

“What Can’t Be Coded Can Be Decoded”: Ciphering and Codification in *Finnegans Wake*

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The tradition of ciphering and encoding messages can be traced back to antiquity, probably due to the fact that privacy and secrecy have always been inner qualities of mankind, making it distinct from other animals. Some of these hermetic techniques of writing are simplistic or very basic, but others are the result of sophisticated apparatus and complex mental associations devoted to conceal relevant information, avoiding the interference of curious readers. Secret messages, thus, can be elaborated by using two different techniques, either steganography or cryptography.

By means of steganography,¹ on one hand, an ordinary message is made occult to the eyes of the reader, for example, by writing it down on the skull of the messenger, awaiting then for his hair to grow longer, which was a common practice in old times. Another popular device was the use of invisible ink, which has endured throughout time experimenting sophisticated improvements, though it is also well-known that some spies have been obliged to make use of their own urine when lacking any other material to delete their writing, as Simon Singh explains.²

Cryptography, on the other hand, is a term that derives from the Greek “kruptein” or “to hide,” and “graphos” or “writing,” yet, as opposed to the previous system, in this case the message is not concealed but ciphered, or rather, codified. The difference between the former and the latter is that, while a ciphered text substitutes one single letter for a different letter or for others, codification implies substitution at a higher level, that is, replacing words or whole sentences. In this sense, the term “decipher” is mainly employed when trying to read the letters of a message one by one, whereas the terms “codify” and “decode” can be generally applied when referring to both ways of creating hermetic messages (Singh 42).

James Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake* is undoubtedly the darkest work written by the Irish author, and indeed, at first glance the book gives the impression that it has been written by using a secret system of codification.³ The main problem, however, is the lack of a unique key to decipher the enigmatic writing of *Finnegans Wake* since the text itself constantly demands new solutions as the work develops. At the same time, Joyce’s tendency to

enclose universal messages within particular events, characters or anecdotes is also present in the sense that, in *Finnegans Wake*, the letter and by extension the whole book, is concealed as well as codified.

Concerning steganography, for example, a notable passage is the one in which Shem "the penman," author of the famous letter accusing his father, enumerates the elements he combines to produce his own ink, providing a scatological catalogue of excrement materials among which he also mentions his own urine (FW 185.14-26). Moreover, the same ink is described as "the indelible ink" (185.26), conveying the meanings of both "indelible" and "illegible." But apart from its organic composition, the letter itself is inserted in a bottle: "combarative embottled history" (140.33) and is found by the hen digging in the soil. The concealment of the letter, as relevant as it may be for the development of the book, is infinitely less mysterious to the reader than the codification of its message, and in that respect, *Finnegans Wake* is an astonishing exhibition of the most popular ciphering and codifying techniques.

Already in *Ulysses*, Joyce proved to have a particular interest in those techniques, making it more explicit in "Ithaca," where the narrator reveals a piece of paper written in a secret manner among the contents of Bloom's drawer: "the transliterated name and address of the addresser of the 3 letters in reversed alphabetic boustrophedonic punctated quadrilinear cryptogram (vowels suppressed) N. IGS./WI. UU. OX./W. OKS. MH/Y.IM" (U 17.1798-801).⁴ As a continuation of Joyce's interest, *Finnegans Wake* immortalizes some of the most popular systems of cryptography and ciphering. This is the case of the so-called "atbash" method, a traditional Hebrew system of writing which owes its name to the combination of the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet, "aleph," followed by the last letter, "taw," plus the second one, "beth," and finally, the second letter starting from the end, "shin" (Singh 39). An example can be found in Jeremiah, 51: 41, where the name "Babel" is replaced by "Sheshach." A similar example also occurs in *Finnegans Wake*, where a punctual footnote reads as follows: "Where he fought the shessock of his stimmstammer" (272n4). The reader should not read this footnote in isolation, but in relation to the main textual body wherein it has been inserted: "Foamous homely brew, bebattled by bottle, gageure de guegerre" (272.28-29). Joyce's neologism, "stimmstammer," therefore, is a clear allusion to H.C.E.'s stutter, which is linked to the couple "bebattled by bottle" suggesting the textual battle as well as the character's stutter again by means of alliteration. The difficulty of verbal communication is thus made implicit by the character's handicap when speaking, together with a reference to the "embottled history" mentioned above in this essay. Moreover, the couple "bebattled by bottle" also suggests the name "Babel," alluded in the footnote by its corresponding "atbash" substitute, in Joyce's version, "shessock."

Most systems of codification are the result of bright minds and ingenious

mechanisms, though the most primitive system was probably the monoalphabetic substitution, or in other words, replacing a letter by another one or by a different sign. On certain occasions, the text may include “empty” letters, intending to detain the task of the reader, which are not difficult to solve when dealing with a short text, but can become confusing as the text is extended. It is not rare to encounter in *Finnegans Wake* some cases of omitted vowels, as in “Dbln” (13.14), “W.K.” (503.12), “Lff” (628.07) or “blzb” (194.179), translated as “Dublin,” “Wake,” “Liffey” and “belzebu,” respectively. Also, a curious usage of letters is the sequence ABCD that can be found throughout the whole book, usually evoking the alphabet as well as being a synonym of mental abstraction and erudition, as in “abcdminded” (18.17). There are other cases, however, where the sequence is slightly altered: “Please stop if you’re a B.C. minding missy, please do. But should you prefer A.D. stepplease” (272.12-14). According to Campbell and Robinson,⁵ the musical keys appearing on the left margin of the same page reveal the same sequence, and a similar organization of the letters already appeared in “Wandering Rocks,” in the following passage: “the honourable Gerald Ward A.D.C. From the window of the D.B.C. Buck Mulligan . . .” (208.1223-24). Even when the order has suffered a transformation, the reader’s mind imposes its own organization, re-ordering the sequence as it should appear according to the customary arrangement, which provides a brief sample of the complex functioning of the human mind.

It cannot be questioned that one of the best-known systems of codification is the Morse alphabet, which, due to its universality, also finds its place among the pages of *Finnegans Wake*. In book 1, chapter 5, thus, the “Cad” attacks the male protagonist with a stick which, at the same time, stands for a pen since in some versions, the attacker is no other than Shem, “the penman.” The injuries caused to the victim, in this context, can be seen as the punctuation signs made by the pen, and the holes or “paper wounds” (FW 124.03) are similar to the signs used in the Morse alphabet, mixing the textual “dots” with the victim’s laments: “stop, please stop, do please stop, and O do please stop” (124.04-05). In addition to this, the symbols that represent Earwicker’s family, at the end of the “Nightlessens” chapter, keep a close resemblance with the freemason alphabet, and in fact, the protagonist is defined at the beginning of the work as a “freeman’s maurer” (4.18) or “freemason.”

As a way of anecdote, Philibert Babou, famous cryptographer working for Francis I of France, acquired his popularity because he devoted most of his life to the decipherment of an intercepted message, but also because in so doing, he neglected his wife, who ended up keeping an adulterous relationship with the king himself. It is difficult to determine whether Joyce was aware of this anecdote or not, though it does not seem a mere coincidence that some passages of his last work include the following:

“Baaboo, the burgeoismeister, who thought to touch both himmels at the punt of his risen stiffstaff” (191.35-36) or also: “Why, they might be Babau and Momie! . . . Can you reverse positions? Lets have a fuchu all round . . . Leas and love potients for Leo, the next beast king” (191.35-36), the latter making a clear allusion to sexual intercourse. Curiously enough, Joyce was nicknamed among his relatives as “Baboo,” a coincidence that links the negligent French decoder to the eccentric Irish codifier.⁶

Numbers, as well as letters, have been widely used in cryptography, and numbers in *Finnegans Wake* frequently comprise mysterious meanings, like the cipher 1132. Number 11, on the one hand, implies rebirth or regeneration, being the beginning of a new sequence after 10. The couple 32, on the other hand, is the digit expressing the fall of bodies, as Leopold Bloom constantly recalls all along his peripatetic journey. 1132, thus, may be interpreted as a variation of the title itself, *Finnegans Wake*, combining the fall of the protagonist with his resurrection altogether. Sometimes, both numbers and letters are conjoined, giving way to a complex equation that includes characters and little stories, ramifications of the main plot. The rivalry between the twins Shem and Shaun, and their fight against their own father to gain the love of Issy, is exemplified in book 1, chapter 6 in the triad Burrus-Caseous-Antonio, fighting for the love of Cleopatra: “This Antonio-Burrus-Caseous grouptriad may be said to equate the *qualis* equivalent with the older socalled *talis* on *talis* one just as quantly as in the hyperchemical economantarchy . . . so that eggs is to whey as whay is to zeed like your golfchild’s abe boob caddy” (167.04-08). The three male names have a Latin reminiscence, though Burrus and Caseous can also be read as “butter” and “cheese” and are connected with the relationship between Bacon and Shakespeare already initiated in “Scylla and Charybdis” (160.410). If Shem and Shaun are butter and cheese, their father, Earwicker, is “the eggs,” which is not strange taking into account one of the versions of his fall as the fall of Humpty Dumpty. “Eggs,” by homophony, is linked to the graphic symbol “X,” in the same manner that “whey” and “whay” can be represented by “Y.” Finally, “zeed” can be read as “seed,” and represented by the letter “Z.” To sum up, we may obtain several equations from this brief story:

H.C.E.=Antonio=Eggs=X=qualis
 Shem and Shaun=Burrus and Caseous=Y=*talis*&*talis*
 X=Y=Z=ABCD

Following the whole process, the final solution is the end of the characters’ dispute and the reconciliation of opposites since Shem and Shaun are made equal. Also, their own father is made of the union of the two sons, creating the ABCD of the story/history, or the narrative of *Finnegans Wake*, in a combination of narration with characters, numbers,

letters and food, which unquestionably constitute the total ingredients for the peculiar recipe of the book.

Certainly, mathematics are a key component in the organization of the work, and Joyce himself defended to have discovered the quadrature of the circle, a mathematical theory that he adopted in his own manner, providing a circular structure to the narrative of *Finnegans Wake* but dividing the work into four books, intending to insert a square within a circle. Some authors have even commented that this circular structure resembles a Möebius band,⁷ and actually, mathematics are the highest materialization of mental abstractions as well as a symbolic language that can give shape to the whole universe, which makes us wonder if Joyce really intended to find a universal language based on mental procedures and concepts rather than on phonetics.

In the same manner, the interpretation of dreams is also considered to be a type of decoding or a task of cryptography. While dreaming, the mind generates associations that seem to be common to all human beings, and in this sense, authors like Jacques Derrida have pointed out the connection between dreams and Egyptian hieroglyphs.⁸ Hieroglyphs were originally believed to be gifts provided by gods to mankind and inspiring new pieces of wisdom to the interpreters. At the same time, the multiple condensations and transpositions taking place in dreams can be equaled to those occurring in Egyptian writings. Both processes are secret codes that should be decoded by using a symbolic system, not a phonetic one, originating a kind of expression that escapes logic. *Finnegans Wake*, following the example of conceptual hieroglyphs or dreams, is revested by the same touch of sacredness and apparent chaos, aiming at mental associations that exceed the limits of the written text and entrap the reader in a series of secret codes, in which the possibilities of combinations are infinite.

Notes

1. The term derives from the Greek verb “stegein” meaning “to cover.” *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, ed. William Morris (New York: American Heritage, 1975).

2. See Simon Singh, *Los códigos secretos*, trans. José Ignacio Moraza (Madrid: Editorial Debate, 1999).

3. James Joyce, *Finnegans Wake* (London: Penguin, 1992); all subsequent references in this essay will be to this edition.

4. Joyce, *Ulysses*, eds. Hans Walter Gabler, Wolfhard Steppe and Claus Melchior (London: Penguin, 1992); all subsequent references will be to this edition. As the narrator indicates in this excerpt, the alphabet has suffered an inversion. Thus, the letters have been substituted by the corresponding ones starting from the end, inserting “empty letters” at the same time and replacing the vowels with dots. The resulting name, Clifford, has also suffered an inversion.

5. Joseph Campbell and Henry Morton Robinson, *A Skeleton Key to Finnegans Wake* (New York: Horcourt Brave and Jovanovich, 1944).

6. Ellmann recalls the use of this affectionate nickname which was made manifest in many letters that Joyce sent to several relatives, like the one written on 1 June 1934, which the author signed as "Baboo" (JJII 743).

7. John Paul Riquelme, "Twists of the Teller's Tale: *Finnegans Wake*," *James Joyce: An International Perspective*, eds. Suheil Badi Bushrui and Bernard Benstock (Gerrard Cross: Barnes and Nobles, 1982) 82-114.

8. Jacques Derrida, "Freud and the Scene of Writing," *Writing and Difference* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1978) 196-231.