar of the phrase, "[she] set down a jiminy and took up a jiminy." The double occurrence of the indefinite article "a" tells me that ultimately it does not matter which "jiminy" is which, and so I took particular care to convey this in the intonation of my reading.

Finally I should make note of the use of the "hundred-letter thunderclap" (indicating Vico's *ricorso*) which Jarl utters when the Prankquean appears the third time. This being the climax of the whole tale, I took special care to practice saying it many times beforehand, feeling that it would not do to stutter over something which, on one level, is an instance of the main character's own stuttering!

What I have attempted above is a short and, I am afraid, woefully inadequate justification for reading the selection I made from *Finnegans Wake*. All I really need say, I suppose, is that if one is going to tell or read any story to an audience, he must at least pretend to understand it. If one can present his pretense of understanding in a convincing way to his audience, then presumably that audience can likewise pretend that they understand what is being told.

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