

“Knock Knock”: Enabling Dislocation in *Finnegans Wake*

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Those readers familiar with *Finnegans Wake* II.3, the tavern chapter, will recall the “knock knock” passage, which occurs near the end of this section’s first extended tale: the radio play about the Norwegian captain and Kersse, the tailor. The knocking and the verbal banter that accompanies it constitute a narrative interruption, one of many in a chapter that features multiple diegetic dimensions. These narrative streams include radio and television programs, commentary on these programs by the tavern’s barkeep and its rowdy patrons, and brief exchanges between the bartender and his family and domestic servant – to mention only the most prominent of these narrative channels. The “knock knock” passage appears just as the Norwegian sailor and the tailor’s daughter have married and settled down together. Here’s the passage:

Knock knock. War’s where! Which war? The Twwinns. Knock
knock. Woos without! Without what? An apple. Knock knock.
(*FW* 330.30-32)



In this essay, with its accompanying collages, we'd like to unpack some of the semantic resonance of this brief, but deceptively complex exchange. Further, and more importantly perhaps, we'd like to explore the effect of this passage – at least its effect on those readers who get the joke, if there is a joke – as an enactment of a particular type of *dislocution*, to invoke Fritz Senn's term to which we will return presently.

Most native English speakers will recognize the characteristic, though here distorted pattern of the children's knock-knock joke, or riddle, in the lines in question. This genre of joke is interactive in that it calls for participation from the person to whom it is told in a call-and-response format that climaxes with a pun as its punch-line. Here's an example:

Joker: *Knock, knock!*

Listener: *Who's there?*

Joker: *Harry.*

Listener: *Harry who?*

Joker: *Harry up and open the door – it's cold out here!*

It is not clear exactly where or when the knock-knock joke originated, though according to one source it has been a “staple of American humor since the early 20th century” and “by the mid 1930s, knock-knock jokes were to be heard everywhere [in the U.S.]. Strangers told them on the streets. Businesses staged knock-knock contests. Swing orchestras wove knock-knock schtick into songs.”¹ This comic craze seems to have peaked in the U.S. in 1936, by which time it had also reached the U.K. (ibid.). Joyce inserted the passage in question as a handwritten emendation to the first typescript copy of the tavern chapter in early 1935 (*JJA* 54, 58). It is unknown, at least to us, where and when Joyce would (or could) have heard his first knock-knock joke, though he might have gotten the idea from Giorgio (who was living in the U.S. in 1934 and into 1935) or from one of his American friends or associates in Paris at the time. The joke’s characteristic discursive structure, here underpinning an instance of narrative disruption, appears nowhere else in the *Wake*, at least not this clearly.² Moreover, the pattern of its articulation is sufficiently distorted as to raise the question of whether Joyce is miming the knock-knock riddle’s format at all in this passage. We are not alone in this reading, however, which Patrick McCarthy and Grace Eckley, both excellent readers of the *Wake*, have also asserted.³ For this reason, it is an interpretive possibility that we should not blithely dismiss. Let’s accept its hypothetical validity for the moment and probe this gloss a little deeper.

Given that this is *Finnegans Wake*, it is not surprising that Joyce has restructured the foundation of the knock-knock joke's familiar discursive pattern – deconstructed the riddle, if you prefer. Here is a schematic representation of the passage:

Knock knock.

Joker: *War's where!*

Listener: *Which war?*

Joker: *The Twwinns.*

Knock knock.

Joker: *Woos without!*

Listener: *Without what?*

Joker: *An apple.*

Knock knock.

It is possible that the one who is knocking – the joker or riddler in the standard paradigm of the jest – is merely verbalizing, rather than doing the knocking in this case. However, given the naturalistic context of the bar scene with which we can most readily associate this narrative intrusion, it seems more likely that it is the sound of knocking, rather than its verbal enunciation, that the text is rendering here – hence our separation of the “knock knock” from the discourse in the outline above. If this is indeed the case, it would seem that someone is knocking while simultaneously identifying, albeit obliquely, him- or herself.

There are, of course, additional exceptions to the standard knock-knock routine in these lines. The answers to the riddles – “the Twwinns” and “an apple” – are not puns, as we would expect in the standard format, though they are distortions of the would-be visitors' identities. In “the Twwinns,” we recognize not only the battling brother motif (“War's where”) but a visually

duplicative representation of the nature of Shem and Shaun's kinship, in the doubled double-u and the doubled en in the drawn-out word "Twwinns." In the second, or more precisely the third, knocker (who "woos without ... an apple"), we recognize a female temptress whose Adam's apple, by nature, is small enough to appear non-existent, and who seems clearly a manifestation of ALP, both as Eve and one whose monogram is anagrammatically embedded in the word "apple." We glimpse Issy in this third figure as well, for the doubled pee suggests the young girl's reflected image, the double with whom she is so much and so often taken. She is also, of course, frequently associated with Shem and Shaun. According to Ellmann, Joyce glossed this passage himself in a conversation with American art critic and historian, James Johnson Sweeney: "He explained to Sweeney that Cain and Abel were the origin of war; the second 'w' in 'Twwinns' ... was for Eve, and meant, as the next phrases indicated, 'without an apple,' for she had been born without an Adam's apple" (*JJII* 707). In still another variation on the standard pattern of the knock-knock routine, the repetition of the knocking – which occurs three times in this passage, rather than the single instance which characterizes the traditional knock-knock joke – links ALP and the children's attempt to enter the pub with the Prankquean's three attempts to enter Jarl Van Hoothe's castle in Chapter I.1, usually with a child in tow both entering and leaving (*FW* 21.05-23.15).



**she was back again at Jarl von Hooter's and the
Larryhill with her under her abromette.** (22.18-20)

It is this repeated knocking, which does not occur in the more compact framework of the classic knock-knock joke, that most compellingly suggests a different intertextual echo in these lines. Many readers will recall the comic response of the drunken porter to the repeated rapping at the gate of the castle immediately following Duncan's murder in the opening of act II, scene 3 in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. In this scene, the porter stumbles to answer the door, while repeating

aloud to himself the sound of the knocking. Here is an abbreviated version of his heavy-headed soliloquy:

[*Knocking.*] Knock, knock, knock. Who's there, i'th' name of
Belzebub? – Here's a farmer, that hang'd himself on th' expectation
of plenty ... [*Knocking.*] Knock, knock. Who's there, i'th' other
devil's name? – Faith, here's an equivocator, that could swear in
both the scales against either scale ... [*Knocking.*] Knock, knock,
knock. Who's there? – Faith, here's an English tailor come hither
for stealing out of a French hose ...⁴

Both the porter's drunkenness and his allusion to an old joke about a tailor signal the relevance of this intertextual reading of this particular passage in the *Wake*, in which the pub's intoxicated patrons are listening to and commenting on a radio play in which a tailor plays a prominent role. And Joyce was, of course, thoroughly familiar with Shakespeare's work. We are not alone in *this* interpretation of the passage either, which both Vincent Cheng and Vike Plock, two more scrupulous readers of *Finnegans Wake*, have posited.⁵

It is not our intent to argue the relative merits of these two intertextual readings or to establish whether one is more appropriate or legitimate than the other. On the contrary, it seems to us that both are viable. Furthermore, once a reader has alighted on these allusions, seen and heard them in the lines in question, these sources of potential intertextual influence irrevocably color that reader's experience of the passage, for better or worse, rightly or wrongly. This, we would suggest, is an effect generated by a certain type of Joycean dislocation.

Fritz Senn introduced this concept primarily to describe the linguistic and discursive mechanics of *Ulysses*, though acknowledging its potentially greater, even overwhelmingly

pervasive applicability to *Finnegans Wake*. At its root denoting phrasings (or “locutions”) that change direction in some sense (thus the term “dis-location”), Senn speaks of this “waywardness,” this “deviation,” as a kind of “spatial metaphor for all manner of metamorphoses, switches, transfers, [and] displacements” that contribute to the “overall significance of speech and writing.”⁶ Dislocation is dynamic; it refers to linguistic and discursive processes that veer away from readers’ or listeners’ expectations, deviations that potentially disrupt the flow of easy and transparent comprehension. Dislocation is thus a trope that constitutes the very fabric of *Finnegans Wake*, which we might recognize as the dislocated text *par excellence*.

In the knock-knock passage, as a diegetic shifting away from what is already a relentlessly uncertain interpretive context, we discern an “Enterruption” or “Dvershen” (*FW* 332.36). The allusions to the knock-knock joke, to *Macbeth*, or to both, provide readers some purchase on the already heavily dislocutionary prose that depicts the scene in the tavern. This intertextual intrusion, clearly announced by the acts and sounds of knocking, creates a welcome diversion from the otherwise obscure narrative by supplying the reader with a familiar distraction: “Ah yes, it’s a knock-knock joke,” or “I know this scene: it’s the drunken porter’s babbling in *Macbeth*.” Thus, we might construe the structure, content, theme, and even rhythm of this passage as manifesting a doubly dislocutionary narrative tactic – that is, a dislocation within a discourse that is already thoroughly dislocated – that paradoxically introduces a moment of false clarity into the text, a familiar refrain that gives readers some relief from the persistently obscure discourse that surrounds it. For this reason, we might call this particular type of deviation an “enabling dislocation” – that is, a dislocation that, in spite of its deviant complexity,

rekindles in readers the courage and the will to read on through the endless thicket of the book's dense prose.

While the effect of the knock-knock passage may be particularly illustrative in this regard, this type of dislocation, one that enables, while at the same time diverting the reader, is of course actually widespread in the *Wake*. It is the source of that sense of temporary security and false mastery that we experience, however fleetingly, whenever we perceive the intertextual echoes of popular songs, nursery rhymes, historical events, or other literary texts in *Finnegans Wake*. Under different circumstances in other works of literature we might dismiss or find fault with these interpolations as gratuitous, inconsequential, out of place, or even nonsensical disruptions of what is essentially non-dislocated prose. Herein lies the danger of the concept, which Senn himself warns fits "so generally [when applied to *Finnegans Wake*] that it ought to make us suspicious" (211). For this "enterruption" or "dvershen," which shunts us from the primary narrative to an intertextual track of seemingly marginal importance, is still, at its core, another knot of overdetermined significance in the *Wake*'s densely woven skein. To go back one more time to the passage in question, situated as it is in the tavern chapter, let's recall what the knocking interrupts. In the radio play, the Norwegian captain and the tailor's daughter, figures of HCE and ALP, respectively, have just married and settled into their home – "He goat a berth. And she cot a manege. And wohl's gorse mundom ganna wedst" (*FW* 330.28-29).



He goat a berth. And she cot a manege. (330.28)

When the “twwinns” and Issy suddenly appear, they are knocking on the pub door (on the naturalistic plane of the chapter), while at the same time entering the lives of the two newlyweds (within the tale of the Norwegian captain and the tailor’s wife). The key shift-points here are the words “knock knock,” a repetition of a term whose familiar, vulgar usage, as far back as at least the 18th century, referred to sexual intercourse.⁷ This sense of the word survives in the more contemporary phrase, dating back to at least the 19th century, to “knock up,” or to make pregnant.⁸ The sexual nuance of the knocking, a meaning of the word that is partially concealed by the intertextual shadings that underwrite the passage, is confirmed by the first few words of the sentence that follows – “The kilder massed, one then uhindred [the children (German, *Kinder*) amassed, one ten and a hundred], (harefoot, birdyhands, herringabone,

beesknees), and they barneydansked a kathareen round to know the who and to show the howsome” (*FW* 330.33-35).



**The kilder massed, one then and uhindred,
(harefoot, birdyhands, herringabone,
beesknees), and they barneydansked a
kathareen round to know the who and to
show the howsome. (330.33–35)**

Thus, the knocking announces the children's arrival both at the door of the pub and within the story that is being recounted there in the radio play. The process through which this passage discloses its multifaceted interpretation underscores how a dislocation, and what in this case we are specifically calling an enabling dislocation, both disrupts and furthers the development of the *Wake*'s discourse, how it both reassures and bedevils the reader with its "enterruption," its "dvershen." It is perhaps useful to recall here Samuel Beckett's astute observation that *Finnegans Wake* "is not *about* something, *it is that something itself*."⁹ As such, the *Wake* enacts its particularly radical linguistic process through a chain of signifiers cast adrift, perpetually dislocated, from their commonplace semantic moorings. Reading it forces us to weigh anchor as well – that is, to go with the flow of its continuously dislocutionary prose – even as we cling to some of its more familiar undercurrents.

Notes

¹ Linton Weeks, "The Secret History of Knock-Knock Jokes," accessed 15 May 2019, <http://www.npr.org/sections/npr-history-dept/2015/03/03/389865887/the-secret-history-of-knock-knock-jokes>.

² We do hear distant echoes of the joke's characteristic pattern of exchange in "Kick nuck, Knockcastle! Muck!" (*FW* 379.01); and "A space. Who are you? The cat's mother. A time. What do you lack? The look of a queen" (*FW* 223.23-24).

³ Patrick A. McCarthy, *The Riddles of “Finnegans Wake”* (Rutherford, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1980), 111; Grace Eckley, *Children’s Lore in “Finnegans Wake”* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1985), 126.

⁴ William Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of Macbeth*, in *The Riverside Shakespeare*, 2nd ed., ed. G. Blakemore Evans, with the assistance of J.J.M. Tobin (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997), 1368.

⁵ Vincent Cheng, *Shakespeare and Joyce: A Study of “Finnegans Wake”* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1984), 210-211; Vike Martina Plock, “‘Knock knock. War’s where!’: History, *Macbeth*, and *Finnegans Wake*,” *Joyce Studies Annual*, 2009, 221.

⁶ Fritz Senn, “Dislocation,” in *Joyce’s Dislocations: Essays on Reading as Translation*, ed. John Paul Riquelme (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), 202. Further references to this work will be indicated parenthetically in the text.

⁷ Francis Grose, *A Classical Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue*, ed. Eric Partridge (London: Routledge & K. Paul, 1963).

⁸ John Camden Hotten, *The Slang Dictionary: Etymological, Historical, and Anecdotal* (London: Chatto and Hindus, 1874).

⁹ Samuel Beckett, “Dante... Bruno. Vico. Joyce,” in Beckett et al., *Our Exagmination Round His Factification for Incamination of Work in Progress* (London: Faber and Faber, 1972), 14.