

September 1987

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Recommended Citation

Colby Library Quarterly, Volume 23, no.3, September 1987, p.113-122

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"The Last Leaf" in *Finnegans Wake*

by JAMES WALTON

*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.
Finnegans Wake (628.6-8)*

THESE LINES on the last "leaf" of the *Wake* suggest that the life of the speaker is co-extensive with his/her art-dream, which in turn becomes infinitely extended by the book's ending. ALP intends that her death, or reunion with her *Bygmester* lover, should revive him and set him building again: "Soft morning, city! . . . Rise up, man of the hooths, you have slept so long! . . . there's a great poet in you" (619.20, 25-26, 31). The last leaf has reminded her ("Lff!") that she was once "leafy" (619.29), "Leafiest" (624.22), not to say "leafier" (Livia), but also that death precedes flowering as surely as flowering precedes death. A pun earlier in her monologue defines the paradox: "Only a leaf, just a leaf, and then leaves" (619.21-23), and much earlier, "while there's leaf there's hope" (227.17).

The "leaving" of ALP evokes in title, theme, and paradoxical design a famous O. Henry story whose artist-heroine arrives in the city in May hoping someday to paint the Bay of Naples and who languishes in November, yearning only for death, which she identifies with the disappearance of the last ivy leaf from the wall across from her garret: "I want to see the last one fall. I'm tired of waiting. I'm tired of thinking. I want to turn loose my hold on everything, and go sailing down, down, just like one of those poor, tired leaves" (O. Henry, 1133).

O. Henry's heroine is saved by a failed artist—gin-bitten, Nordic, sententious, compared to Moses—who, through the inducement of a woman, sinks low but mounts high like the avatars of Tim Finnegan. He scales a ladder on a stormy night to paint upon the tenement wall a leaf that stands for the young woman's life, then returns to his downstairs room and dies of her affliction.

The heroine has been as speechless (or as silently eloquent) as Gabriel Conroy in "The Dead," for "The loneliest thing in all the world is a soul when it is making ready to go on its mysterious, far journey." But the old artist's sacrifice restores her to speech, appetite, and love of self: "Something has made that last leaf stay there to show me how wicked I was. It is a sin to want to die. You may bring me a little broth now, and

some milk with a little port in it, and—no; bring me a hand-mirror first” (1134). Though they report a death, the ending of the *Wake* and the pot-boiler mark a beginning. For the death of O. Henry’s hero—a painted leaf, a girl’s life—is pronounced his “masterpiece” (1134). And Joyce’s heroine by dying resumes the tale.

II

“You have to be a cad before you can be an artist.”

“The Plutonian Fire,” *The Voice of the City* (1015)

NIGHT had fallen on that great and beautiful city known as Bagdad-on-the-Subway. And with the night came the enchanted glamour that belongs not to Arabia alone. In different masquerade the streets, bazaars, and walled houses of the occidental city of romance were filled with the kind of folk that so much interested . . . the late Mr. H. A. Raschid. . . . With the eye of faith, you could have seen the Little Hunchback, Sinbad the Sailor, Fitbad the Tailor, the Beautiful Persian, the one-eyed Calenders, Ali Baba and Forty Robbers on every block, and the Barber and his Six Brothers, and all the old Arabian gang easily.

But let us revenue to our lamb chops. (“What You Want,” *Strictly Business*, 1265)

Lacking external evidence, one explores vainly the rich pattern of O’s and Henrys, of Williams, Sydneys, and Porters, of references to America and to the Arabian Nights, for a clear view of the “Caliph of Bagdad” in the *Wake*’s kaleidoscope of popular culture.

William Sydney Porter began to receive wide attention in England posthumously in 1916 with the publication of a first shilling edition of his works, a biography (Smith), and influential essays by Stephen Leacock and St. John Adcock, who announced with a report on his English sales that the American writer was at last “triumphantly entering into his kingdom” (O. Henry, 1348). From then on, Porter became the subject of redundant sketches and reminiscences in the Anglo-American press. In the image these created of O. Henry (who twice used the pen-name James L. Bliss), Joyce, ever adept at seeing himself in others, would have beheld an extravagant tipper and tippler; a speculator, like the original Jim the Penman; a compulsive polylingual punster; an anatomist of the swarming city; and in his New York stories the laureate of that Irish-American population that is thought to have produced the ballad of Tim Finnegan.

Porter’s earliest journalistic pieces appeared in his own, unsuccessful *Rolling Stone* (1894–95; repr. in Harrell, 1923), then in the *Houston Post*, where he called himself the Post Man, and indeed his affinities are with the Shaun-Kevin branch of the Porter family, migratory and prolific, who “wend [them] to America to quest a cashy job” (562.31). Will, Porter, Post, and Rolling Stone are all part of Shaun’s identity as he begins his passage from guilt to glory (a passage that prefigures the last leaf of the *Wake*): “And may the mosse of prosperousness gather you rolling home! . . . ’Tis well we know you were loth to leave us, . . . right royal post, . . . pulse of our slumber, dreambookpage” (428.10–16). He is headed for “Amiracles” where “toll stories grow proudest” (427.23), fertile

ground for both the sharp reality and the sentimental fiction of "tramp-thickets" and "battercops" (428.26-27).

This identification would place Will Porter, though an American Southerner, in the company of such westering Irishmen as Dion Boucicault ("dyinboosycough," 95.8), John McCormack ("Joan Mock-Comic," 222.7), and William Tyrone Power ("What tyronte power!," 569.35): commercial travelers and Philistine sentimentalists who "touch Armourican's iron core" (447.6). To Joyce they are simoniacs, but the question from which all Porter allusions exfoliate concerns the identity of Pen and Post: ". . . why do I am alook alike a poss of porterpease?" (21.18-19. See McCarthy, 109: "Why do I look like I could pass as a Porter, please?").

O. Henry—cad, forger, Post Man—is the kind of artist to prompt such a question, for like the author of the *Wake* he characterizes his city as a dissonant choir of voices, "not combined, but mixed, and of the mixture an essence made" ("The Voice of the City," 979), and he perceives city and civilization alike as "a great river fed by a hundred alien streams. Each influx brings strange seeds on its flood, strange silt and weeds, and now and then a flower of rare promise" ("A Little Local Color," *Whirligigs*, 943). The magnanimity of this river-city seems embodied in Della of "The Gift of the Magi," whose "beautiful hair fell about her rippling and shining like a cascade of brown waters" (*The Four Million*, 8; cf. ALP: "First she let her hair fal and down it flussed to her feet its teviots winding coils. Then, mothernaked, she sampooed herself with galawater and fragrant pistania mud" [206.29-31]). O. Henry's Della and Delia of "A Service of Love" (*The Four Million*) are named like the Delias of the *Wake* for a fertility goddess, but to a less conventional view than the Post Man's they are also daughters of Delilah whose maiming or unmaning of themselves unmans their lovers. They are O. Henry's muses, and Shem's when he has been traduced as Sham, feminizing hack, whose house of fiction is "persianly literaturred" with "telltale stories," "vestas which had served," "borrowed brogues," "upset latten tintacks," "once current puns," "quashed quotatoes," "stale shestnuts," and "tress clippings" (183.10-29): Gifts of the Maggies.

Rather fetishist than female impersonator, Sham belongs not to the tradition of "Moll Pamelas" (569.29), Mollys, or Annas, but to that of such anti-*Biedermeier* realists as Balzac, Flaubert, and Maupassant, and, on a lower level, Arthur Morrison (?192.4) and O. Henry, who use downtrodden women (eveling[s], "foul clay" [186.23-24], "painful digests [183.21]) as an index of cultural paralysis. Each, according to Joyce's shrewd formulation, writes "the mystery of himsel in furniture" (184.9-10). The mystery of these authors' selves (or them's' else) is demonstrably feminine. In O. Henry it is inscribed in the "cryptograph" of debris in a Balzacian boarding house: "He was sure that since her disappearance from home this great, water-girt city held her somewhere, but it

was like a monstrous quicksand, shifting its particles constantly, with no foundation, its upper granules of today buried to-morrow in ooze and slime" (78). The hero seeks traces of his beloved amid the litter, the microchaos, of a furnished room:

The guest reclined, inert, upon a chair, while the room, confused in speech as though it were an apartment in Babel, tried to discourse to him of its divers tenantry.

A polychromatic rug like some brilliant-flowered rectangular, tropical islet lay surrounded by a billowy sea of soiled matting. Upon the gay-papered wall were those pictures that pursue the homeless from house to house—The Huguenot Lovers, The First Quarrel, The Wedding Breakfast, Pysche at the Fountain. . . .

The room had been but carelessly set in order. Scattered upon the flimsy dresser scarf were half a dozen hairpins. . . . These he ignored, conscious of their triumphant lack of identity. Ransacking the drawers of the dresser he came upon a discarded, tiny, ragged handkerchief. He pressed it to his face. It was racy and insolent with heliotrope; he hurled it to the floor. In another drawer he found odd buttons, a theatre programme, a pawnbroker's card, two lost marshmallows, a book on the divination of dreams. In the last was a woman's black satin hair bow, which halted him. . . . But the black satin hair bow also is femininity's demure, impersonal common ornament and tells no tales. ("The Furnished Room," *The Four Million*, 78-80)

Sham's Word (MYSTERY) is written "on the brow of her of Babylon" (185.12), and shadowed in "his penname SHUT sepia-scraped on the doorplate" (182.31); to speak it he must cross the "kathartic" ocean and emulate the rainy prankquean. The description of this act parodies the voice of the Psalmist commencing to celebrate the union of bridegroom and bride: "*Lingua mea calamus scribae velociter scribentis: magna voce cantitans, . . . demum et stercore turpi cum divi Orionis iucunditate mixto, cocto, frigorique exposito, encaustum sibi fecit indelibile*" (185.22-25; see O Hehir).

Sham's object is quick, copious production, and the *personae* of this prolific anti-self appear throughout the *Wake*. One is a witness at Festy King's trial, a certain W. P., regarded by his fellow W. C. frequenters as a priest in disguise. The description of his unmasking partially reveals his identity, for it is a variation of the Porter code: "letting down his rice and peacegreen coverdisk." His "Medical Square" address, as an allusion to Merrion Square, links him to Dublin's Porter clearly enough, but as a possible pun on Madison (Medicine) Square, it names a New York Porter's favorite haunt (86.32-36; a Madison-medicine pun occurs at 25.4).

At a trial for imposture where all are masked and for exhibitionism where all are anal aggressive, W. P. testifies against his other self, one Hyacinth O'Donnell, "wordpainter" and "mixer," who by his answers generates a medley of identities for himself, assisted by a guzzling porter-sound (the dream-transformation of Issy's chamber music) and by free association: "A loss of Lordedward and a lack of sirphilip a surgeonet showeradown could suck more gargling bubbles out of the five lamps in Porttterand's praise" (88.31-33). For the dreamer, "Lordedward" is followed by Fitzgerald, Fitzgerald by Major Sirr (his captor), Sirr by Philip Sidney (and perhaps Henry, the poet's father and lord deputy of

Ireland). These Sirs lead to the surgeon, Sir Philip Crampton, and thence (by way of the American general?) to the prolific family Sheridan ("showeradown"): Thomas, author of *The Art of Punning* (see 184.24); Frances, author of *Miss Sidney Bidulph* (a painful digest indeed);¹ Richard Brinsley, creator of the Shem-Shaunite brothers *Surface*. In the garbled question that follows—"Wirrgeling and maries?"—William and Mary enter the whirlpool: the allusion becomes somewhat clearer when W. P., surely a Will *and* a Porter by this time, is "willingly pressed" (note the journalistic connotation) by admiring "maidies of the bar" (92.12,14).

The riddle of identities proposes as many solutions as names, all of which are gathered into the identity of Hyacinth ("a loss" and "a lack" = AI) or Shaun. Although William, Sidney, and Porter are clearly present, can they be united along such an axis of titles and Anglo-Irish allusions to form a reference to "the little shop-girl's knight"? The author of that phrase, at least, Vachel Lindsay, made such a strained connection in a 1916 memorial verse to O. Henry:

THE KNIGHT IN DISGUISE

CONCERNING O. HENRY
(Sydney Porter)

Is this Sir Philip Sidney, this loud clown,
The darling of the glad and gaping town?
This is that dubious hero of the press
Whose slangy tongue and insolent address
Were spiced to rouse on Sunday afternoon
The man with yellow journals round him strewn.

The poem defends Porter's quashed quotatoes:

How coolly he misquoted. 'Twas his art—
Slave-scholar, who misquoted—from the heart.

His esiop's foibles (see Shaun at 422.22):

Esop the Greek, who made dull masters laugh
With little tales of *fox* and *dog* and *calf*.

And painful cases:

With something nigh to chivalry he trod—
The fragile drear and driven to defend—
The little shop-girls' knight until the end. (1338)²

By Joyce's reference to the five lamps (88.33) we can infer that the subject of the trial passage is an exploiter of wise virgins (Matthew 25:1-13), a distinctly Shaunite trait in a context where Shem and Shaun are "as like

1. The reputation of Frances Sheridan's novel (1761) was preserved by Samuel Johnson's remark to the author: "I know not, Madam, that you have a right, upon moral principles, to make your readers suffer so much." Hill, ed., I, 390.

2. Reprinted with a few changes from Lindsay, *General William Booth Enters into Heaven and Other Poems*, 52-54.

as a duel of lentils" (89.4), as "pease" in a pot. So, recurrently in the *Wake*, are bodily and imaginative functions, Dublin and American Porters ("our mixed racings have been giving two hoots or three jeers for the grape, vine, and brew" [117.22–23]). When HCE's sexuality goes on trial in III, iv, the language is legalistic and the theme is productiveness of the literary as well as the genital and urinary kind. Three types of sexual failure are cited: contraception (the rubber check signed by "Wieldhelm");³ frigidity ("contractural incapacity"); and premature ejaculation (Monsignore Pepigi, who by means of a pun on the Latin *pango*: to fasten, or make fast, becomes Will Breakfast, whose "pact was pure piffle"). The episode includes several American things – California, Brers Fox and Rabbit, *No, No, Nanette*: things, that is, characterized throughout the book by sterile abundance and here specifically by a trivial and evasive approach to sex. America's Annas are Nanettes, antiseptic cuties of the type responsible for Pepigi's shortcoming. They can serve Joyce neither as muse nor as mistress: "Will you, won't you, pango with Pepigi? Not for Nancy, how dare you do!" (573.35–576.8).

Pepigi is a generic name for quick, marketable, naive writers of the kind Sham aspires to be, like the authors of juvenile fiction for adults, like the scenarists of musical comedy. If Joyce was acquainted with Will Porter's misadventures with a bank and the law, with his journalist's pace and his sentimental heroines, then O. Henry is one of the characters signified by "Wieldhelm" and "Will Breakfast." Yet here as elsewhere there is none but the faint shadow of a specific allusion. A precedent cited against Pepigi is that of the "Calif of Man v. the Eaudelusk Company" (576.3). The party of the second part – eau de l'usque, or water of water – refers to the Twelve, spiritless "subporters" (372.9) whose sign is O (Hayman, 95–96). The party of the first, a phrase with many variants in the *Wake*, encompasses the beginning of the book's time (aleph/Manannan, or Mahan) and the end of its space (California/Manhattan), the old Adam and the new. Shaun, we recall, begins his journey to America "as innocent and undesignful as the freshfallen calef" (426.12–13).⁴ Called, like Haroun, the Orthodox (252.20, 358.29), he has learned in the Night Lessons to write like his "Bigdud dadder" (294.17); has become the "boon of broadwhite" (136.4–5): has acquired, like another Porter, banal status as a member of America's royalty, the Caliph of Bagdad.

If America, prolific and devouring, mechanized and manic, represents for Joyce the degeneration of culture, it must also serve, according to the *Wake's* economy, as symbol of regeneration. ALP has bestowed her mixed blessings on the children of both her banks. Her domain includes

3. As to the "D you D" check for which O. Henry went on trial, an illustration in Davis and Maurice (112) shows a promissory note signed "W. S. Porter" with the words "she is dead" scrawled across it by a collection agent.

4. This allusion includes Wyndham Lewis, *The Caliph's Design* (London: The Egoist Ltd., 1919).

what is highest and lowest in art as well as nature, and the novel's vision, which she personifies, requires confirmation from epic and comic strip, from Master Builder and artist *manqué*. The *Wake's* history lesson, of course, is in part an effort to reconstruct a letter from the states, full of slangy small talk. It sets static things in motion, presents time in spatial form, sets objects and events within a mock-teleology ("Goat and Compasses" [275.16]). Pub voices and revelations merge in its narrative of mountain-climbers like Hannibal and Moses whose descent was necessarily preceded and followed by their attainment of a summit. A footnote to this passage requests "A glass of peel and a pip for Mr Potter of Texas, please" (274.n3). The reference names a popular novel (on an East-West theme) that helped to spread the image of Texas gigantism through America and Europe.⁵ But as an echo of the prankquean riddle it punningly includes the Austin bank clerk whose star descended in the West and rose in the East. Text takes the high road, footnote the low.

The history lesson continues with the view, from a Greenwich Village address, of a "datetree doloriferous." The "date," temporal, signifies a reversal of the original sequence of creation and fall—1132. Restoration, and another fall, are to occur in the West: "Number Thirty two West Eleventh streak looks on to that (may all in the tocoming of the sempereternal speel spry with it!) datetree doloriferous which more and over leafeth earlier than every growth . . ." (274.12–17). A description of the view from O. Henry's Madison Square lodgings also includes a doloriferous tree (its name containing the Hyacinth emblem AI) and a suggestion of the fertility of an author's loneliness and pain:

He had . . . a window that looked out on a typical New York yard, boasting one ailanthus tree frowned upon by time-stained walls of other houses. More and more men began to seek him out, and he was glad to see them, for a good deal of loneliness enters into the life of a man who writes fiction during the better part of the day. (Davis and Maurice, 197)

In "The Last Leaf" the standing tree is replaced by a climbing one that must be restored through art by a climbing man:

There was only a bare, dreary yard to be seen, and the blank side of the brick house twenty feet away. An old, old ivy vine, gnarled and decayed at the roots, climbed half way up the brick wall. The cold breath of autumn had stricken its leaves from the vine until its skeleton branches clung, almost bare, to the crumbling bricks. (1132)

One ivy climber in the *Wake* is Boucicault's Shaun the Post, who in a stage illusion at the climax of *Arrah-na-Pogue* scales a wall, falls, and recovers. Another, perhaps (alas, only perhaps), is Behrman, the old painter in "The Last Leaf"—"Beerman's bluff," says Joyce's Shaun, "is what begun it" (422.31)—his own masterpiece also being an "efferfresh-painted livy" (452.19).

5. Archibald Claverling Gunter, *Mr. Potter of Texas* (1888). The novel and its impact are described in the O. Henry biography by Davis and Maurice (20).

Both Shaun and Will Porter see their heroines as nearly moribund, statuesque. "Livy" lies "in beautiful repose, upon the silence of the dead, . . . the last bust thing" (452.19-21); Johnsy "white and still as a fallen statue" (1133). Both heroines seek a deeper stillness amid the maelstrom. Johnsy's view from the Greenwich Village flat is as follows:

"They're falling faster now. Three days ago there were almost a hundred. It made my head ache to count them. But now it's easy. There goes another one. There are only five left now."

"Five what, dear? . . ."

"Leaves. On the ivy vine. When the last one falls I must go, too." (1132)

ALP's from 32 "West Eleventh streak" evokes, among countless other tales, the outlandish one, by an alien author, of a last leaf that survives the blast to end a young woman's dying and begin an old man's immortality:

and, elfshot, headawag, with frayed nerves wondering till they feeled sore like any woman that has been born at all events to the purdah and for the howmanyeth and howmovingth time at what the demons in that jackhouse that jerry built . . . , the sparksown fermament of the starryk fieldgosongingon where blows a nemone at each blink of the windstill they were sliding along and sleeting aloof and scouting around and shooting about. (274.17-27)

III

"Vass!" he cried. "Is dere people in de world mit der foolishness to die because leafs dey drop off from a confounded vine? . . . Vy do you allow dot silly pusiness to come in der brain . . .?" (1133)

Pimpim's Ornery forninehalf. Shaun Shemsen saywhen saywhen. . . . Thatll beall fortody. Cal it off. Godnotch vryboily. End a muddy crushmess! Abbreciades anew York gustoms. (533.33-534.2)

Is O. Henry in the Yawn broadcast, whose world market report mingles the name of wine and spirits, livestock and authors, in a babel of melting pot jargon? Is he in the class of realists residing among "tress clippings" at the House of Sham? Is his Behrman (Bear-man/"Beerman"), whose "Moses beard curl[ed] down from the head of a satyr" (1133), among the climbers memorialized in the Night Lessons? Is the view from West Eleventh streak his, among others'? Above all, does the prankquean's riddle, whose structure generates so many rich variants, provide a place for Mr. Porter of Texas?

The question of O. Henry's presence at the *Wake* can be answered lamely enough: he *should* be there because Everybody is. Yet indeed most *Wake* commentary is founded on the perception that univocal meaning throughout the book has been methodically shattered, its fragments adhering to consistent patterns like the units of a numerical progression which the reader can always extend but never complete, making him a joyous collaborator in literature's most inclusive anatomy.

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