

Introduction

"Sacriligious Languages"

"to start with in the beginning . . . a community prayer"

This study examines James Joyce's pervasive use of prayer as a theory of language and communication in *Finnegans Wake*. From utterance and gesture to familiar everyday exchanges, prayer appears in the book frequently enough to function as a lingua franca that describes the organization of reality that Joyce seeks to present. Moreover, prayer serves as a vehicle for amplifying emotion and poetic expressiveness. In his search for elemental forms by which to represent experience, Joyce looks to prayer as a unifying feature that is essential to the sequence of the four books that constitute *Finnegans Wake*. These books correspond to the following themes: the nexus of image and word from which writing is born; the equation of verbal agency and magic; the interrelationship between poetry and dreams; and the glorification of ordinary speech that prevails at the end of Joyce's book.

The most direct evidence of prayer's foundational presence in Joyce's linguistic framework for the *Wake* is "Isolde's night prayer," a passage found in an unpublished manuscript page of one of the earliest notebook sketches for *Finnegans Wake*.¹ Dated somewhere between December 1922 and March 1924, this sketch points to Joyce's engagement with prayer from the earliest phase of the *Wake*'s conceptualization. The entry begins in pencil—with words such as "her one little prayer" and "patternother" (paternoster) written over in pen—in an unusually legible hand, as follows:

For her piety Isolde's night prayer and orison so ran:

Howfar wartnevin alibithename Kingcome illbedone nerth tism-
evin. Usisday daybread givesdressp sweegivethem dresspas gainstus
leesnot tootntation liversm evil Men.

It matters greatly that Joyce chose to experiment with the paternoster, or Lord's Prayer, at this early stage of the *Wake's* creation.² The passage itself is relatively lengthy and yet manages to elide ordinary language in ways that are entirely naturalistic. Our Father becomes "Howfar," and "Give us this day" becomes "Usisday." The passage is set in the context of Isolde's girl-child learning, centered on nursery geography and domestic arts. Isolde is the precursor to Issy, the precocious little sister to Shem and Shaun, who in the footnotes to II.2, the "schoolhouse" chapter, is the voice of counternarrative and critique against the boys' traditional modes of knowledge and book learning. That in his notes Joyce gives to Isolde a garbled English rendition of the prayer makes the passage even more interesting because it suggests that Issy's DNA, like that of Stephen in *Ulysses* and the *Wake* as a whole, has the religious strain injected backward. Thus, even in this preliminary note, Joyce uses prayer to suit the developing themes of the book: "alibithename" suggests clandestine activity that must be covered up; "illbedone" points to the human tendency to do harm, as evidenced by the flow of history; and "evil Men" heralds what will become Issy's ongoing complaints about sexual politics. Regardless of whether Joyce incorporated this particular devotion intact in the finished book, its appearance early in the compositional process suggests that prayer ranked high among the various forms of language that Joyce bore in mind as he worked. Multiple adumbrations of the prayer would eventually be ubiquitous in *Finnegans Wake*—so much so that quite separate from any connection to religious practice or conviction, prayer comes to stand in for the process of gaining knowledge and for the ontological construction of characters (including letters) and words.

The edited facsimile manuscripts of *Finnegans Wake*, from the University at Buffalo James Joyce Collection, bear further evidence of Joyce's predisposition to find in prayer the elements of learning, knowing, and communication. An overview of VI.B.25 and VI.B.6 demonstrates how prayer is embedded in Joyce's imagination. In their "sacrilegious" way, these notebooks tell us that Joyce early on found inspiration in sacred words and religious reading (Latin: *legere* "to read"), as well as their echoes in

ordinary life. We can start with the notebook words “paternoster (bait),” which Joyce took from the *Guide to Bognor*: “Fishing with ‘Paternoster’ is recommended from the Pier, as various depths of the bait will suit the habits of different fish” (VI.B.25:031). The editors of the notebooks remark that the bait line resembles a rosary; moreover, “bait the trout” appears earlier in VI.B.2:053 and forms part of a fishing list in the next draft.

Elsewhere, VI.B.25 richly references prayer. Apart from the mention of St. Kevin on VI.B.25:144, VI.B.25:147 has the words “Book of Common/Prayer”; and VI.B.25:153 notes “passion,” “clerical habits,” and Kevin as “incensed.” On VI.B.25:154, we find “ecclesiosological” and “liturgiological” side by side, as well as “extempore prayer” crossed out and followed with “common.” Pages 172–78 continue Joyce’s notation of matters ranging from vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience to the observance of canonical hours as he lists them on 176: “Lauds,” “Prime,” “Terce,” “Sext,” “None,” “Vespers,” and “Compline.” Finally, VI.B.25 ends with the crossed-out words “precreated” and “postcreated,” singular vocabulary that surfaces in the description of St. Kevin at prayer in book III of *Finnegans Wake*. VI.B.25, our editors note, also contains extensive material pertaining to St. Kevin, including lists of the various numerally organized sacraments, hierarchies, and other religious material that abounds in Joyce’s book.

VI.B.6 begins with the words “[pray] fervently they [may] / not depart this life / till they have,” a fragment that makes its way to the finished book as “will fervently pray to the spirit above that they may never depart” (472.32). Later, on VI.B.6:163, we read the crossed-out line, “than those in heaven.” The editors tell us that this line derives from a February 11, 1924, piece in the *Freeman’s Journal* about a murder trial in Waterford, which reads as follows: “The two accused made statements when arrested:—. . . Leahy said: ‘I had no more to do with it than those in heaven. I was in bed that night at half-past nine.’” They note that the passage is not located in either manuscript or finished editions of the *Wake*. I wish to suggest that Joyce’s eye may well have been caught by the words “those in heaven” not only for their colorful value but also for their echo of “who art in heaven.” As is the case with all other parts of the paternoster, this phrase’s echo is so pervasive in the *Wake* that it cannot be traced to a single source but instead manifests as a foundation, or substrate, of *Finnegans Wake*. I would add that Joyce may well have reveled in the source of these words, coming as they did in the form of an alibi (“alibithename”) and reinforcing his theme