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Barlow, Richard Alan

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Richard Barlow

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“HUME SWEET HUME”: SKEPTICISM, IDEALISM, AND BURIAL IN *FINNEGANS WAKE*

by RICHARD BARLOW

WHAT IS THE RELATIONSHIP between the Irish modernist writings of James Joyce and the Scottish empirical philosophy of David Hume? Here I discuss Joyce's conception of Hume as a philosopher and explore the presence of Hume's work in Joyce's final masterpiece, *Finnegans Wake*. How then did Joyce conceive of Hume's thought, and to what extent did he engage with it? Well, in his lecture "Realism and Idealism in English Literature," given at Trieste in 1912, Joyce denounces the interest in the sanity (or otherwise) of artistic and philosophical geniuses, before offering the following comments:

If we were to lay a charge of madness against every great genius who does not share the science undergraduate's fatuous belief in headlong materialism now held in such high regard, little would remain of world art and history. Such a slaughter of the innocents would include most of the peripatetic system, all medieval metaphysics, an entire wing in the immense, symmetrical edifice built by the angelic doctor, St Thomas Aquinas, the idealism of Berkeley and (note the coincidence) the very scepticism that leads us to Hume.¹

Crucially for our understanding of Hume's role in *Finnegans Wake*, Joyce regards Hume as the *end* of a process of philosophical development.

Joyce seems to have been reasonably well acquainted with Hume's work and also keen to discuss it. In his Trieste library, the collection gathered during the period from 1910 to 1920, Joyce kept copies of *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, *An Enquiry Concerning the*

Principles of Morals, and *The History of England*.² These works must have interested him, as Joyce is known to have talked about the most famous and celebrated philosopher of the Scottish Enlightenment with his associates. As Richard Ellmann notes in his biography, Joyce explored Hume's theories and writings in conversation. The following passage reports a rather awkward-sounding conversation between Joyce and Samuel Beckett on the subject of Hume:

Beckett was addicted to silences, and so was Joyce; they engaged in conversations which consisted often of silences directed towards each other . . . Joyce suddenly asked some such question as, "How could the idealist Hume write a history?" Beckett replied, "A history of representation." Joyce said nothing . . . Later, "For me," he said, "there is only one alternative to scholasticism, scepticism."³

Joyce now refers to Hume as an idealist rather than a sceptic. According to Ellmann, Joyce probably saw Hume as a mixture of the two. Skepticism, "the view that nothing can be known with certainty; that at best, there can only be some private probable opinion," is compatible with idealism in that "only minds and mental representations exist; there is no independently existing external material world."⁴ Idealism and skepticism are similar positions insofar as value is placed on the individual, internal, and private functions of the mind as opposed to the external world, which is either unknowable or does not exist independently. Presumably Joyce saw a contradiction here in that an idealist philosopher such as Hume could write about history while also holding the view that the existence of an exterior reality could not be verified.

Beckett's clever answer seems to gain Joyce's silent approval in this discussion. Joyce's further comment on skepticism as an alternative to scholasticism perhaps indicates that his earlier attachment to Thomas Aquinas had diminished somewhat. These fragments of evidence reveal that Joyce maintained an enthusiasm for Hume from his time in Trieste, through to the period of the composition of *Finnegans Wake* in Paris. Joyce's notes also indicate his conception of Scottish philosophy as part of a Celtic school of skepticism, as Ellmann has discussed:

Joyce's notes preliminary to *Exiles*, composed about November 1913, indicate a fellow-feeling towards Hume as a Celt: "All Celtic philosophers seem to have inclined towards incertitude or scepticism—Hume, Berkeley, Balfour..."⁵

Instead of associating Scotland with any particular value, system, or creed, Joyce sees Scottish thinkers as sharing in a Celtic tradition of “incertitude or scepticism.” Joyce views Scottish and Irish thought as being almost part of the same philosophical tradition. Ellmann has also noted what he claims is Hume’s influence on the latter chapters of *Ulysses*:

Aristotle is a much less active presence in the episodes beginning with the *Wandering Rocks* than their predecessors. I would suggest that there is a new philosophical presence, and that this can probably be identified as David Hume . . . For a sceptical philosophy, Hume was Joyce’s obvious source . . . the dominant mood from the *Wandering Rocks* through *Circe* is scepticism, Bloom’s day but also, for the nine hours from three to midnight, Hume’s day. (*Liffey*, pp. 93–96)

Unfortunately, Ellmann does not expand on what he regards as manifestations of skepticism in the later chapters of *Ulysses*. Certainly Aristotle is a less “active presence” in the later half of *Ulysses*, but this does not necessarily mean that the book moves toward skepticism. Other than sections of the “Oxen of the Sun” episode that are modeled on Hume’s prose style, there are no obvious indications of Joyce evoking Hume’s work in the way he does Aristotle’s. I suggest that Hume’s philosophy is more suited to the interior, interred mindset of *Finnegans Wake* than *Ulysses*, given the atmosphere of doubt or “unknowability” in a work where “the unfacts, did we possess them, are too imprecisely few to warrant our certitude.”⁶

The “unknowability of Hume’s universe” is fitting for a book in which definite knowledge or certainty, even about the basic plot and characters of the work, is elusive. Joyce’s interest in Hume is revealed at a number of points in *Finnegans Wake* where references to the philosopher can evoke Hume’s concepts of skepticism or idealism. Furthermore, through the latent linguistic possibilities of Hume’s name, Joyce explores the interred/interned situation of the putative “dreamer” of *Finnegans Wake* himself. It is an irony that the composition of Joyce’s “lingerous longerous book of the dark” (*FW* 252.24) should—through Hume—interact so extensively with the Scottish Enlightenment, a movement dedicated to illumination.

In book 1, chapter 4 of the *Wake*, during the passage in which “Kate Strong recalls old times in the midden heap in Phoenix Park” and following the “burial in Lough Neagh,”⁷ Hume’s name makes an intriguing double appearance:

What subtler timeplace of the weald than such wolfsbelly castrament to will hide a leabhar from Thursmen's brandihands or a loveletter, lostfully hers, that would be lust on Ma, than then when ructions ended, than here where race began: and by four hands of forethought the first babe of reconciliation is laid in its last cradle of hume sweet hume. Give over it! And no more of it! So pass the pick for child sake! O men! (FW80.12–20)

Although Kate is recalling the pile of rubbish in which the letter has been buried and recovered—called a “dumplan” (FW 79.29) as well as a “(Tiptip!)” (FW 79.27)—the subject of the section is to some extent HCE himself, as evidenced by a phrase bearing his initials: “homelick cottage of elvantone” (FW 79.29), and a play on the name Earwicker in the words “her weaker” (FW 79.33). The phrases “So pass the pick for child sake” and “four hands” link the historian Hume to the chroniclers of *Finnegans Wake*, known as “the Four.” The presence of the four old men here can be detected by the phrase “so pass the pick for child sake” since it echoes similar phrases, based on “Pass the fish for Christ sake” used in sections describing the “Four.”

The phrase “Give over it” suggests the German *übergeben*—deliver—which, along with the “pick” used to dig up the letter and the talk of “scavenging” (FW 79.34), connects Hume to an attempt to uncover a past which is, perhaps like the precise details of the events in “Phornix Park” (FW80.6), are essentially unknowable or “lostfully” (FW80.15). It is also worth remembering at this point that the only recorded conversational comments by Joyce on Hume concern history and writing. This history/writing linkage informs the context of this section, a discussion of the rubbish dump where the letter is buried. As I mentioned earlier, Joyce viewed Hume as the terminus of a particular route in philosophy and here, the grave of “last cradle” and the warped prayer ending “O men” express this sense of finality.

The possibilities open to Joyce in Hume's name are also utilized here. The pun converting “home” into “hume” works as a reference to the philosophy of David Hume but also signifies the earth—*humus* being the Latin for soil—in which HCE is buried. As John Bishop has discussed, burial in the *Wake* expresses the unknowing experience of the *Wake's* dreamer, the subject whose mental activities supposedly form the action of *Finnegans Wake*.

Etymologically, the word “bed” derives from the proto-Indo-European root **bhedh-*, meaning “to dig or bury” or, in nominal form, “a hollow in

the ground, for sleeping" . . . If the man "tropped head" "in bed" at the *Wake* is indeed "dead to the world" and can largely only "no", how can he "know" that the "bed" in which he lies is not, "as a murder effect" (345.7), a "bed of soil?"⁸

Bishop here highlights the ambiguous connections between the earth and sleep in *Finnegans Wake*. I would argue that Joyce's use of the word Hume relates to this idea, since it can simultaneously evoke the soil of burial and also, through the skepticism and doubt associated with Hume's philosophy, suggest the doubt and incertitude of dreams.

In an article based on the passage of *Finnegans Wake* I am currently discussing, Richard Beckman makes the following remarks on the servant figure of Kate:

Kate . . . oversees the journey from cradle to grave in the creepiest sense possible, the return to vacuity of "the first babe of reconcilment" to "its last cradle of hume sweet hume" (80.17–18), where Hume's realm of unknowable causation transforms home sweet home into a rather sour metaphysical aporia . . . ⁹

While I would generally agree with Beckman's comments here, Joyce is perhaps evoking Hume's overall philosophy rather than dealing specifically with the question of causation. Ellmann's position is that Hume's work is, for Joyce, a hybrid of idealism and skepticism. It may be that its idealist aspects are most pertinent when considering Hume's function in *Finnegans Wake*. Idealism, with its focus on mental representations and its rejection of the exterior world, could almost be a description of *Finnegans Wake* itself. The *inhumæd*, dreaming subject of the *Wake*, being asleep or "*Dead to the World*" (*FW* 105.29) and confined within his own unconscious mind, has only his internal, mental representations available to him; there is no external reality in *Finnegans Wake*. Joyce sees unconsciousness as casting all humans into the imprisoned state similar to the idealist conception of reality, where only the interior mental life can be known. Perhaps Joyce's appreciation and approval of the joys of Hume's work is also evident in the phrase "hume sweet hume."

In the night lessons of book 2, chapter 2, where the children Shem, Shaun, and Issy are studying, there is a further reference to Hume:

When who was wist was ware. En elv, et fjaell. And the whirr of the whins humming us howe. His hume. Hencetaking tides we happily return, trumpeted by prawns and ensigned with seakale, to befinding ourself when

old is said in one and maker mates with made (O my!); having conned the cones and meditated the mured and pondered the pensils and ogled the olymp and delighted in her dianaphous and cacchinated behind his culosses, before a mosoleum. (*FW* 261.2–13)

Again, the context involves a figure that is “chthonic” (*FW* 261.18) or dwelling underground like an underworld deity, under a “tumulous” (*FW* 261.18), a pile of earth and stones over a grave, or a burial mound: “howe” (*FW* 261.04). One of Shem’s marginal notes for this section reads “Dig him in the rubsh” (*FW* 261.17–18), which links to the rubbish pile and to the letter that represents history itself as well as the processes of historiography. The buried letter is also alluded to with the pun on “petit bleu,” a type of telegram: “petsybluse” (*FW* 261.2). A focus on burial is also revealed by the play on mausoleum in “mosoleum” (*FW* 261.13), and death is present in the phrase “when old is said in one” which is, of course, a play on the saying “when all is said and done,” Again, Joyce is linking the experiences of sleep and death/burial to the philosophy of Hume. Here Hume is in the esteemed company of other philosophers (*FW* 260.8–261.22), appearing alongside the Italian “Vico” (*FW* 260.15) and the Irishman “Berkeley” (*FW* 260.11) in keeping with the theme of learning and thinking in the chapter.

The final mention of Hume is also made in connection with the buried body of HCE or the “erected . . . century . . . hen” (*FW* 606.16–17), whose body forms the “three Benns” (*FW* 606.14) of Howth:

Bisships, bevel to rock’s rite! Sarver buoy, extinguish! Nuotabene. The rare view from the three Benns under the bald heaven is on the other end, askan your blixom on dimmen and blastun, something to right hume about. They were erected in a purvious century, as a hen fine coops and, if you know your Bristol and have trudged the trolly ways and elventurns of that old cobbold city, you will sortofficially scribble a mental Peny-Knox-Gore. Whether they were franklings by name also has not been fully probed. Their design is a whosold word and the charming details of light in dark are freshed from the feminiarity which breathes content. *O ferax culpa!* (*FW* 606.13–23)

This section comes from book 4, the final section of *Finnegans Wake*. The reference to Biddy the hen links Hume again with the rubbish heap where the letter has been buried. The letter itself is alluded to in the same paragraph: “What will not arky paper, anticidingly inked with penmark, push, per sample prof, kuvertly falted, when style, stink and

stigmataphoron are of one sum in the same person?" (FW 606.25–28). Being the chapter of reawakening, the sleeping or buried body "comes out of the soil very well" (FW 606.28–29), which suggests organic growth as well as indicating perhaps the fertility of Hume's thought.

Once again Hume is associated with the soil, suggesting that Joyce saw a similarity between the mind of the dead or sleeping person and the unknowable universe of Hume's philosophy. As well as the entombing earth of the grave, finality is suggested by the phrases "the other end," "extinguish," and "bald heaven." The hallucinatory visions of the dreamer are expressed in the phrase "charming details of light in dark," reminiscent of the phrase "united states of Scotia Picta" (FW 43.30), which also represents the imagery or pictures of dreams as seen in the obscurity of sleep and night.

The contrasting expression "light in dark" is also a description of a chessboard, connecting with bishops and rooks or "Bisships" and "rock's." The use of the word "mental" also highlights the focus on cerebral processes or games in the passage. Furthermore, in the above passage Hume is once again linked to history and the act of writing—"right hume" and "scribble"—through a connection to the letter. The cyclical scheme of history advanced by Vico may also be present in the section, through the lightning clap that marks the beginning of a cycle: "blixom" suggests the Swedish and Dutch words for lightning, *blixten* and *bliksem* respectively. Does the phrase "right Hume" in place of "write Hume" signal Joyce's positive estimation of the Scottish philosopher's theories?

In summary, the sections where David Hume is composted into the black, generative soils of *Finnegans Wake* also involve imagery of burial, through words related to earth or graves such as "tumulous" (FW 262.18), "chthonic" (FW 261.18), "last cradle" (FW 80.17), or to HCE's interred body as landscape with "three Benns" (FW 606.14). Each passage in which Hume is buried (or planted) also relates to the enigmatic letter through references to writing—"ensigned" (FW 261.06), "loveletter" (FW 80.14), "right hume" (FW 606.16), "petsybluse" (FW 261.2)—and to the hen who discovers the letter: "as a hen fine coops" (FW 606.17).

All of the Humean material relates to HCE, as shown by the appearance of his initials in close proximity to the name of Hume in each case. These instances are "homelike cottage of elvanstone" (FW 79.29) in the paragraph that runs from 79.27 to 80.19; "enthewsyass cuckling a hoyden" (FW 260.18), "him, a chump of the evums" (FW 261.13–14), "highly fictional, tumulous under his chthonic exterior" (FW 261.17–18) in the paragraph from 260.8 to 261.22, and "erected in a purvious century,

as a fine hen coops" (*FW* 606.16–17) in the paragraph from 606.13 to 607.16. Hume's name forms a nexus at three points in the text where the themes of writing, history, skeptical philosophy, burial imagery, and explorations the death-like nature of sleep all converge. Joyce saw a resemblance between the idealism of Hume and the situation in which the dreamer of *Finnegans Wake* finds himself, trapped within the limits of his mental faculties. Another reason that Joyce associates Hume with the grave so often must be that—as with Bertrand Russell—he regarded Hume as representing an ending in a certain branch of philosophy:

David Hume . . . is one of the most important among philosophers, because he developed to its logical conclusion the empirical philosophy of Locke and Berkeley . . . He represents, in a certain sense, a dead end: in his direction it is impossible to go further.¹⁰

Similarly, Joyce writes in "Realism and Idealism in English Literature" of "the very skepticism that leads us to Hume," also conceiving of Hume's work as a terminal point (*OCPW*, 179–80). In *Finnegans Wake* David Hume also symbolizes a "dead end," since his name is so frequently associated with conclusions and burials. This idea, coupled with the linguistic possibilities opened up by the earthy name "Hume," meant that in *Finnegans Wake* Hume is associated with the grave and with burial, the endings of human life. Despite this somewhat gloomy association, I suggest that Joyce was probably broadly sympathetic to Hume's work, since he discusses it and engages with it without ever criticizing it.

It seems that Hume's *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* was of more use to Joyce in thinking of ways to develop the dream world of *Finnegans Wake* than *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, since the former deals with mental faculties. However, although Joyce uses Hume's name in *Finnegans Wake* and joins it with the words "sweet" and "right," these are no guarantees that Joyce totally agrees with Hume's ideas.

As is well known, Joyce uses Giambattista Vico's ideas as a "trellis" in *Finnegans Wake*. However, this should not be read as Joyce buying into and promoting the ideas of Vico's philosophy. As with Joyce's use of Vico, references to Hume and his philosophy are used to construct the major themes of the *Wake*, rather than to develop or espouse the theories themselves. Another reason Joyce seems to be interested in Hume is simply because he considers him a "Celtic" philosopher, and regards his work as part of what he sees as a general inclination toward incertitude

in Celtic philosophy. The lack of dogmatism in Hume may also have been attractive to Joyce. In the conclusion to *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, Hume writes:

I am sensible, that nothing can be more unphilosophical than to be positive or dogmatical on any subject; and that, even if excessive scepticism could be maintained, it would not be more destructive to all just reasoning and enquiry. I am convinced, that, where men are the most sure and arrogant, they are commonly the most mistaken, and have there given reins to passion, without that proper deliberation and suspense, which can alone secure them from the grossest absurdities.¹¹

Rather than adhering to or advancing any type of “dogmad” ideology (FW158.03), Hume stresses a sceptical detachment or “suspense.” Hume is a Scottish writer whose work is based not upon any religious, philosophical, or political agenda, but instead recommends the reserving of judgment and promotes skepticism. Rather than associating Scotland with Protestantism, Conservatism, and Unionism,¹² I would argue that Joyce associates the country with, not the reverse of these creeds, but with the endorsement of an enlightened liberation from emphatic, confident certainties.

QUEEN'S UNIVERSITY BELFAST

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5. Richard Ellmann, *Ulysses on the Liffey* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), p. 94; hereafter abbreviated *Liffey*.
6. James Joyce, *Finnegans Wake* (London: Penguin, 2000), p. 80, lines 12–20; hereafter abbreviated *FW* and cited by page number followed by line number(s).
7. Bernard Benstock, *Joyce-Again's Wake* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1965), pp. xvii, xviii.

8. John Bishop, *Joyce's Book of the Dark* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1986), pp. 66–67.
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10. Bertrand Russell, *History of Western Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 600.
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12. Willy Maley, “‘Kilt by Kelt Shell Kithagain with Kinagain’: Joyce and Scotland,” in *Semi-Colonial Joyce*, ed. Derek Attridge and Marjorie Howes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 201–18 (p. 216).