

Hieroglyphic Complexity at Esna

Unetymological Spellings, Trigrams, and Anadromes from Esna Temple and *Finnegans Wake*

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Abstract. Exploration of various types of scribal innovation (particularly in the arrangement of hieroglyphs), as evidenced in Roman period inscriptions from Esna, compared to similar practices in James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*. Beyond the much-discussed phenomenon of unetymological spellings, particular attention is paid to the reduction of chief divinities' names to sportive bigrams and trigrams, which could be rearranged to express theological constellations.

Keywords. Esna Temple; Roman Period; Ptolemaic Egyptian; Enigmatic Writing; Horapollo; James Joyce; Neith; Khnum; Tatenen

was I not rosetted on two stellas of littleegypt? had
not I rockcut readers, hieros, gregos and democriticos?

JAMES JOYCE (*Finnegans Wake*, 551.30–31)

1. Introduction

James Joyce's high modernist epic *Finnegans Wake* (hereafter *FW*) and the Roman Period hieroglyphic inscriptions from Esna temple are both notorious, albeit among different audiences, for their dense, frustrating, and often impenetrable writing styles.¹ Esna is perhaps most famed for the two hymns in the pronaos, composed almost entirely with ram and crocodile signs (Leitz 2001; Morenz 2002). *FW*, meanwhile, is replete with such textual gimmicks, perhaps most famously

¹ Morenz 2002: 77 already connected the two by beginning his own article on the Ram Hymn from Esna with an epigram he attributed to *Finnegans Wake* ("Everyword for oneself but Code for us all"), but which actually only appeared in Joyce's working notebooks for the book (VI.A.755: cf. McCreedy 2010).

sneaking in the names of hundreds of rivers into the main text of the Anna Livia Plurabelle chapter (Bishop 1986: 336–385).

Although Joyce was deeply interested in ancient Egyptian religious and historical texts, and quoted many of them throughout *FW*,² a direct influence from Esna seems unlikely.³ Some inscriptions from the temple had been published already in the 19th century by Champollion, Lepsius, and Brugsch, but the writing system was hardly studied in detail prior to the foundational studies by Serge Sauneron, begun in 1951 (Sauneron 1959: 6–9), a decade after Joyce’s decease. Nonetheless, it is still profitable to compare two major similarities between both texts.

2. Wordplay and Unetymological Spellings

First, *FW* is composed in a difficult, dream-like language, where seemingly ordinary sentences, in English and many other languages, are distorted and rendered almost unrecognizable by phonetic puns, word associations, and cultural references. For example, the Egyptian Book of the Dead is referred to alternately as “the *Bug of the Deaf*” (*FW* 134.35), “the balk of the deaf” (*FW* 309.3), and the “boke of the deeds” (*FW* 13.30–31).

To examine one passage in greater detail, briefly consider the bedtime prayer concluding Chapter IX (*FW*, 259. 7–8):

Loud, heap miseries upon us yet entwine our arts with laughters low!

The first half of this sentence can be understood as a garbled phonetic variant of: “Lord, have mercy upon us.” Scholars have identified the second half, meanwhile, as a more extreme distortion of a phrase from the Book of Common Prayer: “incline our hearts to keep thy law” (McHugh 1991: 259). So on the one hand, the above quote could read as a conventional prayer altered with ludic, non-etymological spellings (e.g., the false cognate of “heap miseries” < Latin *miserere*, “to have mercy”). Yet the sentence can simultaneously be understood as an autobiographical note: Joyce had his fair share of troubles, both personal and professional, and his writings (“arts”) were infamous for jokes about bodily functions (“laughters low”)

Even more obscure are the various attempts to render foreign phrases more or less phonetically employing seemingly random strings of English and nonsense words. For example “And let luck’s puresplutterall lucy at ease!” (*FW* 262.16–17) roughly corresponds to Latin *et lux perpetua luceat eis*, “and may perpetual light shine for them!” (McHugh 1991: 262). Or even more confusingly (*FW* 16.4–5):

Come on, fool porterfull, hosiered women blown monk sewer?

2 Troy 1976; Bishop 1986: 86–125.


3 Troy 1976 posited that Joyce may have been influenced by P. le Page Renouf, an Egyptologist who had taught in Dublin and wrote extensively on Egyptian religion, symbols, and sportive hieroglyphs. While he was notably a pioneer in the study of Egyptian enigmatic writing (e.g., le Page Renouf 1874), and often quoted Ptolemaic and Roman temple texts, I am unaware of any specific times le Page Renouf discussed the trigrams from Esna.



This has been identified as phonetically rendered French (McHugh 1991: 16):

Comment vous portez-vous aujourd’hui, mon blond monsieur? (McHugh 1991: 16).

Both examples shift word boundaries so drastically (e.g., “lucy at ease” > “luceat eis”; “hosiered women” > “aujourd’hui mon”) that the puns can only be understood by reading each passage aloud.

Such unusual spellings also occur in hieroglyphic, hieratic, and Demotic texts of the Ptolemaic and Roman period, and specialists typically refer to them as “unetymological” (Pries 2023: 3–4, with references). Their precise motivation is still debated: they might be mere wordplay, purposefully cryptographic, embedded with multiple layers of meaning, or simply intended to convey the original, Middle Egyptian pronunciation of ritual texts.

Sauneron (1959: 48; 1964) noted several examples at Esna where traditional word boundaries are shifted,⁴ as when the past-tense marker (.n) and suffix pronoun (=f) in a *sḏm.n=f* verb form are merged into the unrelated signs for *nfr*, “good” ()⁵ a word which at that point in history was usually pronounced as */nu: fe/ (De Meulenaere: 1994).

Individual words are also broken apart into new spellings, like in *FW*, perhaps reflecting novel or *ad hoc* etymologies. For example, the common word *sh.t*, “field,” is written as if it were a compound *s.t-ih.t*, “place of food offerings”: .⁶ Similarly, the king is said to be the successor of the crocodile-headed Shemanefer, invoked with an epithet beginning with the phrase *p³wty-tpy*, “first primeval one,” but which is spelled as if it were **p³y w³d-tp*, “he with the green head”:  (*Esna* III, 324, 5). Although the word *p³wty* is written this way in both hieroglyphs and Demotic (Quack 2009: 131)—perhaps also suggesting the phrase “he of the papyrus stalk”—here it might have been chosen because of the god’s reptilian face (cf. also Klotz 2012: 174–175, n. 1137).

More frequently at Esna temple, local divine figures replace the conventional signs used to represent phonetic elements of various words. Besides in toponyms and divine names, where this phenomenon is quite common (Leitz 2023b), the substitution occurs with keywords salient to the local theology. Khnum-Re was identified with both the Memphite demiurge Ptah-Tatenen, who separated heaven from earth to begin creation at the potter’s wheel (Berlandini 1995), and with the solar deity Re, represented as a four-headed ram traversing the midday sky in his celestial bark.⁷ As such, many words at Esna are written unconventionally with the ideogram of Tatenen (or his crown), or more frequently different types of rams. Just like the more famous hymn composed almost entirely with ram hieroglyphs, these graphic variants reflect the “criocentric” worldview of the local clergy.

4 See also Kurth 2007: 55–56.


5 E.g., *Esna* II, 162, 4, 5; 184, 24.

6 *Esna* III, 306, 20; see also *Esna* III, 340, 5 and 7.


7 See especially *Esna* IV, 437, No. 6; Mendel 2022: 444. Numerous texts identify the midday sun with the four-headed ram in the solar bark: e.g., *Esna* II, 48, A; *Esna* IV, 405, 1–2; 431, 2; 441, 2.


Khnum-Re as Ptah-Tatenen

itn, “solar disk”  (Klotz 2014: 58)⁸

tn(n), “Tatenen”  (*t* < *tʹ*y, “male (ram)” + *n*(*hp*) “potter’s wheel”: *Esna* VI, 514, 8)


Khnum-Re as a ram in the solar bark


wbn, “to rise”  (*w*(*iʹ*), “bark” + *b*(*ʹ*), “ram” + *n*: the ram sails within the solar bark of Khnum)⁹


psd, “to shine”  (*p*(.t), “sky” + *s*(r), “ram” + *d* < *t*(*ʹ*), “earth”: the ram shines between heaven and earth)¹⁰


Khnum as king

nb, “lord; all”  (*n*, “crown” + *b*(*ʹ*), “ram”: the ram is king of Lower Egypt)¹¹

shd, “to illumine”  (*s*(r), “ram” + *hd*(.t), “white crown”: the ram is king of Upper Egypt)¹²

ʹ, “great”  (the ram is a manifestation of Thoth: Leitz 2001: 254 (2); also *Esna* III, 262, 19, § 5)¹³

šps, “august”  (the ram is a manifestation of Shu)¹⁴

tʹ, “the earth”  (the ram is a manifestation of Geb; Klotz 2014: 50–51, n. b)

8 *i* < *ii*, “to come” and < *iʹw*, “old man”; *tn* < *tnn*, “Tatenen.” In the final example, the middle consonant is spelled with an ideogram of Geb, representing *t* < *tʹ*, “the earth.”

9 *Esna* II, 169, 5; Klotz 2014: 34, n. b.

10 Derchain-Urtel 1999: 196–197; Pries 2023: 5. See also *Esna* II, 150, 1.


11 Leitz 2001: 255, 261; see also *Esna* II, 53; 76, 15; 171, B; 184, 25; 191, 21; *Esna* III, 328, A; 393, 23; *Esna* VI, 541, A; *Esna* VII, 549. At Edfu and Dendera, a falcon (*p* < *pʹ*) wearing the red crown (*n*) similarly writes the demonstrative pronoun *pn*: Cauville 2002: 96; Kurth 2007: 247, No. 16.


12 Leitz 2001: 258 (16); Kurth 2007: 199, No. 28; add also *Esna* II, 164, A; *Esna* III, 389, 15; 394, 24. At Edfu and Dendera, a ram or *bʹ*-bird wearing a composite crown writes the epithet *bhdy*, “Behedety,” perhaps for a similar reason (*bʹ* + *hd*(.t)): Kurth 2007: 199, No. 27; Cauville 2002: 105; *Dendara* XV, 4, 2; 5, 7; 270, 10; Cauville 2021: 41–42, 85

13 Here the ram wears the typical *hmhm*-crown of Thoth, thereby inheriting his typical epithet ʹ, “great”: Kurth 2007: 142, No. 81; 163, n. 566; Junker & Winter 1965: 400, bottom.


14 E.g., *Esna* II, 59, 1; 106, 1; *Esna* III, 368, 34.

Other rams

mḥy, “north”  (the north-wind is a flying ram)¹⁵

imnty, “west”  (the west-wind is a flying ram-headed falcon)¹⁶

Esna as Land of the two Rams (Khnum-Re and Khnum-Shu Lord of the Field)

tʰ-sn.t  (*Esna* II, 76, 15; Klotz 2014: 51; see also *Esna* VII, 596, 24)¹⁷

3. Trigrams, Acrostics, and Nomina Sacra

A second major feature of *Finnegans Wake*, again tied to its dream language, is the reduction of the main characters’ names to three-lettered monograms, which then spark myriads of acrostic word associations throughout the novel. The protagonist’s true name appears to be Humphrey Chimpden Earwicker (HCE), while his wife is Anna Livia Plurabelle (ALP). The name of the first transforms into “Here Comes Everybody” and hundreds if not thousands of acrophonic variants and anagrams.¹⁸ Of particular interest to Egyptologists are the following examples (initials bolded by the author):

first pharoah, **H**umpheres **C**heops **E**xarchas (*FW* 62.20–21)

on the night of making **H**oruse to **c**riumph over his **e**nemy (*FW* 328.34)

Even unto **H**eliotropolis, the **c**astellated, the **e**nchanting (*FW* 594.8–9)

Just as the ram and Tatenen spellings discussed above reinforce the Esna priests’ obsession with the god Khnum, so the constant appearances of HCE and ALP in numerous contexts, including in chemical and mathematical formulae,¹⁹ drives home that all of *FW*, touching on much of world history and literature, is a projection of the main character’s subconscious. Moreover, each acrostic variation adds new dimensions to their personas.

15 *Esna* II, 163, 26; Sauneron 1962: 294, n. x.


16 *Esna* II, 163, 19; Sauneron 1962: 294, n. x.

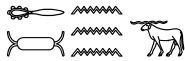
17 See also Fernández Pichel 2018: 20, with n. 17. The first ram writes *t* < *tʰy*, “male (ram).” The latter two might be uniliterals, or function together as a group (< *snw*, “the two rams”).

18 For a sample, see Glasheen 1977, 11 (ALP), 121 (HCE). A more extensive list available at <https://brettlockspeiser.com/fw/>. Note that even the initials are not immune to unetymological spellings, for example “HCE” can be rendered phonetically as “Haze sea east” (*FW* 593.5).



19 “H₂ C E₃” (*FW* 95.12), the triangle ALP or αλπ (*FW* 293), which begets multiple phonetic puns such as “lapis” (*FW* 293.10; i.e. multiple “L-A-π”s), or “Olaf’s lambtail” (*FW* 294.10; i.e. “aleph lambda”).

The closest parallel at Esna would be the use of so-called “trigrams,” many of them acrophonic, to spell the names of the chief divinities. These writings occur primarily in the litanies on the central columns (Sauneron 1982; Leitz 2023a), but other examples are clustered in certain repetitive hymns to Khnum, then sporadically throughout the temple (Leitz 2023b).

For most of Pharaonic history, the name of the god Khnum (*hnmw*) had been denoted almost exclusively with the trilateral *hnm*-vessel, followed by a determinative of a ram or ram-headed anthropomorphic god (e.g., ). Yet at Esna, in one of the earliest preserved inscriptions from the joint reign of Ptolemy VI, Ptolemy VIII, and Cleopatra II (170–164 BCE), Khnum’s name is spelled only using a combination of uniliteral values:



Esna II, 17, 5 (Fernández Pichel 2018: 19, n. a)

A further step occurred in the reign of Domitian (81–96 CE), when for the first time, and only at Esna,²⁰ scribes began experimenting with **strong** acrophony.²¹ That is, reducing a sign to its first consonant, even if it includes multiple strong consonants, for example  or  = *h* < *hrp*, as the first element of Khnum’s name (Sauneron 1982: 117, No. 22; 177, No. 320; 193).

This radical innovation led to numerous possibilities, as suddenly myriads of sign combinations could theoretically represent each sacred name. In general each divine name was reduced to tri- or bi-consonantal groups:

Biliteral		Trilateral	
Neith	<i>NT</i>	Khnum	<i>HNM</i>
Heka	<i>HK</i>	Menhyt	<i>MNH(Y)</i>
Isis	<i>ʾS</i>	Nebtu	<i>NBW</i>
		Osiris	<i>WSR</i>

Like Oulipian writers, the Esna scribes worked within these phonetic constraints to encode complex, multi-faceted theological allusions into each spelling and verse of the litanies, analyzed exhaustively in two recent works by Leitz (2023a; 2023b). As one very simple example, compare the following name of the local child god Heka:

20 Sauneron 1982: 190–191, 195. Kurth 2007: 59–62 recorded acrophony as one of the general principles in Ptolemaic sign derivations, but most of his examples come from Roman period Esna; the few from Dendera and Edfu can be explained without resorting to acrophony. The same is true of the pre-Roman examples listed by Sauneron 1982: 104 (the man holding the cord is an elaboration of the cord, which often writes *s* (< *šs*); the figure of Nephthys writes *rs*, not *r*).

21 For the distinction between strong acrophony and weak acrophony (the latter more frequently called the “Consonantal Principle”), see Vernus 2015. Despite the general scholarly consensus on this question (e.g., Roberson 2020: 143–145), Leitz (2023a: 442, n. 154; 2023b: 9) still advocates for strong acrophony as a principle of sign derivation already during the New Kingdom, preferring to read a lion-headed goddess in the word “Isheru” as *r(w)* < *Rpy.t*, “Repyt,” rather than a simple variation of the lion (*rw*) typically used in this word.



Esna III, 242, 15 (4) and 17 (12);²² 299, 5

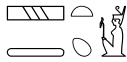
As the first-born son and eldest heir of Khnum, Heka is essentially the local form of Horus. Yet since Khnum and Nebtu are frequently identified with Shu and Tefnut, their child Heka can simultaneously be an avatar of the Heliopolitan pair's son, namely Geb (Klotz 2014: 40, n. 35). As such, Heka's name is spelled here with two ideograms, as if it were actually Horus-Geb > H(orus)-G(eb) > *HG* > *HK*, "Heka."²³

Because of acrophony, and the generally rich polyvalency of hieroglyphs during the Roman Period, the precise reading of certain divine names can be ambiguous at times:



Esna II, 58, 5

Wsir, "Osiris" (*w* < *wp* (horns) + *sr*, "ram") or *b³ dmdy*, "the United Ba" (an epithet of Osiris).²⁴



Esna II, 104, 2; see also *Esna* VI, 513, 17; 528, 7

N.t, "Neith" (*n.t*, "water" + *t³*, "earth"),²⁵ or *št.t*, "the Mysterious one" (a frequent epithet of Neith at Esna).

More challenging is another designation for Khnum which appears throughout the temple, and occurs with the signs appearing in various permutations:



Esna III, 383, B



Esna III 310, 28; *Esna* VII, 619, 22



Esna III, 225, 4, § 3; *Esna* VII, 570, 34; Bénédite 1893–1895: 98, 10 = Leitz 2002–2003: IV, 204c, example 6 (Philae)



Zivie 1982: No. 35, 6 (Deir Shelwit)



Esna III 341, 9; 371, 1



Chassinat 1930: 184, 15 (Edfu)






Esna III, 277, 22, § 6; Bénédite 1893–1895: 107, 6 = Cauville 1980: 55, 5 (Philae); Cauville 2000: 144, 6 (Dendera)

22 Cf. Leitz 2023a: 546–547, 562–564.

23 For the crown of Geb on the second figure, see Sauneron 1982: 122; Klotz 2014: 50–51.



24 So read by Sternberg 1985: 66, n. aa; Leitz 2001: 255, 6.

25 So read by Sternberg 1985: 92, 95, n. i.

Based on the variants, this would appear to write *nb phty*, “Lord of strength”, an appropriate designation of Khnum-Shu as Onuris, the mighty warrior.²⁶ Dimitri Meeks gathered references from outside of Esna, and suggested this should read *nb nph*, “le maître de l’appareil génital” (Meeks 1999: 582). Nonetheless, at Esna this group occurs precisely where one would expect the divine name “Khnum” (particularly in *Esna* III, 225, 4 (3) and 277, 22 § 6, both hymns in which all other verses begin “For Khnum...”), as Sauneron (1982: 83–84) already recognized (see also Rüter 2003: 67, n. 313).²⁷ Here, then, the sign order must be perturbed (see below, section 3), and since this spelling occurs already at Edfu during the Ptolemaic Period, one should not resort to acrophony for an explanation. Thus the lion’s rear hieroglyph () is most likely just a different view of the hide sign () which in turn alternates with the larger mammal skin () thereby obtaining the biliteral value *hn*. Thus reading:

$$h(n) + n + b \text{ (var. } hn+nb) = hnb > hnm(w), \text{ “Khnum” (cf. Greek } Khnoubis) \text{ }^{28}$$


4. Reversals and other Perturbations

Further complicating the acrostic values in *FW*, Joyce also employed a range of symbols (typically called “sigla”) representing various characters or archetypes (McHugh 1976; McCreedy 2010). For the protagonist, Joyce used the sign , explaining in a letter that it evokes “H C E by moving letter round” (McHugh 1976: 8). As a sideways letter E, this of course stands for the main character’s last name, Earwicker, while inverted (; *FW* 6.32) it evokes the Chinese (and Egyptian) sign for “mountain” (Glasheen 1977: 81), a Paleolithic stone structure (“trilithon”: *FW* 119.17), or even a recumbent, ithyphallic Osirian mummy. The symbol for ALP is a pyramid or triangle (Δ), which of course is identical every time it is rotated.²⁹ Like Egyptian hieroglyphs,³⁰ these sigla restore the iconic visual aspect to the otherwise highly phonetic reading experience.

26 E.g., *Esna* III, 277, 22, § 6; so apparently understood by Wilson 1997: 512. Note that the epithet *nb phty* occurs in a conventional spelling as an epithet modifying the group in *Esna* III, 225, 4 (3); similarly Khnum with this spelling is also called “lord of might (*nb qn*)” in *Esna* VII, 570, 34, and “great of victory (*‘nh*)” in *Esna* VII, 619, 22.

27 See also Leitz 2002–2003: IV, 204c: “*Nph*: “...?”. Name fur Khnum”; Leitz 2023a: 45, with n. 25, who translated “Nephe-Re,” but suggested the alternate reading “Chnum-Re” in the footnote.

28 Sauneron 1982: 83. For *b* representing an expected *m*, see also Kurth 2007: 508; Leitz 2023a, 85.

29 The relationship between the two sigla are described at length in *FW* 119.16–23: “the initials majuscule of Earwicker: the meant to be baffling chrismon trilithon sign , finally called after some his hes heciteny Hec, which, moved contrawatchwise, represents his title in sigla as the smaller Δ , fontly called following a certain change of state of grace of nature alp or delta, when single, stands for or tautologically stands beside the consort.”

30 For the hieroglyphic nature of Joyce’s sigla, see Schotter 2010: 99–100. It is possible that Joyce was aware these symbols (essentially Greek epsilon and delta) ultimately derived from Egyptian hieroglyphs via Proto-Sinaitic and Phoenician scripts, as demonstrated already by Gardiner 1916.

If each element of HCE could be permutations, however obscurely, of the related symbol $\pi\pi$, then each letter should be roughly interchangeable. Indeed, the trigrams HCE and ALP occur in all possible permutations throughout the book, both as acrostics (“Et Cur **Heli**” [FW 73.19]; “**caller herring everydayly**” [FW 136.25–26]), and as trigrams (“his hes **hecitency Hec**” [119.18]; “if **hec** dont love **alpy**” [332.3]; “**ech** with **pal**” (264.3), “**Paa** lickan laa lickam, **apl lpa!**” (298.1), “**Hecech**” [377.3]).

Beyond the trigrams, Joyce employs many other word reversals to various effects, including in several examples imitating the Book of the Dead (FW 237.24–7):

You are pure. You are pure. You are in your puerity. You have not brought stinking members into the house of Amanti. Elleb Inam, Titep Notep, we name them to the Hall of Honour.

The pseudo-Egyptian names in the final sentence are simply reversals of two nicknames: “belle mani” (Italian: “beautiful hands”) and “petit peton” (French: “little feet”). Towards the end of the book, at daybreak, we find the following passage (FW 593.23–24):

Pu Nuseht, lord of risings in the yonderworld of Ntamplin, toph triumphant, speaketh.

Although the mysterious name “Pu Nuseht” somewhat recalls Nu and Ani, two names Joyce would have seen in Budge’s translation of the Book of the Dead, it is also simply “the sun up” spelled backwards (McHugh 1991: 593). Yet another Egyptian name is concealed within the following reference to “the chaptel of the opening of the month of Nema Knatut” (FW 395.22–23).

In earlier Egyptian, such reversals and perturbations are not especially common, even in enigmatic texts. Sauneron (1982: 87–89) noted a few cases in the litanies from Esna. Another possible example is the trigram of Atum, written frequently in temple and magical texts as a sequence of hieroglyphs evoking the sun’s transformations through the day (Klotz 2010: 72–73):



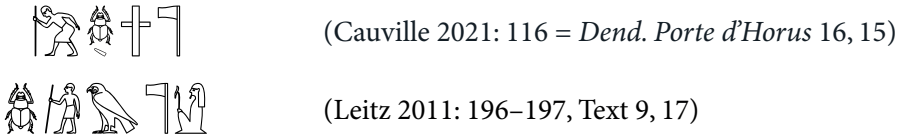
Esna III, 318, 9, § 8

According to Egyptian solar theology, the sun manifested as a scarab rising from the earth (morning), bright disk (midday), old man returning to the grave (evening), repeating the cycle the next day. This trigram for “Atum” (*Itm*) is difficult to explain until one realizes the cycle is backwards. If one reverses the signs, then the sequence follows correctly: Old Man (evening) > scarab (morning) > bright sun (midday), and so on. Thus:



$i(^3w) + t(^3) + m(^3wy)$ (< “radiance”)

As I noted elsewhere (Klotz 2010: 73, n. 42), the name Atum is frequently spelled with the old man leaning on a stick ($i < i^3w$, “old man”), or the scarab for *it* or *t* (see below), but not typically together. Nonetheless, two recently published texts combine them for the name Atum, providing further support to this proposed reading:



In the second example, the sign-order is also perturbed, and the falcon (writing *m* via substitution with the owl or vulture) takes the place of the usual radiant sun sign.

5. Palindromes and Anadromes

Throughout *FW*, Joyce explores numerous relations between the abstracted HCE and ALP. Among other associations, the combined initials can be arranged to form CHAPEL, short for Chapelizod, the area of Dublin in which the novel is set (Glasheen 1977: 54; McBride 1996: 149). In a letter to Miss Weaver, Joyce explained that the combination of these sigla $\sqcup + \Delta$ (i.e., a mountain + the Egyptian Delta) could symbolize the source of the Nile (Milesi 1990: 84–86). But even with all the complex permutations, there is little indication they were conceived of as mirror images,³¹ much less palindromes or anadromes. However, that practice does occur at Esna, for both graphic and deeper theological reasons.

Scholars have occasionally noted examples of intentional palindromes and antimetabole in ancient Egypt, based on trilateral consonantal roots. For example, palindromic phrases such as the solar epithet *wbn m nbw*, “he who rises from gold” (Bojowald 2011), or the personal name *Pth-ḥtp*, “Ptah-hotep” (Gourdon 2006; Breyer 2011). At Esna, near palindromes can be found throughout the litanies mentioned above, since the individual hieroglyphs employed in the divine name are often borrowed from the subsequent epithets. Such as in *Esna* III, 317, 25 (32) and 27 (40):³²



n Wsir m ḥw.t-sr wr m Ṛwnw, “For Osiris in the Chapel of the Prince, great one in Heliopolis.”




n Wsir sr wr m W³s.t, “For Osiris, the great prince in Thebes.”

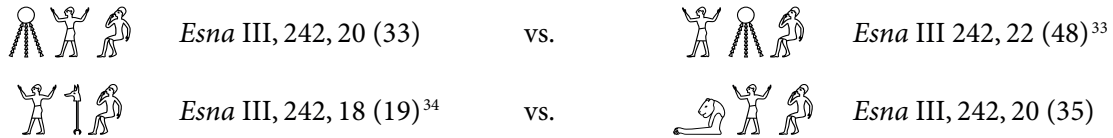
In the second case, a standard epithet of Osiris written with two standing figures (*sr wr*, “great prince”) is reversed to form the first two consonants of his name: *w(r)s(r)*; in the first, those same

31 For arguments that HCE and ALP represent conceptual opposites of one another, see Honnor 2010: 6–8.

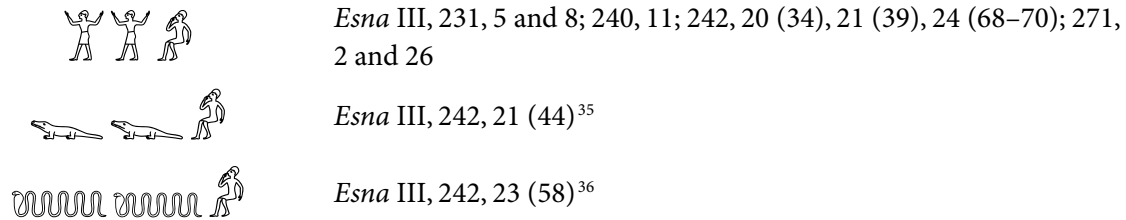
32 Cf. Leitz 2023a: 924, 946.

terms are split between two epithets: “Osiris in the Chapel of the Prince (*sr*), great one (*wr*) in Heliopolis.”

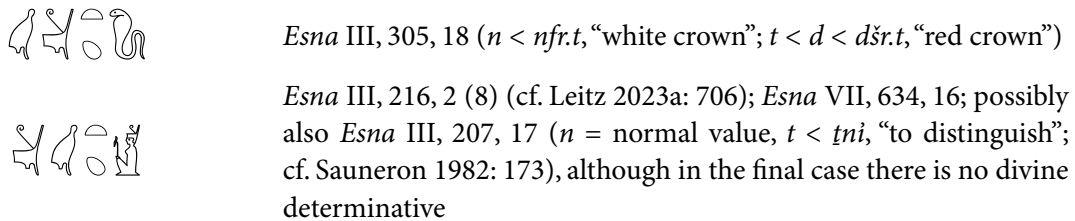
Somewhat trivial examples occur for the child deity of Esna, Heka (*Hkʿ* or *Hqʿ*), whose name is generally reduced to two major consonants, *HK*, both in the litanies and throughout the temple. Since both elements could be spelled, without acrophony, via the standing man hieroglyph ( = *h* < *h(i)*, “to rejoice”; *k* < *q* < *qʿ*, “high”), the standing man can appear in either or both positions. So there are anadromes, where the name Heka is read the same when it is reversed:







There also palindromes, where the two phonetic elements are identical, so the name can essentially be read in either direction. The following all spell “Heka”:



Similarly, the name of the goddess Neith, which also reduced to two consonants (*NT*), could be written with the dynastic crowns in either order:



For the latter value, compare also a unique writing of the third person plural independent pronoun *ntsn* (   ) in *Esna* III, 311, 17.

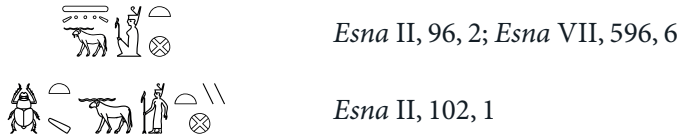
33 Sauneron 1982: 161 and Leitz 2023a: 607, n. 362, assumed the second spelling is simply a reversal. However, the interchange of *h* (here derived from < *iʿhw*, “radiance”) and *q/k* is well-attested in the Ptolemaic and Roman periods, see Kurth 2007: 535 (28.2), 536 (29.2); Quaegebeur 1990: 74–75.

34 The jackal head, which otherwise often writes *hʿ.t*, here might writes *k* < *q* < *qʿb.t*, “chest”; Leitz 2023a: 575, n. 210.



35 Sauneron 1982: 146, suggested acrophonic derivations for both crocodiles. One wonders if perhaps they simply substitute as reptiles for the serpents in the previous writing; cf. Klotz 2006: 163–164, n. B.

36 The first snake writes *h* < *hfʿw*, “snake”; the second often determines the word *kʿ*, “spirit; agathos daimon” (e.g., *Esna* II, 70, 12; 161, B; 279, 10–11; 341, 9; 388, 8), and can also serve as an ideogram for the same word (e.g., *Esna* III, 241, 14 (95); 44, 7 and 8; 312, 6; *Esna* VII, 630, 9; 633). Leitz 2023a: 539, n. 2 suggested an acrophonic derivation from *qrh.t* or *qrry*, thinking of serpents associated with the grottos of Nun.

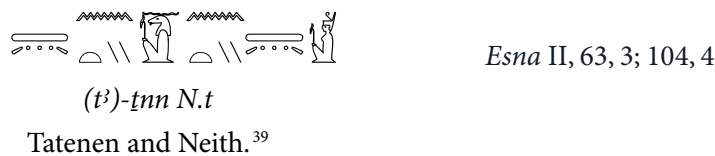
More interesting are two distinct examples of anadromes between two divinities. A palindrome is a word or phrase that can be read the same in both directions (e.g., “madam”, or “my gym”). Anadromes, meanwhile, are words which are mirror images of one another (e.g., “dog ~ god”, “plug ~ gulp”). Similar to Kom Ombo, Esna temple was dedicated to two major divinities: Khnum, originally from Elephantine (Upper Egypt) and Neith of Sais (Lower Egypt).³⁷ Sportive writings of the name Esna (*t³-sn.t*) incorporate both divinities, as if the toponym meant “land of the ram (Khnum) and Neith” (cf. Leitz 2023a: 148, n. 515):



As such, much of the decoration of the surviving forecourt or pronaos was divided symmetrically between texts and scenes featuring Khnum-Re and Neith (Hallof 2007).

As mentioned above, Khnum of Esna was directly associated with Ptah-Tatenen, the demiurge from Memphis who fashioned the cosmos, all living beings, and other creator gods (the Ogdoad, the seven Khnums), working manually upon his potter’s wheel. Neith, meanwhile, was considered a primeval deity in her own right, who gave birth to Re and produced a different set of creator gods (the seven Djaisu) through her verbal utterances. These two cosmogonical traditions, Memphite and Saite, coexisted within the temple of Esna, and in fact Neith herself was also identified as Tatenen (el-Sayed 1982: II, 122) and even Irita (lit. “earth maker”), his common epithet as demiurge (e.g., *Esna* III, 216, 2, 6–7). The name “Tatenen” could even be spelled employing the hieroglyph of Neith:  (*Esna* III, 388, 8: *t < d < dhn*, “obelisk,” *n < N.t*, “Neith”), while “Neith” is rendered with the ideogram of Tatenen:  (*Esna* III, 216, 10 (48): *n < nb.t, t < t³-tnn*).³⁸

The local scribes took this a step further by writing Tatenen (determined with a figure of Khnum) and Neith as mirror images, or anadromes:



A later variant, not employing the same symmetry, writes the first element differently:

37 For the major divinities at Esna, see Sternberg 1985: 37–45; Hallof 2011; Fernández Pichel 2020.

38 For Tatenen and Neith, see also el-Sayed 1982: I, 122.

39 El-Sayed 1982: II, 636 (Doc. 1027), 638 (Doc. 1032) highlighted the symmetry by translating this epithet as: “le T³-N et N-T³” and “le T³-n(ty) et N(ty)-t³,” which he elsewhere recognized as Tatenen and Neith (El-Sayed 1982: II, 122). Sternberg 1985: 96, n. n, understood the phrase in *Esna* II, 104, 4 quite differently (“das Land des Chnum, welches (auch) das Land der Neith ist”), overlooking the parallel in *Esna* II, 63, 3, as did Goyon 1987: 119 (“la terre du dieu [...] et celle de la déesse”).



Esna VI, 513, 11-12

(*tʰ*)-*tʰnn* N.t m rn=s

Tatenen and Neith, in her name.

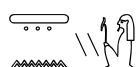
To understand the above-mentioned palindrome phonetically, one should note that Tatenen (lit. *tʰ-tʰnn*, “the elevated land”) had reduced to simply **tn* at this point. His ideogram, and the ideogram of his crown, both served to write the verb *tʰni*, “to distinguish,” and comparable spellings of his name occur elsewhere in the temple:



Esna III, 243, 10



Esna VI, 513, 17 (an epithet of Neith)



Esna VI, 537, 17

Similarly, Neith’s name, unlike other goddesses, retained a strong *t*-ending. As in the anadrome writing, her name is written with a final *tʰ*-sign multiple times, for example:



Esna III, 216 (4, 5, 80); 305, 18; Esna IV, 424, 2; Esna VII, 579, 11



Esna III, 216 (22, 51)




Esna III, 216 (12)



Esna III, 216 (31)



Esna III, 216 (29)

From a theological perspective, one must note the palindrome () occurs in both instances after the same epithet, crucial to the theology from Esna:



Esna II, 63, 3

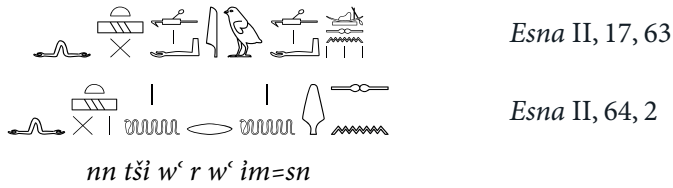


Esna II, 104, 4

From these spellings, and other parallels, the epithet can be interpreted as: “the single (serpentine) god, who transformed into two (serpents) (*ntr wʰ hpr m snw*).”⁴⁰ This is an allusion to Irita and the *d*-serpent, twin ophidian children of Kematef, who emerge from the waters of Nun at the beginning

40 Klotz 2012: 173, with n. 1130; see also Leitz 2023a: 702, n 58; and Esna VI, 534, 1-2 (partially damaged)..



of creation.⁴¹ At Esna, these siblings are also identified with Khnum-Tatenen (aka “the Father”) and Neith (aka “the Mother”), and other texts mention they are so similar that:



“One cannot distinguish between one (serpent) and the other (serpent).”⁴²

In other words, those primeval serpents are essentially identical twins,⁴³ and thus their anadromic names are perfectly appropriate. That the names of Neith and (Khnum)-Tatenen were anadromes is a phenomenon recorded with surprising accuracy by Horapollo (*Hieroglyphica* I, 10–12). In those passages, Horapollo noted that the scarab could write “father” (10), and the vulture, “mother” (11). The former ideographic value occurred already in the New Kingdom, but was more common later; whereas the vulture wrote “mother” in all periods. More interestingly, Horapollo claimed these signs could be combined to form two different divine names (I, 12):

Ἡφαίστων δε γραφοντες καθαρὸν καὶ γυπα ζωγραφουσιν;
 Ἀθηγὰν δε γυπα καὶ καθαρὸν.

To write “Hephaistos” they depict a scarab and a vulture ();
 or “Athena,” a vulture and a scarab ().

Phonetically, the two spellings reported by Horapollo follow the same principle from the anadrome discussed above: the scarab writes $T < t(\ddot{s})$, the vulture $N < n(r.t)$, so combined they can represent TN (Tatenen) and NT (Neith) respectively. Scholars have long recognized this passage must refer to Tatenen (Hephaistos) and Neith (Athena),⁴⁴ and several have sought similar spellings from Esna


41 Note that Kematef and Irita are mentioned in epithets of Neith right after the variant of the anadrome (Tatenen and Neith) mentioned above in *Esna* VI, 513, 12.


42 For this text, see also Fernandez Pichel 2018: 152, n. 10, noting another example from Philae in an epithet of Khnum (Bénédict 1893–1895: 80, 11–12). A very similar phrase occurs also in *Esna* IV, 424, 1, where it describes Khnum united with Menhyt-Nebtu.


43 Hallof 2011: 5, characterized the two creator deities of Esna as being “[!]like a coin, only one side of which can be regarded at a time.”

44 For the interpretatio graeca of these divinities, see Quaegebeur, Clarysse, van Maele 1985a; 1985b: 26–32; Galazzi 1985.

temple.⁴⁵ Unfortunately, examples with these specific signs are difficult to find within the remains of the temple,⁴⁶ of which only the pronaos survives.

Nonetheless, in one text (*Esna* II, 71, 5–6) Neith is called: “father of fathers, mother of mothers, , who came about in the beginning (*hpr m hʿ.t*).” Brugsch had suggested interpreting this passage literally as “that means the scarab and vulture,” but based on the remarks above, one might understand this as “that means Tatenen, who came about in the beginning” (von Lieven 2010: 570). Since there is no divine determinative confirming this is Tatenen, perhaps the most likely reading here is “that means the father and the mother (*it mw.t pw*).” Support for this final interpretation comes from the trigram litany to Neith, where she is addressed in two subsequent verses featuring the scarab and vulture, each time in different positions (*Esna* III, 216, 6; Leitz 2023: 738–742):

(25)  “(Neith), **the father and mother** who came about in the beginning, who came forth from Nun, before what exists had come into being.”

(26)  “(Neith), the mother of mothers, the father of fathers, who came about before anything existed.”

These verses employ the scarab and vulture (the latter incorporated into the *nb.ty* sign in verse 26), and call Neith both “mother of mothers...” as well as “father and mother,” suggesting the example from *Esna* II, 71 should be understood the same way.

In the associated litany to Khnum, meanwhile, his divine name (not Tatenen’s) is also spelled with the scarab and vulture, albeit with one additional sign in between, a falcon writing *n < ntr*:

 *Esna* III, 232, 14 (141); Leitz 2023a: 292–293

Otherwise, there are multiple examples where the second consonant (*t*) of Neith is written with the scarab,⁴⁷ but none with a preceding vulture.

Nonetheless, Horapollo correctly reported that Neith and Tatenen in particular were somehow mirror images of one another, both graphically and theologically. Moreover, he connected them specifically to divine archetypes of a “father” and “mother,” coincidentally much like HCE and ALP in Joyce’s *FW*. These two points strongly suggest Horapollo was directly informed about the hieroglyphic conventions and nuances of local theology of Esna temple, whether from priests, scribes,


45 E.g., Brugsch 1891a: 114–115; Brugsch 1891b: 4 (both books at least theoretically accessible to James Joyce); Van de Walle & Vergote 1943: 54–55; Winter & Winter 1996; von Lieven 2010: 569–570.

46 Leitz, *et al.* 2002–2003: VII, 411c, recorded an example of the first group (scarab + vulture) at Dendera as a unique spelling of “Atum.” However, the text passage cited there, example (202), is a standard spelling of the divine name, without scarab or vulture.

47 *Esna* III, 216, 3 (13); Chassinat 1939: 101, 2.

or papyrus copies of the local hymns. On the one hand, Esna was the only major temple wherein Tatenen (Hephaistos) and Neith (Athena) were so closely connected. More importantly, multiple hymns and cult-topographical monographs from Esna designate it as both “Temple of the Father” and “Temple of the Mother,” clarifying that in these instances, Khnum was “the Father” and Neith “the Mother” (Fernández Pichel 2018: 85, 89–90).

While this non-commutative relationship ($AB \neq BA$) between the names of Neith and Tatenen has long been recognized, similar anadromes exist for the next divine generation. If Khnum-Tatenen and Neith represent the first primeval moment of creation, their successors are Khnum and Menhyt. In fact, multiple texts explicitly link the two together, such as *Esna* II, 104, 4, just before the passage in which the anadrome discussed above occurs: “thus Khnum became the name of Tatenen, and Menhyt the name of Neith.” Similarly, the pairs are identified again in the litany to Khnum (*Esna* III, 232, 12 (135); Leitz 2023a: 285–286), where their names are written as near-anadromes of one another:

n hnmw Mnhyt m tʼ-sn.t For Khnum and Menhyt () in Esna: that
tnn pw hnʼ N.t means Tatenen together with Neith.

Other texts directly compare Tatenen and Neith to Khnum and Menhyt (*Esna* VII, 633), or refer to Menhyt in contexts typically associated with Neith, such as Menhyt one of the two primeval serpents (*Esna* VI, 507). In their litanies, Neith is identified with Menhyt (*Esna* III, 216 (31, 67)), and Menhyt with Neith (*Esna* III, 233 (12, 33, 36)).⁴⁸

Just as Tatenen (*TN*) and Neith (*NT*) had essentially symmetrical consonantal structures, so the reductive trigram scheme at Esna permitted a comparable relationship between Khnum (*HNM*) and Menhyt (*MNH*). The main challenge comes from the two different fricatives (*h* vs. *ḥ*). Although they were quite distinct in earlier phases of the language, they could interchange in Ptolemaic and Roman texts (Kurth 2007: 524–530). Particularly in the Esna litanies, Khnum’s name could begin with multiple consonants due to sound changes (*h*, *ḥ*, *ḥ*,⁴⁹ but also *q* and *š*)⁵⁰, and the same was partially true for Menhyt (*ḥ* for *ḥ*).⁵¹ As in the example noted above, the radiant sun (*ḥ* < *iʼḥw*) could represent both *h* in Khnum, and *ḥ* in Menhyt (Sauneron 1982: 160, No. 225), the latter possibly derived from *ḥʼy*, “to shine” (Leitz 2023a: 379).









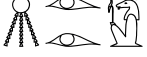
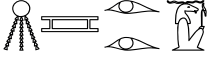


48 For Menhyt designated as Neith, see also *Esna* III, 251, 22, § 2; the relationship was briefly discussed by el-Sayed 1982: I, 137–138.

49 Sauneron 1982: 99.

50 Sauneron 1982: 134, No. 101 (baboon = *q* < *qnd*, “to rage”; see Kurth 2007: 535, n. 3), 145, No. 159–160 (feather = *š*; see also *Esna* III, 393, 21); 164, No. 252 (lake = *š*); 176, No. 315 (scimitar = *q* < *qn*, “might”). So also in *Esna* III, 230, B (*š* < *šms*).

51 Sauneron 1982: 128, No. 77; 176, No. 316.

This being established, one can recognize a number of symmetrical anadromes for Khnum and his consort Menhyt:

Khnum		<i>Esna</i> II, 157, B
Menhyt		<i>Esna</i> III, 335, B
		<i>Esna</i> VII, 635, 10
		<i>Esna</i> III, 301, 10
Khnum		<i>Esna</i> III, 232, 11 (129); possibly 225, 19 (56)
Menhyt		<i>Esna</i> III, 346, 24
		<i>Esna</i> III, 254, 12
		<i>Esna</i> III, 232, 22 (47)
Khnum		<i>Esna</i> III, 353, A; 387, 1; possibly 225, 17 (49); cf. Leitz 2023a: 133, n. 448
		<i>Esna</i> III, 264, 25
Menhyt		<i>Esna</i> III, 233, 23 (50)
		<i>Esna</i> III, 233, 22 (46)

All variants involve the radiant sun (*i³ḥw* > *ḥ/ḥ*) and the two eyes or pupils, both round and ovoid (*m³n*, “to see” > *mn/nm*, via metathesis).⁵² Graphically, the anadrome is simple, but it may allude to a major event in the religious calendar at Esna. On the first day of the month of Khoiak, the pacified goddess of the Eye of the sun, Menhyt-Nebtu, would return to the city and unite with Khnum (Sauneron 1962: 47–67; von Recklinghausen 2017). At this time, other neighboring deities would visit Esna “in order to see the beauty of the two celestial disks (*r m³n nfrw itn.wy*),”⁵³ namely Khnum and Menhyt-Nebtu and Shu and Tefnut.⁵⁴ The circular pupils in some of these writings may allude to the twin celestial luminaries, while the others evoke phrases such as “beholding the radiance” or “the radiance of the two (reunited) eyes.”

52 Cf. Sauneron 1982: 100, 126, No. 66; Smith 1984.

53 *Esna* II, 81, 6; 127, 9; *Esna* III, 346, 22.

54 For their identification with the two disks, see also *Esna* II, 31, 59; 80, 3.

There do not appear to be any similar anadromes between Khnum Lord of the Field and his main consort, Nebtu, the divine couple at nearby North Esna. Nonetheless, there is also a degree of symmetry between their primary names and epithets. Nebtu's name literally means "Lady of the agricultural domain (*ww*)," which is roughly synonymous with Khnum's title "Lord of the Field (*sh.t*)." Indeed, this form of Khnum can also be called "Lord of the agricultural domain (*nb ww*)" (Leitz *et al.* 2002–2003: 605b), essentially the masculine equivalent of Nebtu.

Conclusion

It is fair to characterize *Finnegans Wake* and certain texts from Esna temple as attempts towards a transcendental writing system. Both radically disrupt traditional readerly expectations, foreground the visual iconicity of their texts, and add multiple layers of meaning to be interpreted from each phrase. Most remarkable is their mutual adoption of acrophonic or acrostic trigrams representing the archetypal father and mother figures: Khnum (*HNM*) and Menhyt (*MNH*), or Neith (*NT*) and Tatenen (*TN*) at Esna; HCE and ALP in *FW*. For Joyce, this practice draws attention to the visual script, as readers cannot help but notice and seek out more instances of these trigrams. In turn, each acrostic variation expands the network of imagery and personal associations for each character, so that most wordly events, personages, and phenomena are filtered through HCE, ALP, and the other major characters.

So too at Esna, the novel trigrams replace graphic associations between divinities and their conventional spellings; indeed, Khnum was much more than just the *hnm*-vessel which historically wrote his name, and the mysterious ideogram for Neith reveals nothing about her complex role in the Egyptian pantheon. The myriad graphic variations would have prompted devotees of Khnum and Neith to reflect on further epithets, attributes, and mythological events encoded in their very names, and on their inter-divinity relationships. Just as the original temple must have been divided symmetrically into sanctuaries for Khnum and Neith, so the very names of Khnum-Tatenen and Neith-Menhyt were redesigned into mirror anadromes.

References

NB: Passages from *Finnegans Wake* are cited by page and line number (e.g., *FW* 24.5). Citations from Esna temple are cited by volume, inscription number and column or line (e.g., *Esna* II, 61, 5). Abbreviations for Esna are as follows:

Esna II = Sauneron 1963; translations at <https://bookdown.org/shemanefer/Esna2/>

Esna III = Sauneron 1968; translations at <https://bookdown.org/shemanefer/Esna3/>

Esna IV = Sauneron 1969; translations at <https://bookdown.org/shemanefer/Esna4/>

Esna VI = Sauneron 1975; translations at <https://bookdown.org/shemanefer/Esna6/>

Esna VII = Sauneron and Hallof 2009

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