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Iconic Identity of Characters in James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*

The term “iconicity” goes back to C.S. Pierce’s typology of signs, which includes symbols, indices, and icons. According to Pierce, symbols are such signs in which the relation between the form of a sign and its meaning is purely arbitrary, whereas the indexical sign is connected with the object it stands for by a spatial or temporal relationship, being as if a trace of the actual thing. In icons, in turn, there is a direct resemblance between the signifier and the signified. Iconicity is defined as “a similarity between form and meaning as conceived by a human mind” (Tabakowska 5), which means that such similarity is seen as rooted in the perceiver’s cognitive models of the world actively created in the interaction with the surrounding world. It is divided into two major types: the so-called primary, or direct, or imagic iconicity where a resemblance between the shape of a sign and the phenomenon it refers to is perceived immediately (as in “cuckoo”); and the secondary or diagrammatic iconicity, which is abstract and relational and consists in correspondence between a structural pattern and meaning to be conveyed (Tabakowska 9). Iconicity has long been considered marginal in language and literature, however, recent research proves that it can be discovered at various levels of language, e.g., phonetic, syntactic, and stylistic. Both its types can be fruitfully applied to explain some peculiarities of the main heroes of James Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake*.

Although thousands of volumes have been written about this work, not much is known about its characters. Or, rather, a lot is known but

nothing is certain. The readers have been groping in the dark, almost literally, forced to extract sense out of a mass of black marks covering over six hundred pages. But though at first sight the text appears to be a graphic chaos of misspelled words, the narrator comments that "... it is not a miseffectual whyacinthinous riot of blots and blurs and bars and balls and hoops and wriggles and juxtaposed jottings linked by spurts of speed: it only looks as like it as damn it . . ." (118.28).¹ The letters begin to make sense and some shadowy figures emerge from the text. These are: a Mr. Porter, a publican living in a Dublin suburb of Chapelizod, otherwise and better known as Humphrey Chimpden Earwicker, and usually called Humphrey because of a hump on his back, or Earwicker because he is said to resemble an insect called "earwig," guilt-ridden and haunted by an obscure sin; his wife, a Mrs. Porter, otherwise known as Anna Livia Plurabelle, who tries to defend her husband by writing a letter, and their children: the daughter Issy or Isolde, suffering from a personality disorder, and twin sons: Shem and Shaun (which are Irish forms of James and John), or Jerry and Kevin, or Mick and Nick, who fight with each other and with their father.

However, it takes some time and effort before the reader realizes that several different names and phrases may, in fact, refer to one and the same character. A Wakean hero is never the same and can assume different names depending on different circumstances, since "every person, place and thing in the chaosmos of Alle . . . was moving and changing every part of the time: . . . the as time went on as it will variously inflected, differently pronounced, otherwise spelled, changeably meaning vocable scriptsigns." The reader learns slowly to recognise that it is H.C. Earwicker that is hidden under the disguises of "Howth Castle and Environs" (3.03), "Haroun Childeric Eggeberth" (4.32), "Head-in Clouds [that] walked the earth" (18.22–3), Humpheres Cheops Exarchas (62.21), "hagious curious encester" (96.34), and "heavengendered, chaosfoetted, earthborn" (137.14). Mystery, obscurity and uncertainty seem to be immanently connected with him: he is a "hallucination, cauchman, ectoplasm" (133.24), "his hes heciteny Hec" (119.18), definitely, the "hardest crux ever" (623.33), "ech?" (623.09). Hundreds of such phrases refer to

¹ Since every edition of *Finnegans Wake* has the same number of pages and verses on each page, the quotes are traditionally identified by the page and verse number only, thus 118.20 means page 118, verse 20.

various aspects of his personality, and the only definite clue that lets the reader identify him are the initials: H, C, E. In case the reader has missed this the narrator directs his attention to them in the second chapter, devoted to the origin and background of the hero:

[t]he great fact emerges that . . . all holographs so far exhumed initialled by Haromphrey bear the sigla H.C.E. . . . which gave him as sense of those normative letters the nickname Here Comes Everybody. An imposing everybody he always indeed looked, constantly the same as and equal to himself and magnificently well worthy of any and all such universalisation . . . (32.18)

These initials function as indexical signs of the hero's presence. They as if emanate hundreds of names and phrases through which HCE manifests himself in the texture of the book. Thanks to this he becomes multiplied nearly *ad infinitum* and, simultaneously, reduced to these initials to become ultimately identified with them. Similarly, his female counterpart can be traced in phrases beginning with the letters A, L, and P, as in the following: "Anna . . . Livia . . . Plurabelle" (21.24), "Amnis Limina Permanent" (153.2), and "appy, leppy and playable" (41.23) and ends up being referred to as ALP. A massive number of such acrostical strings scattered throughout the whole book may be seen as an iconic device that directly reflects the characters' inherent plurality and universality.

The multiplicity of ALP's and HCE's incarnations makes it impossible to define them in the same way as characters in traditional fiction, even those who conceal or change their identity, such as, for example, Dickens' Provis / Magwitch of *Great Expectations*, or even Joyce's Leopold Bloom. Although the convict assumes different names, he does so to avoid the hand of the law and remains unequivocally one and the same person. Bloom, on the other hand, undergoes several transformations in "Circe," but this is only a singular, hallucinatory episode of an otherwise fairly stable and definable personality. The Wakean heroes can be defined rather as a bunch of features which are manifested in various historical, fictional, legendary or mythical figures, rather like dybbuks speaking through the bodies they haunt. Ultimately, since their only permanent trait is their initials, they boil down to HCE and ALP. They become indistinguishable from their initials – the graphic characters, which not only function as indexical signs of HCE's and ALP's presence, but be-

come one with the Wakean characters. This identification is so absolute that any differentiation between the characters as people represented in the story and the characters as graphic symbols becomes impossible. The signifier merges with the signified, the signs cease to point to any reality outside the textual world, they signify themselves. Thus the narrator calls the Earwickers: "Mister Typus, Mistress Tope and all the little tytopies" (20.12), and "The Doodles family: \square , \triangle , \neg , \times , \square , \wedge , \sqsubset . Hoodle doodle, fam?" (299.F4).²

The Doodles appear in several other places in the book. The first one to encounter is the rotated \sqcup , resembling a human figure or a bug lying on the back. Here, as Joyce explained in another letter to H.S. Weaver,³ the father, Earwicker / earwig assumes the form of the mythical giant Finn McCool interred in the landscape of Dublin and its environs, with his head in the Howth, the penis as the Wellington Monument in Phoenix Park and the feet as the Wicklow Hills, the vertical strokes of the letter representing them respectively. His body extends from a tiny island near the Howth Peninsula, called the Ireland's Eye, to the Wicklow Hills to the south of Dublin:

Well, Him a being so on the flounder of his bulk like an overgrown babeling, let wee peep, see, at Hom, well, see peegee ought he ought, platterplate. \sqcup Hum! From Shopalist to Bailywick or from ashtun to baronoath or from Buythebanks to Roundthehead or from the foot of the bill to ireglint's eye he calmly extensolies. (6.30–5)

²These symbols are the sigla Joyce used while writing *Finnegans Wake*, and which he incorporated into the book. In the letter of 24 March 1924 he wrote to Miss Weaver: "In making notes I used signs for the chief characters. It may amuse you to see them so I shall write them on the back of this.

\square (Earwicker, HCE by moving letter round)

\triangle Anna Livia

\sqsubset Shem-Cain

\wedge Shaun

ζ Snake

ρ S. Patrick

\top Tristan

\perp Isolde

\times Mamalujo

\square This stands for the title but I do not wish to say it yet until the book has written more of itself.

³Joyce in the letter of 13 May 1927 to H.S. Weaver.

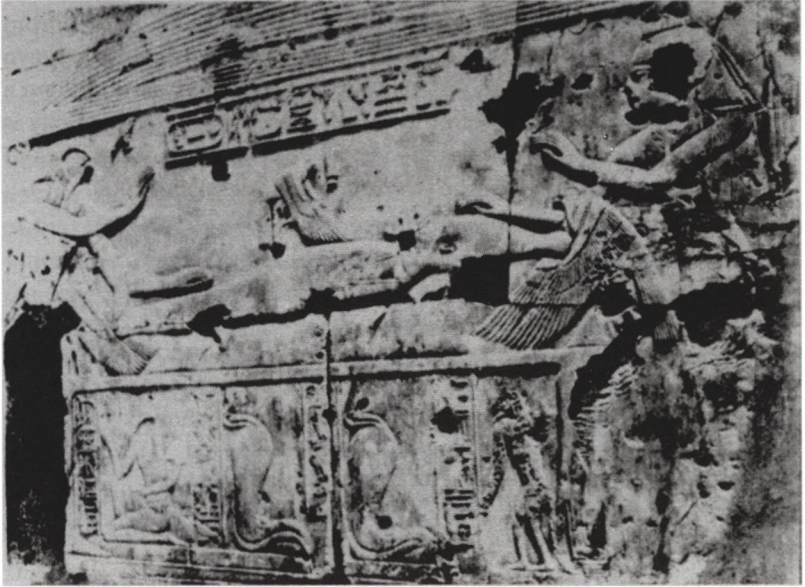


Figure 1. Plate X from A. Moret's *Rois et Dieux D'Égypte*.

The words preceding the icon encode the hero's initials: E sounds in "wee peep," "see" stands for C, "Him" and "Hom" indicate the capital H. The passage alludes to yet another mythological figure: Osiris, the ancient Egyptian god of the dead. M. Słomczyński discovered that this is an encoded reference to page 88 of A. Moret's *Rois et Dieux D'Égypte*, where one can see a picture of dead Osiris stretched in the same position as Earwicker, whose name "Humphrey" derives from Osiris Unefer (see Fig. 1). But 山 is also the Chinese ideogram denoting the mountain. The hump on HCE's back makes him look like one, and the narrator confirms later that "this man is mountain and unto changeth doth one ascend" (32.04–5); (cf. also "a man that means a mountain" in 309.04).

Just as HCE is a mountain, so ALP is a river and her siglum is Δ , the delta, the triangle reminiscent of the estuary of numerous rivers, as well as the Greek letter derived from the Egyptian word meaning "door" or "gate" (incidentally, the Chinese ideogram 入 for "enter," and "entry" is nearly alike). She is the Dublin River Anna Liffey and all the rivers of the world, as well as water in all forms. Her fluvial delta is the inlet to the sea: "the cold mad feary father" (628.02) and death: "A way a lone a last a loved

a long the" (628.15), and, simultaneously, the source of life issuing from her pubic triangle. "Anna Livia Plurabelle," i.e., chapter 8 of book 1 known under her name, begins with the triangularly shaped text issuing from a big O as if a river gushing from the spring. Here the imagic iconicity is reinforced by sound iconicity as the initial words contain several liquid "l" giving an impression that the words flow effortlessly from "O."

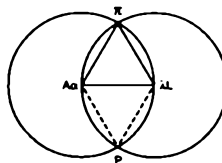
O

tell me all about

Anna Livia! I want to hear all

about Anna Livia. Well, you know Anna Livia? Yes, of course, we all know Anna Livia. Tell me all. Tell me now. You'll die when you hear. Well, you know, when the old cheb went futt and did what you know. Yes, I know, go on. Wash quit and don't be dabbling. Tuck up your sleeves and loosen your talk-tapes. And don't butt me – hike! – when you bend. Or whatever it was they threed to make out he thried to two in the Fiendish park. He's an awful old reppe. Look at the shirt of him! (196.01–1)

Joyce also uses other graphic elements to enhance ALP's visual character and make the reader *see* this. She is represented in a diagram showing the construction of the equilateral triangle, which unities all her vital aspects; thus it is "Uteralterance or the Interplay of Bones in the Womb" (293.L1), "The Vortex. Spring of Sprung Verse. The Vertex" (293.L2) as well as "Vieus Von DvbLln" (293.12). The diagram contains ALP as delta (with all its associations); and can be interpreted as an iconic image of the bird's eye view of Dublin, which resembles a circle or oval with $A\alpha-\lambda L$ line symbolising the river Anna Liffey; ALP's sexual organs, from which the twins have sprung; as well as "O," the source of language (words and verses). It can even represent the circular structure of the book itself, with its poles, "[c]oncaving now convexly to the semidemihemispheres, . . . from the female angle" (508.21).



In it the book (*Finnegans Wake*) is identified with the letter (O, Δ) and with the character represented by this letter (ALP). Perhaps in this play of signifiers the string of identifications can be extended even further, to the letter ALP wrote in defense of HCE. If so, any comment on her “mamafesta” must pertain to *Finnegans Wake*. But “[w]ho in his heart doubts either that the facts of feminine clothiering are there all the time or that the feminine fiction, stranger than the facts, is there also at the same time, only a little to the rere? Or that one may be separated from the other? Or that both may then be contemplated simultaneously? Or that each may be taken up and considered in turn apart from the other?” (109.30–6), asks the analyst who investigates her letter in chapter I.5. Joyce exploits such ambiguities to the extreme. If people can be letters, then letters can behave like human beings. The commentator of chronicles displayed in the Musyeroom of chapter I.1 notices that printed symbols resemble living creatures: they somersault and jump around the page, they lie down, make love and fight:

Here say figurines billycoose arming and mounting. Mounting and arming bellicose figurines see here. Futhorc, this liffle effingee is for a firing called a flintforfall. Face at the eased! O I fay! Face at the waist! Ho, you fie! Upwap and dump em, π face to μ -ace! When a part so ptee does duty for the holos we soon grow to use of an allforabit.

(18.33–19.02)

The horizontal position of “the lying effs” is an indexical trace of the actual movement that must have taken place. The letters have lied down and now resemble two bodies lying upside down in relation to each other, in the same way as Leopold and Molly are positioned at the end of episode 17 in *Ulysses* (606). This is another example of direct, imagic iconicity, immediately perceivable by the reader, who is encouraged to *see* the characters-letters making love or fighting. The position of Fs is reinforced by the symmetrical structure of the two preceding mirror sentences, in which the other is an almost perfect reversal of the first one, which is supposed to reflect their meaning. This time it is diagrammatic or secondary iconicity at work.

As this passage concerns different alphabets: the runic futhorc, as well as Greek, Hebrew, Latin ones (“Olives, beets, Kimmels, dollies, alfrids, beatties, cormacks and daltons.” 19.08), the animated Fs may also



Figure 2. Wakean multiple characters HCE and ALP (based on Joseph Balthazar Silvestre's *L'Alphabet Album*).

refer to obscene body alphabets in which shapes of letters were reproduced by various postures of naked bodies. But the reader has been warned that there are “curios of signs . . . in this allaphbed. . . Miscegenations on Miscegenations” (18.17, 20). So HCE and ALP may be literally made up of several persons, perhaps like in Figure 2.

The animated F, “that fretful fidget eff, the hornful digamma of your bornabarbar,” appears again in chapter I.5, dealing with the above mentioned letter written by ALP in defence of HCE. It features here as the “digamma” (Διγαμμα), an obscure Greek letter resembling F, corresponding to the Hebrew Vav, and pronounced as “W.” It was gradually simplified until it disappeared as a letter, though the labial sound φ was introduced instead. In the Latin alphabet it was substituted by F. The passage reconstructs its gradual disappearance; the character is:

rarely heard now save when falling from the unfashionable lipsus of some hetarosexual (used always in two boldfaced print types – one of them as wrongheaded as his Claudian brother, is it worth while interrupting to say? – throughout the papyrus as the revise mark) stalks all over the page, broods, ∫ sensationseeking an idea, amid the verbiage, gaunt, stands dejectedly in the diapered window margin, with its basque of bayleaves all aflutter about its forksfrogs, paces with a frown, jerking to and fro, flinging phrases here, there, or returns inhibited, with some half-halted suggestion, E, dragging its shoestring; the curious warning sign before our protoparent's *ipsissima verba* . . . (120.33–121.08)

Yet, curiously, the F seems to be a faded version of an even earlier sign; it is a graphic “half-halted suggestion” of E without the upper stroke. E looks like a misprint, or a visual echo of E, or, more likely, an anticipation, an imperfect prototype of the proper parent Ω . In a Wakean equation:

F (Διγάμμα, resembling F and pronounced as W) = *Finnegans Wake*
(commonly abbreviated to *FW*) = ALP's letter = Δ = a character = a letter
= E = Ω

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