

Finnegans Wake in Retrospective

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Abstract

The article offers a deep and personal reflection on the process of reading and interpreting Joyce's most obscure and difficult work, *Finnegans Wake*. The author compares and contrasts his own dilated experience studying the text with the different approaches and readings that Joyce's work has received from well-known Joycean scholars, offering a review of the critical reception of Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* since its publication.

Keywords: *Finnegans Wake*, reading, interpretation, criticism.

I believe that most of us who are called or call ourselves Joycean scholars have quoted single words or phrases as well as isolated paragraphs from *Finnegans Wake* much before we actually came to read the book. Writing about *Dubliners* or *Ulysses*, who has been able to resist drawing parallels or echoing the beginnings of Joyce's last work? Who has not exulted in the multiple resonances in the first word, "rieverrun," or in the enigmatic vacuum behind the lonely "the" with which the book ends? It is true, as has been demonstrated with wit and humour, that to speak and quote books which have not been read is a common practice. This contrivance is as frequent as that of tracking a hypothetical

theme throughout *Finnegans Wake* by using concordances and quotations taken from one and all, as well as by adding entire paragraphs from here and allusions to characters from there, which, incidentally, only exist in the interpretation of some readers. As a result, one might end up thinking that the author had it in mind to mislead and confuse scholars; to insert deception into the essence of the book, not as something exceptional and surreptitiously embedded, but rather as part of the integral nature of the book.

For many writers and critics, *Finnegans Wake* has become an often-quoted resource to circumvent any potential impasse or, quite the opposite, to disguise platitudes and banalities, when in fact it is the most profound and revealing work of human history, although this statement *per se* constitutes yet another *boutade*. Be that as it may, as occurs with any other work, and not exclusively with *Finnegans Wake*, the story of the reader is to be added to the story of the book: when, where, and how was the book read? In my case, for whom the first reading of the book took almost a year and the subsequent re-readings expanded over several years, the circumstances surrounding the challenging effort of reading such a slippery work have affected the course of my life and academic career, both private and public. Without going into further detail and for the reason I have just given, there have been occasions when, over the course of my reading, I think I have discovered, in one chapter or another, more than one children's story or more than one discourse loaded with fervent patriotism. Yet what I have always found is a string of insolences and licentious obscenities unparalleled in the work of any other writer, although I should also clarify that there are passages where the reading of the book brings to mind works such as Thomas à Kempis' *The Imitation of Christ* or San Juan de la Cruz's *Noche obscura*. In other words, basically the reading of *Finnegans Wake* does not differ from that of a

Shakespearean tragedy or a novel by Cervantes, because the act of reading is predominantly subjective by definition. Nevertheless, in the case of *Finnegans Wake*, there is a fundamental difference, for after several attempts I still do not know which story is being told, or who the characters are –if there are any–, whereas in *Hamlet*, for instance, I think that most of us would sanction a plot not far removed from the subject-matter of revenge, and we would certainly identify Hamlet as a fictional character, and Ophelia, Gertrude, Laertes, Claudius and others as accompanying members or members of the company. In contrast, Earwicker, Shem, Shaun, or Issy could well be either a father and his children, two men and a woman, mere ideas, feelings, unreachd desires or rather all the aforementioned things intermingled and compressed into a single persona.

Finnegans Wake requires us to make a Copernican turn in our reading routine, it forces us to make such a great turn that, without any guarantee of coming to understand its words, phrases, paragraphs, chapters, personas or personifications, we will have to spend a whole lifetime trying to assimilate the work, even if we only aspire to reach the same level of understanding as the average reader can fairly draw from *Moby Dick* or *Fortuna y Jacinta*. Ultimately, *Finnegans Wake* will emerge as an evanescent mist and certainties will vanish into the smoke of scholarship. Indeed, immediately after the publication of some excerpts from *Finnegans Wake* in avant-garde magazines, certain literary academics and scholars from the intellectual circle close to Joyce were already offering to guide the potential reader through the maze of the new work, including Samuel Beckett,² Joyce's friend and disciple, who was at that time a beardless twenty-three-year-old young man. Nevertheless, there is a substantial difference between what the volume offers and saying that it constitutes a guide to Joyce's work, for the collection of essays is just a discursive exegesis,

the best example being Beckett's "Dante ... Bruno. Vico ... Joyce."³ At this early stage, we can already detect how the plot of the work is dodged in favour of more or less marginal subject-matters. In other words, the group of critics and apologists who contributed to *An Exagmination* wrote about the hypothetical influence of Bruco and Vico on *Finnegans Wake*, as Beckett's title already suggests; about language problems; about religion and even philosophical issues such as the passing of time, but the question of the plot vanishes into philological-philosophical digressions. The chapter written by Elliot Paul, "Mr Joyce's Treatment of the Plot,"⁴ includes, for instance, a long quotation, taken from I.iii, in which I am unable to decipher, either partially or completely, any fragment of narration –despite the title–, and in which I cannot detect any resemblance whatsoever with the subtitles that the editor of the 1992 Penguin edition inserts into the index, where references to Earwicker's trial –for many obvious – are hinted at. The conclusion I draw is twofold. On the one hand, the quotation reveals that it is taken from a 1927 galley proof and, on the other hand, that, as usual, Joyce played with erotic games, sometimes intensely scatological and incestuous:

Take an old geeser who calls on his skirt. Note his sleek hair, so elegant, tableau vivant. He vows her to be his own Honey-lamb, swears the will be Pope Pals, by Sam, and share good times way down west in a guaranteed happy lovenest When May moon she shines And They twit twinkle all the night, combing the comet's tail popguns and shooting right up at the stars. (*FW* 65.05-11)

An Exagmination set the general trend that explanatory criticism has followed up until now, despite the supposed

breakthroughs which have allegedly contributed to clarifying the opacity of the work, a question to which I shall return later on.

A more recent book, but one which was surely begun or at least conceived during Joyce's lifetime, is the well-known *A Skeleton Key to Finnegans Wake*.⁵ Here the plot is everything: chapter by chapter, we are told the story as well as the minutest incidents which happen in the book, falling into something similar to a paraphrase of the original or rather turning *Finnegans Wake* into a narrative with a traditional structure, albeit less accessible than initially intended by the commentators. In any case, for better or worse, the book has been widely published, despite the harsh criticism it has received from academic scholars working on Joyce's work. *A Skeleton Key* has become a model for a sheer number of titles where the plot of *Finnegans Wake* is supposed to be explained to us or at least where we are asked to trust the author in his/her attempt to carry us through the unfathomable caverns of the book. This, at least, is how I understand the subtitle "Guide" which tends to appear on multiple covers. The only problem lies in the fact that each of these publications seems to allude to different books, although occasionally superficial concomitances can be found.

Another book which, for some years, has enjoyed commendable acceptance amongst the readers of *Finnegans Wake* is that by William York Tindall.⁶ Besides other innovations, Tindall's work introduced the convention of following the pagination order of the original, instead of adhering to the division into chapters or titles which Joyce added to the serialization that preceded the publication of his work in book form. I think that this meant an intelligent pedagogical advance, for the unity of *Finnegans Wake* goes beyond any division into chapters or parts and, in fact, I believe that in this way the solid internal interlocking becomes more

visible and impossible to be sectioned. William York Tindall's textual and thematic explanations are ahead of Roland McHugh's *Annotations to Finnegans Wake*,⁷ and, in my opinion, they are considerably more reliable and have broader and more sagacious resonances than McHugh's more popular

Annotations. I believe, however, that no reader of *Finnegans Wake* has resisted making use of the *Annotations* while reading. As a case in point, I tend to have them at hand, despite being convinced not only of their uselessness to understand the book, but also of the obstacle they might represent for those who believe that this is a work which creates its own coherence and which tries to convey a concrete vision, however fragmented it might seem on the surface. The fact remains that, searching for meaning, we firstly tend to go on the trail of a plot and, as a result, we only come across books which recount it. This first stage of the reader, still unfamiliar with such a peculiar reading, reveals that they have not yet shed their skin, that inherited habits of reading still persist and they partially contribute to obscuring the vision of wholeness which emanates from the text.

There are books that, some of them due to apprehension and others due to surfeit or discrimination, help us to move away from the story. Titles as eloquent as *Finnegans Wake, A Plot Summary*,⁸ or more cautious and reserved ones such as that by Danis Rose and John O'Hanlon,⁹ force us to be wary of anything that echoes the question of narration, because they denote a certain naivety as far as the reading of *Finnegans Wake* is concerned and, above all, they often contradict one another irreconcilably. Even authors who have earned considerable respect for their perseverance, intuition and deep knowledge of Irish history and literature, as is the case of Adaline Glasheen, when they tackle the narrative plot as proof of their consummate erudition, we are surprised by what I consider a transient obfuscation,¹⁰ and I am particularly

referring here to the synopsis preceding the learned and thoughtful encyclopaedia which occupies most of the book.

No wonder that in recent years the publication of guides to the plot of *Finnegans Wake* has been brought to a halt and that Joycean scholars have also avoided alluding to the hypothetical plot of the work in their articles and lectures. This does not mean that the question of the plot has been completely forgotten, but rather that it has been overcome without being banished, which implies a great step forward in the intellectual understanding and assimilation of Joyce's work. In *The Books at the Wake. A Study of Literary Allusions in James Joyce's*

Finnegans Wake,¹¹ James S. Atherton, for instance, and as the title of his work already suggests, focuses exclusively on the study of literary allusions –although not all of them– in one of the texts which is most laden with references to literature. But precisely because literature permeates each of the lines in

Joyce's book, in the end *The Books at the Wake* becomes one of the studies which provides a more profound insight into the structure of the work, since not only does it identify the most significant literary allusions in *Finnegans Wake*, but it also uncovers the potential relationships which exist amongst them as well as the way in which they are integrated into the whole of the story or poem.¹²

In this respect, John Bishop's work, *Joyce's Book of the Dark*,¹³ takes another decisive step towards the backbone of *Finnegans Wake* and, in a quasi-reckless exercise, the author bluntly confronts the origin and development of the great parable or the great vision of the book. Through a thorough reading and after having revised the multiplicity of studies carried out to date, John Bishop tackles the spirit and scope of darkness, which continues to be the life and death of any human being, and he tries, in an audacious and meditated way, to get where Joyce and the nature of *Finnegans Wake* allows him. Indeed, one of the obstacles to be bridged by anyone who

wishes to dispel the shadows of the work lies precisely in the barrier of personal interpretation. There is no valid pretext for avoiding subjectivity, because arguments have to be backed up by the text or texts and this or these are susceptible to a thousand and one interpretations. Let us take some paradigmatic examples, which, nevertheless, could be found in almost every page of the book. One of the few obvious things which can be deduced from *Finnegans Wake* is that the story, if such a concept is indeed applicable to the work, probably takes place at night, more specifically during a fitful dream:

- You saw it visibly from your hidingplace?
- No. From my invisibly lyingplace.
- And you then took down in stereo what took place being tunc committed? (*FW* 504.08-10)

To state that the above quotation alludes to a night dream constitutes but a daring interpretation which ignores several contradictions and chooses the meaning of certain words at the cost of reducing their broad polysemy. Indeed, it could be argued that an interpretation in the terms just described implies taking the quotation out of context. We could gather dozens and dozens of phrases which reiteratively appear page after page and to which we could assign meanings such as “night,” “dream,” “dark” or any other synonym from such a wide semantic field. Thus: “And They Laying low for his home gang in eeriebleak That mead” (*FW* 316.22-23); “Give him an Eyot in the Farout ... there's nobody else in Couch anysides to hold a chef's cankle” (*FW* 463.30 and 33-34); “The Tues of murmury mermers to the mind's ear, uncharted rock, evasive weed” (*FW* 254.18-19). These same phrases could be understood in an antagonist sense as well. The range of meanings would become therefore endless and would lead us, directly or indirectly, to complete, modify or alter the text as a whole.

For this reason criticism on *Finnegans Wake* has been moving further and further away from the univocal interpretation of its elements, even the simplest –and I am referring even to the diacritic aspect–, and it has sought light in necessarily unconnected niches, perhaps in the hope that eventually the union of all of them will lead us towards a global understanding. I am talking about, for instance, the wide range of books devoted to the presence of foreign languages in *Finnegans Wake*, amongst which *A Classical Lexicon for Finnegans Wake*,¹⁴ *A Lexicon of the German in Finnegans Wake*¹⁵ and *Scandinavian Elements of Finnegans Wake*¹⁶ feature prominently, and to which we could also add compelling monographs concerning the French, Italian and Spanish vocabulary which surfaces in the work,¹⁷ not to mention the extensive literature on the presence of,¹⁸ above all, English- and French-speaking writers in the book.

So far not only have critics followed manifold research methods to navigate the convoluted paths of *Finnegans Wake*, but they have also deployed every single theory and technique that has been in vogue over the past seventy years: deconstruction, psychoanalysis (Lacan), historicism, sociology, anthropology and all the others that those of you who read or listen to me already know, the opaque and impenetrable wall having been responsible for crumbling down the most thoughtful hypothesis and practices. However, I would like to discuss, in more detail, the genetic approach, given that, although it was not born with the purpose of analysing Joyce's last work –indeed in France it had already been employed since the turn of nineteenth-century, above all, with regard to the study of Flaubert, and going even further back, the origins of this approach can be related to classical hermeneutics–, I do have to admit that nowadays the geneticist approach occupies a prominent place within literary criticism devoted to Joyce and, especially, to *Finnegans Wake*. There are several reasons why

genetic practices have been so appealing to scholars. The first of them lies in the plethora of existing manuscripts owing, amongst other reasons, to Joyce's unrelenting interest in keeping the notes prior to the drafts, as well as the endless corrections to the subsequent typewritten copies and to the multiple galley proofs, all of which obsessed the typesetters of his work. Joyce was very careful to make sure that this enormous amount of material fell into the hands of those who would certainly preserve it. This reason undoubtedly represents the material cause, but probably the most important reason stems from the remote cause, that is, the cause which has driven critics to explore the origins of art at that unfathomable moment in which the idea becomes a word, sound, colour and so on. This search constitutes a humanly-rooted aspiration, but one which is probably unattainable, and this is precisely, as we shall see, why so far genetic criticism has been unable to overcome the obstacle represented by the difficulty of deciding what is derived from inherited genes or rather from the cultural and learning environment. As far as I know, this problem, which has become a *cliché* in discussions about animal behaviour, has never been disputed by any literary geneticist, perhaps because initially the mission of genetic criticism is assumed, quite rightly, to work at a pragmatic level, ignoring other collateral aspects: philosophy, psychology and psychiatry.

As can be seen in recent publications, much of the technique that Joyce used throughout the composition of *Finnegans Wake* has been unravelled by genetic criticism. Thus, for instance, the most persuasive argument against the hypothetical existence of an underlying plot in the book comes from those genetic analyses of the work which describe it as a nodal armour around which passages, anecdotes, quotation, characters and so on variously converge to a greater or lesser extent. In this sense, the book is constructed around a series of

textual resonances and, instead of telling a story or glossing a subject-matter, its discourse flows through several anecdotes, quotations, passages and so on, in such a way that the outline becomes just a core from which countless ramifications branch out, an initial flash which puts the engine of making texts into motion and keeps it moving until the last word of the book. For a geneticist, there is no trivial finding as every single part lends meaning to the whole –albeit not narrative coherence– and reinforces the unity of the work. (I would like to add that the work of genetic criticism is extremely tedious and requires a considerable amount of perseverance and endurance. This is surely the reason why in many American and some European universities preliminary tasks are preferably assigned to students and scholars in a research training phase). This work and the results derived from it might be illuminating for some, while simultaneously irrelevant for others. Be that as it may, I consider that there is irrefutable evidence of the progress that genetic criticism has brought to the process of calibrating, in retrospective, the ultimate meaning of *Finnegans Wake*, as well as the way in which Joyce stored and assembled a huge amount of information and data, even if progress does not always imply usefulness.

An example, as appropriate or inappropriate as any other, could be the beginning and ending of II.iv, a chapter which is generally known as that about Mamalujo and also about Tristan and Isolde. From a geneticist perspective, this example is considerably complex. To begin with, it is worth mentioning that in the first manuscripts, that is, those which probably date from 1923 or from the last days of 1922, the theme of Tristan and Isolde is just touched in passing, and instead most allusions centre on Mamalujo. In the *Archives*, and already in its first page, we find a sentence which echoes, almost verbatim, the one which appears in the final text: “Hear, O hear, all ye caller Herrings” (*Archives* 47481-94); “(Hear, O

hear, Caller Errin!)” (FW 394.33-34). This sentence, albeit slightly different, re-appears more than once in *Finnegans Wake*, and particularly in II.iv, in the Mamalujo section. A few pages later, in a rather intelligible typography –something atypical of Joyce’s handwriting–, we find the beginning of the chapter exactly as it was published in the first and subsequent editions, without additions or amendments. It even includes the word “quarks” which scientists have adopted to describe certain particles in quantum theory. Although all this applies to both handwritten and typewritten copies, the ones in the latter format introduce some words and phrases which refer us to *Chamber Music and Pomes Penyach* and they even allude to the “smacked the big kuss of Trustan with Usolde” (FW 383.18), an allusion surreptitiously incorporated into other paragraphs of the chapter. In other words, the most important conclusion to draw from these facts is that, at this early stage, Joyce had already written a thirteen-line paragraph that he was not to alter over the seventeen years that the composition of the book took him, something which, as far as I know, represents a unique example. This means that the chapter was initially intended to revolve around four old men or the four evangelists, despite the fact that we can simultaneously detect certain remote resonances which herald the echoes to Tristan and Isolde. According to the date of the galley copies and the order of appearance in the final text, we can infer that only later, probably in 1938, a year before the book was published, did Joyce introduce the theme of Tristan and Isolde in parallel. Consequently, at the beginning of the chapter which is mostly or almost exclusively devoted to the four old men –Mamalujo–, the exogenous character is highlighted in italics, being counterbalanced in the penultimate page of the chapter –“Hear, O hear, Iseult la Belle! Tristan sad Hero, hear!” (FW 398.29)–, which is followed by another page, also in italics, sad and poetic at the same time, which acts as a counterpoint to the

sullen and bitter irony of what could be considered the initial complaint of the old men.

The process of intermingling the two subject-matters, that of the old men and that of the young lovers, is not clear in the manuscripts or, in other words, the manuscripts simply show that the information about both themes is juxtaposed and intertwined. This implies that Joyce broke up the two stories, thus creating a text much deeper and broader than the story of the evangelists and of the tragic heroes of the legend are when taken separately. It is worth noting that the manuscripts provide evidence of the background to much of the final text: through them, we know, for instance, that Joyce adopted Wagner's version of *Tristan and Isolde*, just as it appears in the libretto of his opera *Tristan und Isolde*, ignoring George Moore's and Joseph Berdier's versions which were, nevertheless, temporally and geographically closer to him. The four personae who disguise their personality behind the evangelists Mark, Matthew, Luke and John are also identified in the manuscripts as A.E., Yeats, Shaw and George Moore. However, in my opinion, this kind of information continues to be anecdotal, and after a while one has serious doubts about the usefulness of spending so much time trying to elucidate such an apparently irrelevant finding.

Thus far I have discussed, in a very simplified way, the external aspect of an example seen from the genetic perspective, a theory and technique which I have used in search of Joyce's footsteps. But to tell the truth, without equivocations or grandiloquent excuses, I would also like to add the following in the simplest manner:

1 - *Finnegans Wake* has taken me more time and effort than *Ulysses*, though I have not read it as many times as I have the book about good old Bloom and his wife.

2 - *Finnegans Wake*, I think, is the book of the future, the book whose wisdom, bar Joyce, the rest of us has not yet reached. And do not ask me to give reasons.

3 - I think, along with a few others, that *Finnegans Wake* is undoubtedly the best book by Joyce. And do not ask me why.

4 - In *Finnegans Wake* I have found the paragraphs that have made the most powerful impression on my sensibility; the words that have forced me to think and re-think the little or much that I have learned in books and in the course of my already extensive experience.

5 - *Finnegans Wake* is, amongst all the books I have read, the one that I comprehend the least. There are whole pages that I do not understand, sometimes even chapters. However, it is the book with which I best fight loneliness.

6 - *Finnegans Wake* is music, is a symphony: it has no stories, it tells you no sorrows or joys. It tells you in words what is beyond words and sometimes, as with music, you shed tears without knowing why or you dare to hope that you will be able to listen to that sound or melody for all eternity, and you do not know why either.

7 - If I had been sincere –honest, as is said nowadays–, I would never have written or spoken about *Finnegans Wake*, simply because I do not know what it is about. But I have never spoken or written about Picasso, Beethoven's *Missa Solemnis* or Britten's *War Requiem* either for I do not understand them, yet if I did not have them, I would have been deprived of something, something that I do not understand either, something that people call love.

Notes

¹ See Pierre Bayard, *How to Talk about Books You Haven't Read*, trans. Jeffrey Mehlman (Bloomsbury, New York, 2007).

² Samuel Beckett *et al.*, *Our Exagmination Round His Factification for Incamination of Work in Progress* (Paris: Shakespeare & Co., 1929).

³ Id. 3-23.

⁴ Id. 129-139.

⁵ Joseph Campbell and Henry Morton Robinson, *A Skeleton Key to Finnegans Wake* (New York, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1944; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1977).

⁶ William York Tindall, *A Reader's Guide to Finnegans Wake* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1969).

⁷ Roland McHugh, *Annotations to Finnegans Wake* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980).

⁸ John Gordon, *Finnegans Wake, A Plot Summary* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1986).

⁹ Danis Rose and John O'Hanlon, *Understanding Finnegans Wake. A Guide to the Narrative of Joyce's Masterpiece* (New York & London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1982).

¹⁰ Cf. Adaline Glasheen, *Third Census of Finnegans Wake* (Berkeley, London: University of California Press, 1977).

¹¹ James S. Atherton, *The Books at the Wake. A Study of Literary Allusions in James Joyce's Finnegans Wake* (Mamaroneck, New York: Paul P. Appel, Publisher, 1974).

¹² I believe, and I am not alone in this, that most readers of *Finnegans Wake* end up seeing the book as an enormous and brilliant poem of an endless sonority and loaded with metaphors.

¹³ John Bishop, *Joyce's Book of the Dark: Finnegans Wake* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1986).

¹⁴ Brendan O Hehir and John M. Dillon, *A Classical Lexicon for Finnegans Wake* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1977).

¹⁵ Helmut Bonheim, *A Lexicon of the German in Finnegans Wake* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1967).

¹⁶ Dounia Bunis Christiani, *Scandinavian Elements of Finnegans Wake* (Evanston: Northwestern University, 1965).

¹⁷ Roland McHugh incorporated most of this material into the *Annotations to Finnegans Wake*.

¹⁸ The most well-known and influential book in this respect is undoubtedly Vicent John Cheng's *Shakespeare and Joyce. A Study of Finnegans Wake* (London: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1984).