Finnegans Wake II.2: The Nightlesson

(“Here’s looking at Euclid”)

Jeremy Colangelo – English 9096A – October 29, 2013

Stephen Dedalus’s lesson in the “Nestor” episode of *Ulysses*:

—You, Cochrane, what city sent for him?
—Tarentum, sir.
—Very good. Well?
—There was a battle, sir.
—Very good. Where?
  The boy’s blank face asked the blank window.
  [. . .]
—I forget the place, sir. 279 B. C.
—Asculum, Stephen said, glancing at the name and date in the gorescarred book.
—Yes, sir. And he said: *Another victory like that and we are done for.*

(U 2.1-14)
—Wait. You, Armstrong. Do you know anything about Pyrrhus?
   […]
—Pyrrhus, sir? Pyrrhus, a pier.
   All laughed. Mirthless high malicious laughter. Armstrong looked round at
his classmates, silly glee in profile. In a moment they will laugh more loudly, aware
of my lack of rule and the fees their papas pay.
—Tell me now, Stephen said, poling the boy’s shoulder with the book, what is a
pier.
—A pier, sir, Armstrong said. A thing out in the water. A kind of bridge. Kingstown
pier, sir.
   […]
—Kingstown pier, Stephen said. Yes, a disappointed bridge.
   The words troubled their gaze.
—How, sir? Comyn asked. A bridge is across a river.

(U 2.18-41)

His questions showed me how complex and mysterious were certain
institutions of the Church which I had always regarded as the simplest
of acts. The duties of the priest towards the Eucharist and towards the
secrecy of the confessional seemed so grave to me that I wondered
how anybody had ever found in himself the courage to undertake
them; and I was not surprised when he told me that the fathers of the
Church had written books as thick as the Post Office Directory and as
closely printed as the law notices in the newspaper elucidating all these
intricate questions.

(D 6)
Euclid’s First Postulate, rendered here in the original Greek.

Note the delta and epsilon on the circles – predecessors of the sigla for ALP and HCE.

Proposition One of Euclid’s Elements of Geometry (vol. 1 p. 241-2) describes how one may “on a given finite straight line [AB] . . . construct an equilateral triangle [ABC].” The process involves imaging points A and B as the centers of respective overlapping circles (D and E) which each have a radius equal to the length of line AB. If one imagines a point C at either the top or bottom intersections, lines AC and BC will, as Euclid shows, be equal in length to line AB, meaning that the resulting triangle will be equilateral.
The arrangement of the notes shows how Shem, Shaun, and Issy are deriving their mother ALP, and her sigla $\Delta$, from their arrangement relative to the central block of text.