

McGill Literary Journal

Volume 3 Number 2

Summer 1982

An Awakening

The "Finnegans Wake" Experience, by Roland McHugh (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), \$13.75, 123 pages.

In the past six years, Roland McHugh has produced three significant books on *Finnegans Wake*: *The Sigla of "Finnegans Wake,"* for advanced readers of Joyce's masterpiece, *Annotations to "Finnegans Wake,"* for those in the midst of deciphering it, and now, *The "Finnegans Wake" Experience*, an excellent short introduction to the book which has probably caused more consternation and excitement than any other of the century.

McHugh is an exegetical devotee of Joyce's writing, intent, always, on bringing the reader's attention back exactly to where it should be, to Joyce's own words. Most Joycean criticism concentrates on isolated specifics of Joyce's vast canvas, or what is worse, attempts a lukewarm understanding of the entire Joyce canvas. McHugh is perhaps the only critic able to provide the essential exegesis to all of Joyce's last book, while at the same time understanding that "once everything possible has been achieved, only a small proportion of the text will be accounted for." McHugh's authority comes partly from his "superhuman" first reading of *Finnegans Wake*:

I suppose I have a natural distrust of gurus. I spent almost three years reading Finnegans Wake...before looking at any kind of critical account.

McHugh obviously revels in the beauty, humour, and weirdness of the book, and understands it as a world unto itself:

A (Finnegans Wake) word is not, so far as I am concerned, the same thing as a word in the book you are now reading. It is a solid entity, a weird beautiful crystal, one of whose faces is perhaps identical with a fragment of Thom's Dublin Directory, but which in its totality is entirely subservient to the Wakean rules of play.

The University of California Press has been consistently interested in Joycean scholarship over the past few decades, and has published several very good Joyce documents, among them *Joyce's Voices* (1978), by Hugh Kenner, another of its Quantum Books. The most recent addition to its collection, *The "Finnegans Wake" Experience*, is a superb, sometimes eccentric introduction to a most fantastical book. Hopefully, in this, the centenary of Joyce's birth, McHugh's book will encourage more people to discover the final work of genius by this century's most influential writer.

T.P.O.