“behush the bush to. Whish!”: Silence, Loss, and *Finnegans Wake*

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Abstract

*Finnegans Wake* is neither an incomprehensible text nor an unreadable one, but is a text which marks or memorialises, perhaps to the greatest degree to which prose is capable, the “loss of loss itself”. Joyce’s last work reads as the remnant of a catastrophe, of a great fall whose reverberations are still felt and yet whose quintessence is unrecoverable. Moments of silence are written into the text, and are finally marked by the gap of blank paper, the nothingness, between the end of the book and its beginning. This essay contends that instances of textual silence, in which subject and form act in sympathy, are a means through which Joyce articulates the inexpressibility of loss. It argues that such an understanding of the nature of loss can be encountered both within the text and through the experience of a *Finnegans Wake* reading group.

So. Avelaval. My leaves have drifted from me. All. But one clings still. I'll bear it on me. To remind me of. Lff! So soft this morning, ours. Yes. Carry me along, taddy, like you done through the toy fair! If I seen him bearing down on me now under whitespread wings like he'd come from Arkangels, I sink I'd die down over his feet, humbly dumbly, only to washup. Yes, tid. There's where. First. We pass through grass behush the bush to. Whish! A gull. Gulls. Far calls. Coming, far! End here. Us then. Finn, again! Take. Bussoftthee, mememormee! Till thousandsthee. Lps. The keys to. Given! A way a lone a last a loved a long the (*FW* 628.06–16).

The last page of James Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake* (1939) indicates an awareness of its own momentum towards silence. One leaf “clings still”, and thus both the female entity Anna Livia Plurabelle in her sylvan form, and the folios of the book itself, are now coming to an end. Anna Livia’s journey towards Dublin bay to encounter her “cold mad feary father” carries the reader towards a foretold hush. Between the last fading part-sentence, “A way a lone a last a loved a long the” (*FW* 628.15–16), which carries the word “loss” as a manifestation, and its famous return in the opening line of the book “riverrun, past Eve and Adam’s”
is a silence which has been heavily foreshadowed in the last paragraph of *Finnegans Wake* (quoted above). This essay contends that instances of textual silence, in which subject and form act in sympathy, are a means through which Joyce articulates the inexpressibility of loss. It argues that such an understanding of the nature of loss can be encountered both within the text and through the experience of a *Finnegans Wake* reading group.

Anna Livia makes a plea for remembrance but only “softly”: “Bussoftlhee, mememormee!” (*FW* 628.14). Her oceanic cry of “Whish!” has been annotated as “whist!” meaning “silence,” although the Hiberno-English word is more commonly spelt “whisht!” I detect the presence of another Irish call for silence, “bí i do thost”, lurking beneath the seemingly enigmatic phrase “behush the bush to” (*FW* 628.12–13). “Bí i do thost” (pronounced, roughly, “bi ih do host”) can be translated as “be quiet” or, in a literal translation, “be in your silence”. Joyce’s first draft of *Finnegans Wake* ends with the line “a bit beside the bush and then a walk along the” (followed by the postscript “Paris 1938”). That fragment is subsequently split and expanded by Joyce to create the text which appears in the final 1939 version, “along the” becoming “a long the”, the final words of the book. In its development from “beside the bush” to “behush the bush to”, the fragment gathers its density from the addition of the Irish phrase.

That it is indeed “bí i do thost” which changes the sound and tonality of Joyce’s phrase is confirmed by the appearance of other modifications of the phrase throughout *Finnegans Wake*. The variation “bide in your hush, do” (*FW* 305.25), for example, more conspicuously reveals its source in “bí i do thost” or indeed, with added emphasis on the addressee “bí i do thost, tú”. The indebtedness to the Irish expression is clearer still in the extended segment: “Bide in your hush! Bide in your hush, do! The law does not aloud you to shout” (*FW* 305.24–25). Further confirmation that “bí i do thost” is alluded to in the final lines can be found in a passage in the opening chapter which contains words and motifs closely resembling those on the last page. Mutt and Jute, two “astoneaged” men (*FW* 18.15), stumble into a conversation. Mutt says: “Sell me sooth the fare for Humblin! Humblady Fair. But speak it allsosiftly, moulder! Be in your whisht!” and Jute answers, “Whysht?” (*FW* 18.08–10). In this case the two Irish phrases “bí i do thost” (taking its literal translation as “be in your silence”) and “whisht” are combined in “Be in your whisht!” The sequential

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