

Finnegans Wake is Now 80: Can we Finally Read it?

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Resumen

Finnegans Wake (1939) de James Joyce cumplió 80 años el 4 de mayo de 2019. Desde que los fragmentos del libro se publicaron en revistas bajo el nombre *Work in Progress*, una pregunta sigue intrigando a los lectores: ¿cómo leerlo? Este artículo discute respuestas dadas por Samuel Beckett, Fritz Senn y el propio Joyce, y argumenta sobre lo injusto que es el rótulo de ilegible a una obra tan abierta y desafiante que ofrece, en realidad, varias posibilidades de lectura. El rol de las traducciones en la lectura de *Finnegans Wake* también será considerado en este artículo.

Palabras clave: *Finnegans Wake*, *Work in Progress*, lectura, traducción, James Joyce.

Abstract

James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* (1939) turned 80 years old on 4 May 2019. Since the fragments of the book were serialized in magazines under the name *Work in Progress*, one question has haunted readers: how should we read it? This paper discusses answers provided by Samuel Beckett, Fritz Senn, and Joyce himself and argues that the label of unreadable is unfair to so open and challenging a literary work, which offers, in fact, various possibilities of reading. The role of translations in reading *Finnegans Wake* is also going to be considered in this paper.

Keywords: *Finnegans Wake*, *Work in Progress*, reading, translation, James Joyce.

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*If the doors of perception were cleansed everything would appear to
man as it is, infinite.*

William Blake (1973, p. 40)

James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* was published on 4 May 1939. After eight decades being criticized, translated, adapted, abridged, taught, can it finally be read?

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Reminders of *Finnegans Wake's* unreadability are not difficult to find. For instance, in J. C. C. Mays's introduction to *Poems and Exiles, Dubliners and A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* are defined as "accessible", *Ulysses*, as a "masterpiece", and *Finnegans Wake*, as "unreadable" (1992, p. xvii). Very often, unreadable is also a hyperbole for "very difficult to understand", as when Jorge Luis Borges called both *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake* "vast and, why not say, unreadable novels" (1989, p. 284). But in Mays's quotation, it would only sound like an exaggeration if we believed that "accessible" and "masterpiece" were so, too.

"I don't agree that difficult literature is necessarily so inaccessible", Joyce (Hoffmeister & Joyce, 2005) told Adolf Hoffmeister, the future translator of "Anna Livia Plurabelle" into Czech. Joyce (Hoffmeister & Joyce, 2005) went on:

Of course each intelligent reader can read and understand it—if he returns to the text again and again. He is embarking on an adventure with words. In fact, *Work in Progress* is more satisfying than other books because I give readers the opportunity to supplement what they read with their own imagination. Some people will be interested in the origins of words; the technical games; philological experiments in each individual verse. Each word has all the magic of a living thing. Each living thing can be shaped.

When the writer received Hoffmeister in his Parisian apartment for this *entretien*, *Finnegans Wake* was still known by the provisional title of *Work in Progress*, a book Joyce called "the bowl of creation". He explained it: "At the beginning was chaos. But there is chaos at the end, too. The reader participates in the birth or the end of the world when it happens. Everyone is anyone and every moment is any moment" (Hoffmeister & Joyce, 2005).

A booklike this cannot be easy, but, as Joyce said, not inaccessible either. So, to explicate it, to make it readable, *Our Exagmination Round His Factification for Incamination of Work in Progress* was published in 1929 under Joyce's orientation. In this symposium, Joyce's friend, Samuel Beckett, published the seminal essay "Dante... Bruno. Vico.. Joyce", where we find this much-quoted passage:

Here form is content, content is form. You complain that this stuff is not written in English. It is not written at all. It is not to be read — or rather it is not only to be read. It is to be looked at and listened to. His writing is not about something; it is that something itself (Beckett et al., 1972, p. 14).

So, according to Beckett, we must not *only* read, but also look at and listen to Joyce's text. To make *Finnegans Wake* readable Beckett had to separate the act of reading from two senses that are innate to it – hearing and sight. However, it seems that by use of rhetoric what Beckett meant was that reading is a comprehensive act beyond decoding *what* is written *about* something. *Finnegans Wake* invites the readers to a full performance, one in which the reader deals with the encyclopedic and polyglot appeal of Joyce's book of the night.

I wish the academia and the press in general had taken to the letter what Beckett wrote and encouraged readers to open ears and eyes and go ahead, the book would certainly have many more readers now. Joyce himself wanted its translations to be poetically free, as we will see; Beckett, his disciple, expanded the notion of what reading is for potential readers. However, what persists is the reputation of the book as unreadable, a reputation built mainly by readers who are secretly proud to call the book unreadable to everyone else but themselves.

The book also causes dismay or fear in some readers due to its new and apparently impenetrable idiom. But, paradoxically, this new idiom is precisely what should be more inviting. From Beckett's affirmation in his essay – "no creature in heaven or earth ever spoke the language

of *Work in Progress*" (Beckett *et al.*, 1972, pp. 18-19) – we must conclude that *Finnegans Wake* tends to make us equal, citizens of the same category in the Joycean territory.

Someone who does not know any English cannot read it in Joyce's words – for *Finnegans Wake* depends on English – but can do it in translation, a topic we will return to in this paper. Someone who knows *some* English and has patience and love of literary discoveries can read it in its original form. The more a person knows English and other languages, the better. But mastering English and a few other languages and acquiring encyclopedic knowledge are not enough to make anyone a specialist in *Finnegans Wake* in terms that usually satisfy the notion of specialist in the academia. Scholars are always searching for something. And sometimes they find it. With finding, there come some certainties as well as more questions. But the *Finnegans Wake* scholar can practically only collect questions and possibilities, precisely because the book is written in a way that deflects certainties.

Therefore, it is not that *Finnegans Wake* cannot be read, but that it must be read in a way that defies socially and institutionally consolidated authority. The same happens with *Ulysses*, but with much less intensity. How stable and comforting is the opening of *Ulysses*, "Stately, plump, Buck Mulligan came from the stairhead..." (Joyce, 1986, p. 3), when compared with that of *Finnegans Wake*, "river run, past Eve and Adam's" (Joyce, 1975, p. 3). In the latter, we find instability and disorientation. We catch ourselves running in the river, past Eve and Adam (the church in Dublin), and Adam and Eve (the Creation). Since what is written is Eve and Adam, does it mean a condescending "ladies first" or a way of giving prominence to women in a book where Anna Livia is one of the protagonists? Does it make of *Finnegans Wake* a hermetic book? No. No book is as open. And the adventurous reader – in or out of the universities – delights in such openness.

In an article recently published in the Brazilian newspaper *Folha de São Paulo*, Irineo Baptista Netto (4 Aug. 2019) argued that readers need "a manual of instructions" to read *Ulysses*. The author quoted, in Portuguese, a passage from Wayne Booth's *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, originally published in 1961:

Except for occasional outbursts of bravado nobody has ever really claimed that Joyce is clear. In all the skeleton keys and classroom guides there is an open assumption that his later works, *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*, cannot be read; they can only be studied. Joyce himself was always explicating his works, and it is clear that he saw nothing wrong with the fact that they could not be thought of as standing entirely on their own feet. The reader's problems are handled, if they are to be handled at all, by rhetoric provided outside the work (Booth, 1983, p. 325).

I respect both Netto's and Booth's opinions but disagree with them. Apparently, the two authors can neither conceive reading Joyce for non-academic purposes nor accept that what is called "reader's problems" may not be problems for most readers at all, but problems for the academics. *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake* do not need annotations and guides to be read, which does not mean that they are not useful. A few weeks later, Dirce Waltrick do Amarante (1 Sept. 2019), a Brazilian Joyce translator and scholar, responded to that article in the same newspaper, arguing that the perspective presented by the author discourages readers to take Joyce's books to read on their own as a "unique experience".

Amarante also rejected the cliché according to which one must know the many references present in a literary work to enjoy it. It is worth quoting her:

[Netto] seems to believe that we are even more distant from *Ulysses* nowadays, since [he affirmed that] "certain references that could make sense to someone living in the first half of the twentieth century have become obscure and inaccessible to the readers today".

Every good reading experience can convey new meanings at any time. It is not necessary to know the historical context of the book deeply to enjoy it today.

As for *Ulysses*, the novel is interesting precisely because it comprises uncountable possible readings, today and always: the political, the religious, the feminist... And, why not, the anachronic? (Amarante, 1 Sept. 2019) [My translation].

Moreover, Joyce was not always explicating his works. Joyce was always talking and writing letters about them. *Ulysses* did not need the help of Joyce's schema to cause sensation, and, according to Richard Ellmann (1983, p. 613), the symposium about *Finnegans Wake* did not even sell well.

Let us go back to the initial scene. In Joyce's apartment, Hoffmeister demonstrates his anxiety about receiving permission to translate Anna Livia Plurabelle. Joyce gains time and tells him before clearly giving his consent, "I am giving you every possible freedom in the transformation of words. I depend on you. In your country there are many rivers. Take your rivers: Vltava, Váha, Úslava and Nežárka" (Hoffmeister & Joyce, 2005). And he continues saying that "Victor Llona in *Transition* posited the thesis: language can be made by a writer. In this case, also by the translator" (Hoffmeister & Joyce, 2005). Joyce then went to another room and came back with a copy of "Anna Livia Plurabelle". "Please gentlemen [Joyce said, addressing Paul Léon and Hoffmeister], translate a piece for me, and then we will see whether it is possible to navigate *Anna Livia* in another language" (Hoffmeister & Joyce, 2005). After the test, Joyce's permission was finally given.

Joyce was probably referring to what the Peruvian translator Victor Llona, who would soon be a contributor to *Our Exagmination*, had published in the second issue of *Transition* (May 1927), the literary journal that serialized *Work in Progress* from 1927 to 1938. Llona (1927, p. 169) thought that in about two decades, when the panorama of the literature of the 1920's was to be understood, "a straining towards an interpenetration of languages [...]" was going to be identified as one the main traces of the post-War decade, and Joyce would be the writer to have "registered this 'wave'". *Work in Progress*, affirmed Llona (1927, p. 169), "is proof enough that he no longer considers the English tongue – or, in fact, any other single tongue – sufficiently rich, flexible, colorful and sonorous to express what he has to say". Still according to the Peruvian translator, Joyce resorted to "a composite language intelligible only to readers of wide culture and pronounced linguistic achievements" (1927, p. 170). If Victor Llona were right, only few people – even in the strict academic world – would be able to read *Finnegans Wake*. But only if he *were* right.

In Llona's view, other writers would follow Joyce's way, which ultimately would create uncommunication between artists and popular culture. This is the passage from Llona's essay that Joyce might have had in mind during the conversation with Hoffmeister: "Each writer will use a language modelled out by himself and we shall live in a deliciously anarchistic world of letters, thus achieving a paradoxically undemocratic divorce between Art and the Masses" (1927, p. 170). For many different reasons, this prognostic of an elitist future led by *Finnegans Wake* was wrong. Neither has the book created a cohort of imitators nor has it proven undemocratic. On the contrary, Joyce became the fiction writer that every writer wanted to mark a difference from, and the book has united readers of different backgrounds.

How does *Finnegans Wake* unite readers? The first issue of the *Wake Newsletter*, edited by Fritz Senn and Clive Hart (1962, p. 1), opens with this statement: "*Finnegans Wake* needs to be read communally". Furthermore, in a recent interview (Amaral & Senn, 2019), Senn said that "Ironically, [...] we read it in a traditional way, in groups, like in the Middle Ages, when we seated around the text. So, the procedure we do goes back in time for the piece of literature that is most advanced in time".

As director of the Zurich James Joyce Foundation, he started a reading group of *Finnegans Wake* in 1986. The group is still active, and they are now rereading the book for the third time. People of different ages and backgrounds attend the weekly sessions on Thursday evening. Some are talkative, some silent. Some don't even know English well. However different they are, they are all doing the same thing: reading.

One of the reading sessions was filmed by the Spanish artist Dora Garcia and can now be seen in the documentary *The Joycean Society*, winner of the 2013 International Contemporary Art Prize of the Prince Pierre de Monaco Foundation. In the video, Senn sums up the history and method of the reading sessions:

So, I think it was in 1986, the second year [the Foundation opened in April 1985], when we thought, "well, let's try *Finnegans Wake*. If not enough people show up, we'll stop". But people came. And, obviously, it serves a need. And so, we did it... No idea where it would go. And it took us – as you can see, at our low speed, sentence by sentence – it took us like eleven years to get through it. In the meantime, more people came, some left. Now, after eleven years, you can't just say, "now, go home". So, we continued. And, of course, it's the book for continuation. And so, we are now in our third lap (Garcia, 2013).

In the following excerpt by Senn, we can hear an echo of Beckett:

I believe where we usually fail to understand it – certainly I do – is that we look too much [...] at the words, and we can look up words, [...] but we often don't hear the sense behind it. Often the letters, the constellation of letters is something that, I feel, [...] hides some sounds, some word sounds which I can't get [...]. So, I think it is our failure to hear, which is more important than to read (Amaral & Senn, 2019).

However, somewhere else Senn himself had drawn our attention to the necessity to look at *Finnegans Wake* when he pointed out the incompleteness in the work of some scholars:

[S]ome scholars who, in lecturing about the *Wake*, rely solely on their voices, as some of them do by quoting passages. The voice is simply unable to put across those details that only the eye can pick up: in "of the trying thirstay mourning" one can easily hear "Thursday" and "thirsty", but the ear cannot suspect the supplementary meaning contained in "mourning" (Senn, 2007, pp. 17-18).

It may be true that we look too much at the words, but not looking at all is not a solution, either.

One activity that considerably expands the readability of *Finnegans Wake* in particular, and of literature in general, is translation. The first measure we must take towards such notion of translation is to take it without moral prejudice, or, as Lawrence Venuti (2019, p. ix) has provoked: "[S]top using moralistic terms like 'faithful' and 'unfaithful' to describe translation. Start defining it as the establishment of a variable equivalence to the source text". *Finnegans Wake* epitomizes the defeat of any translator's attempt to be "faithful" to a source-text; even his or her desperate recourse to the trite notion of "essence" cannot thrive. As one of the consequences of such turn of view about translation, we start looking at translations as possibilities, not as reductions of source texts.

Analyzing only at the Argentinian and Brazilian contexts, we find in each of these two countries one full translation of *Finnegans Wake*. In Argentina, Marcelo Zabaloy's translation was published as *Finnegans Wake* in 2016. In Brazil, Donaldo Schüller's five-volume, bilingual *Finnicius revém* had already appeared from 1999 to 2003. But reading Joyce's last novel (can we call it a novel?) conventionally, from the beginning to the end (or rather, in the present case, from the first

to the last page, since the beginning is the end, and the end is...), although possible, is far from mandatory. Joyce's challenging work may press for unconventional readings.

In Brazil, partial translations of *Finnegans Wake* have been made, offering other reading possibilities to be explored by the readers. *The Panaroma of 'Finnegans Wake'*, first published in 1962 by the brothers Augusto and Haroldo de Campos, now in its fourth edition (2001), brings translations of a few fragments from the book, juxtaposing the text in Portuguese with the source-text. Another partial rendition of '*Finnegans Wake*' was done by Amarante, the bilingual *Finnegans Wake por um fio* (2018), in which the translator followed one of the possible narrative threads of *Finnegans Wake*, hence the subtitle "*por um fio*" (by a thread).

To conclude, both Beckett and Sennurge another way of reading; Joyce lets us free to imagine; and the mentioned translators offer different possibilities for us to enjoy *Finnegans Wake*. So, as regards the initial question, "can we read *Finnegans Wake*?", the only answer is, evoking Molly Bloom, yes (and a very erotic one this should be). To not read *Finnegans Wake* is also a choice. And perhaps a wise choice, judging by Senn's classification of the book as "addictive" (Garcia, 2019). I could say, seductive; or, in Wakese, *sinductive*. To read *Finnegans Wake* does not necessarily turn anyone into a super-reader or a person intellectually superior to anyone else. But what a pleasure!

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