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Creating a Lexical Universe: Redefining Burke's Dramatic Pentad through the Language of Finnegans Wake

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As literature has developed, particularly in the age of postmodernity, the fusion of rhetoric with the poetic seems obvious enough. For Kenneth Burke, this synthesis is compulsory, assuming that motives are reflected in the dramatic aspects of human contact. He defines this theory with the use of what he terms the dramatic pentad, a tool for analysis which breaks down essential elements of all interaction: act, scene, agent, agency, and purpose. Each term contributes its own weight to the principles of Burke's position and attempts to simplify questions of authorial motivation. Through these dramatic distinctions, Burke establishes not only a framework for answering the five questions of motivation—"what was done (act), when or where it was done (scene), who did it (agent), how he did it (agency), and why (purpose)" (*A Grammar of Motives* 1298)—but also for analyzing how rhetoric and relationships intersect and coalesce, both in "literature and non-literature... language and life" (Bizzell and Herzberg 1296). But what happens when the pentad is challenged, when the distinctions merge errantly and confuse rather than aid the interpreter? In applying James Joyce's lexical quandary *Finnegans Wake* to Burke's dramatic pentad, I attempt to show how this method can be tested yet emerge rhetorically strengthened by authorial motives.

Infamous for its deliberate perplexities, *Finnegans Wake* remains one the most unapproachable works in literature. Over seventeen years of rigorous composition whilst burdened with deteriorating eyesight, Joyce developed unprecedented techniques of word play, allusive ambiguities, and linguistic manipulations which provide the *Wake's* reader with the daunting task of deciphering whatever meaning they can from its simplest words and phrases. At the root of its difficulties, *Finnegans Wake* revels in its separation from conventional dramatics, disrupting the "symbol-using" portion of Burke's definition of man while flaunting in the "symbol-making, symbol-misusing" description (*Language as Symbolic Action* 16). What this shows is that the pairing of Burke and Joyce is not random. In fact, both are equally praised and criticized for their limitless areas of study and approach. While Burke's rhetoric "seems to encompass almost everything" (Bizzell and Herzberg 1297), the same can be said of *Finnegans Wake*. Joyce once remarked of the *Wake*: "You are not Irish... and the meaning of some passages will perhaps escape you. But you are Catholic, so you will recognize this and that allusion. You don't play cricket; this word may mean nothing to you. But you are a musician, so you feel at ease in this passage" (Bishop ix). While briefly stated, any reader will plausibly find something subjectively valuable in the *Wake's* pages. Thus, it seems only natural to analyze Joyce with Burke's tools, namely, with the latter's dramatic pentad.

Per their definitions, *Finnegans Wake* mocks the pentad's terms through brief, though fragile accommodation with their traits. This brevity, however,

comes in an excess of universal meaning. The act appears commonplace: one man's slumber and the thoughts encompassing him. This aspect of the *Wake* "does not prevent it from being about other things (or even everything else)... since the universe of things that rolls through the mind of Joyce's sleeping hero would include everything" (Bishop xv). This protagonist (agent) acts as a mythical hero and a further challenge to the limits of Burke's pentad, possessing no less than a thousand different names and determiners.¹ At the most basic, he is referred to merely by the acrostic initials HCE and all manner of literal and figurative neologisms made from them (Humphrey Chimpden Earwicker, Here Comes Everybody, Howth Castle and Environs, etc.). At its most complex, "he is designated accordingly by the name of *any* patriarchal figure – on the first page, among others, Adam, Patrick, Isaac, Noah, Finn, and Tim Finnegan" (Bishop xvii).

Perhaps yielding most to any sort of context, the scene feints to be the Dublin, Ireland of Joyce's time. While this appears unquestionable given Joyce's loyalties to Dublin, we err in accepting this in the *Wake*. Instead, Joyce universalizes time and setting in support of a fundamental human connection across all cultural, geographic, or temporal boundaries. Evidence for this can be found in the text's puzzling "puns and reedles" (Joyce 239). With concerns to when the action takes place, the nocturnal aura in which the dream state thrives serves as a Burkean agency rather than temporal bearing. Rather, the action takes place indefinitely. The first words 'begin' midsentence, "riverrun, past Eve and Adam's, from swerve of shore to bend of bay" (Joyce 3). Consequently, we 'end' the work with the beginning of that same sentence, "A way a lone a last a loved a long the" (Joyce 628). The titular clue here becomes shockingly apparent: where we end (fin, finn), we begin again (egan). This technique indicates a cyclical form unprecedented in narratives of any kind. Joyce goes further, however. Just as time is unbound, so is the setting. To escape the limits of defining Dublin as the city of Joyce's mind, the author encourages us that the setting could be anywhere. This is established immediately on the first page: "nor had topsawyer's rocks by the stream Oconee exaggerated themselves to Laurens County's gorgios while they went doublin their mumper all the time" (Joyce 3). Dublin is the setting, but it is not the Dublin, Ireland we would expect. Joyce has supposed the story has roots in Laurens County, Georgia, a location one could find in any U.S. almanac, where they would discover that Dublin is the county seat and the Oconee River runs adjacent like the River Liffey. This departure across the Atlantic is not for the author's amusement: it is an assertion that the scene could be no less than

¹ I use general literary terms in my distinctions of various aspects of *Finnegans Wake* though, doubtlessly, Joyce would disapprove. This is purely for the sake of my analysis and not to be confused for any added literary commentary on the text.

anywhere. Combined with the cyclical structure, the setting promotes the universality of the *Wake* and offers the closest comparison to Burke's concept of human relations throughout history: "The resources of the five terms figure in the utterances about motives, throughout all human history...Yet it is so fertile a source of error, that only by learning to recognize its nature *from within* could we hope to detect its many disguises from without" (*A Grammar of Motives* 1319). Burke assumes we must dive into the textual landscape in order to understand its motives. But this is not easily done amid Joyce's dramatic ambiguities.

To be fair, Burke's pentad does attempt to qualify the ambiguities within his definitions of the terms. He confronts the problem with just reasoning: "Insofar as men cannot themselves create the universe, there must remain something essentially enigmatic about the problem of motives and that this underlying enigma will manifest itself in inevitable ambiguities and inconsistencies among the terms" (*A Grammar of Motives* 1300). What we desire, he continues, are terms that allow for ambiguities to be recognized and explained (*A Grammar of Motives* 1300). In a section entitled the "Range of All the Ratios," Burke speculates that the pentad allows for ten complete classification ratios. These include fusions of scene-act, scene-agent, scene-agency, scene-purpose, act-purpose, act-agent, act-agency, agent-purpose, agent-agency, and agency-purpose. Without these pairings, the pentad would appear flat, unsatisfying. By applying the individual terms of the pentad to dichotomous wholes, Burke's dramatic theory inches ever so slightly to the muddled conglomeration of Finnegans *Wake*. Nevertheless, even this can only go so far.

As mentioned before, Joyce's character HCE exists in an abyss of names and figures, "less a 'character,' properly speaking" (Bishop xvii) than any other in literature. As a result, HCE's presence mirrors that of the limitless barriers surrounding the dream state (admittedly holding true to Burke's agent-agency ratio). Where Burke's ratios fall short, however, is in what HCE is able to do in that dream state, ultimately becoming the scene itself in an array of historical, mythological, and geographical tangents (see fig. 1):

HCE broadens out beyond any one association and merges in a dream sense with Dublin itself. As he drifts off to sleep, we glimpse his form inset archeologically into the cityscape. We pass beneath the everyday contemporary surface down to deeper layers of Dublin's past... Gradually we recognize the outlines of a sleeping giant – his head formed by the Hill of Howth (Howth Head), arms extended in sleep around the bay, the trunk the city itself, the toes tucked up under the green sward of Castleknock, while from the bushes of the Phoenix Park there rises an enormous

erection “the Willingdone Mormorial Tallowscoop” (the Wellington Testimonial, an enormous obelisk erected to celebrate the Duke of Wellington’s victories). (Flint and Norris 154)²



Figure 2. HCE as the Irish Landscape. Carl Flint, *Introducing Joyce*. Cambridge: Icon Books Ltd., 2000. p. 154-155.

Burke supposes that “both act and agent require scenes that ‘contain’ them;” however, that containment does not equate with the act or agent *becoming* the scene (1309).

This challenge to the pentad and its limits is not altogether destructive. In fact, Joyce seems to have strengthened his rhetorical presentation with this displacement. Samuel Beckett, longtime friend of Joyce and a notable author in

² Commonly known as “The Wake scene,” the process of HCE fusing with the landscape runs its course over a total of seventeen pages, embracing “the archetypal Form of all forms,” displaying “various evidences, geographical and historical, of the fallen Finnegans all suffusing, all-feeding, slumberous presence. Not only the landscape is to be reviewed by typical epochs of human history, medieval history, prehistory; also a few fragments of folklore... As the eye regards each, it slightly disintegrates to reveal an unmistakable trait or two of the grotesque Finnegans within” (Campbell & Robertson 39).

his own right, provides the clearest means of seeing how this rhetorical technique is accomplished. “The very words are tilted and effervescent,” he says. “How can we qualify this general esthetic vigilance without which we cannot hope to snare the sense which is for ever rising to the surface of the form and *becoming the form itself?*” (52; italics mine). Certainly, it is also relative to mention Samuel Johnson’s comment on an earlier book, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentlemen*, by the Irishman Laurence Sterne, in which he posits, “Nothing so odd will last” (Flint and Norris 148). The same claim has frequently been applied to *Finnegans Wake*, made ironic as Sterne was one of Joyce’s selected literary idols. Why has the *Wake* lasted despite the oddities wrapped within its text? Burke unknowingly folds the pentad in Joyce’s favor and answers this question when he considers the authorial use of those ‘puns and reedles’ mentioned before:

Though we here lay great stress upon the puns and other word play in men’s ideas of motivation, we do not thereby conclude that such linguistic tactics are ‘nothing but’ puns and word play. Rather, we take it that men’s linguistic behavior here reflects real paradoxes in the nature of the world itself – antinomies that could be resolved only if men were able, not in thought...but in actual concrete operations, to create an entire universe. (1319)

With *Finnegans Wake*, Joyce successfully meets Burkes’ claim. He creates nothing less than a lexical universe cohesive with the paradoxes of collective human experience. Joyce’s ability to let dramatic components speak for themselves through their own arrangements, as Beckett suggests, adds universal rhetorical meaning fundamental to the work and, thus, to expanding Burke’s dramatic pentad. As a result, we would do right to look at *Finnegans Wake* not as an unapproachable boundary but as an infinite contribution to the singular and dualistic nature of Burke’s dramatic terms.

The flexibility of the Burkean pentad is important to recognizing the nature of human relations and the motives that stem from them. Nothing in the world is so structured and bound that it can be explained without a certain characteristic of malleability. While breaking the functions Burkes’ terms prescribe to, *Finnegans Wake* does not defy or restrict the dramatic pentad; rather, it proves the flexibility of its terms and the rhetorical value they can produce when separated from the limits of the general narrative. Joyce’s separation from the typical components of the pentad demonstrates that Burkes’ methods can be expanded beyond a mere five terms and certainly beyond the perimeters of only ten ratios. Through this method, *Finnegans Wake* makes a case for exploring the

boundaries between rhetoric and human relations, though admittedly not without work on the reader's part.

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