

# "SO READ WE IN MUST BOOK. IT TELLS. HE PROPHETS": A READER'S APPROACH TO *FINNEGANS WAKE*<sup>1</sup>

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## RESUMO:

A singularidade de *Finnegans Wake* valeu-lhe, desde a sua publicação, uma recepção particularmente negativa, quer da parte da crítica, quer do leitor comum. Os entraves linguísticos e a fragmentação vocal que caracterizam a obra explicam, em certa medida, o desprezo de uma larga maioria de leitores que viu, na última obra de Joyce, um claro exemplo de elitismo, ou apenas um projecto falhado, um momento de decadência após o auge atingido com *Ulysses*. No presente ensaio procura-se mostrar que *Finnegans Wake* é, de facto, exigente porque, sendo uma obra de metaficção, reivindica a participação do leitor ao nível da co-criação do texto, um papel que nem sempre o leitor está disposto a desempenhar. Todavia, como observa Wolfgang Iser na sua definição de "leitor implícito", todos os textos contêm espaços em branco que o leitor é convidado a preencher.

## ABSTRACT:

Ever since its publication, the singularity of *Finnegans Wake* has produced a particularly negative response in both critics and common readers. Its linguistic puzzles and its vocal fragmentation justify, in part, the feeling of contempt demonstrated by a majority of readers who saw Joyce's last work as elitist or decadent, far from the enormous success of *Ulysses*. This essay intends to show that, by being a metafictional text, *Finnegans Wake* represents, indeed, hard work. It constantly calls for the participation of the reader as its co-creator, a role that readers are not always ready to play. However, as Wolfgang Iser points out in his definition of "implied reader", all texts contain gaps and readers are invited to fill them in.

## PALAVRAS-CHAVE:

leitor, "leitor implícito",  
estética da recepção,  
estratégias de leitura  
e de interpretação,  
metaficção, "Work  
in Progress"

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## KEY WORDS:

reader, "implied  
reader", reader-  
response criticism,  
reading and interpretative  
strategies, metafiction,  
"Work in Progress"

...and look at this prepronominal funferal,  
engraved and retouched and edgewiped  
and puddenpadded very like a whale's egg  
farced with pemmican as were it sentenced  
to be nuzzled over a full trillion times for  
ever and a night till his noddle sink or swim  
by that ideal reader suffering from an ideal  
insomnia...

James Joyce, *Finnegans Wake*

Yes, reading the *Wake* is different, but are  
its readers?

Tim Conley

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David Butler once said that Joyce "wrote the novel which would revolutionise world literature" (Butler and Zenith, 2004: 10). When Butler made his statement, he was not thinking about *Finnegans Wake* (FW); the novel he had in mind was *Ulysses*. Indeed, the importance of *Ulysses* to the twentieth-century novel is quite similar to the importance of *The Waste Land* to twentieth-century poetry: if Eliot's poem is said to be "the poem of the century", Joyce's masterpiece is widely acknowledged as the "novel of the century". But why start by mentioning *Ulysses* when the subject of this essay is *Finnegans Wake*?

Because it seems clear to me that the enormous success of *Ulysses* dictated, at least in part, the apparent failure of its successor. One must not forget that the readers of *Finnegans Wake* read *Ulysses* first. Thus, when moving to Joyce's last work, those readers already had a set of expectations that *Finnegans Wake* could and would not fulfil, especially because the text is built around a "strategy of deception", to use Ricoeur's terminology (Ricoeur *apud* Samoyault, 1999: 30).

After *Ulysses*, what else? After the marvellous Stephen, Bloom, Molly, what other characters could Joyce write into life?

The truth is that in *Finnegans Wake* Joyce not only chose the night instead of the day, but he also abandoned Stephen, Bloom and Molly for a universal consciousness, "a larger Everyman" as Harold Bloom puts it (Bloom, 1994: 422). And, on top of all that,

he also created a sort of *Wakean* dialect by mixing up more than fifty different languages. The vocal fragmentation of the text is yet another obstacle. As Jean-Michel Rabaté points out:

In the case of the *Wake* [...] the real object of narratology may prove to be the gap itself: in no other text are the indeterminacies of the speaking voice so dense and overwhelming that the reader has only a blurred impression that something is being told, though he cannot ascertain what or by whom. (Rabaté, 1993: 196)

The majority of the readers did not appreciate the peculiarities of the text and their criticism was ruthless:

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[A] wild caprice of a wonderful creative artist who has lost his way. (Bennet *apud* Fargnoli, 2003: 314)

[V]ast riddles [,] quirks and fancies [...]. (Wells *apud* Bulson, 2006: 91-2)

It should disgust. The taste which inspired it was the taste of cretinism of speech [...]. (Anonymous *apud* Fargnoli, 2003: 295-6)

[P]age after page of distorted rubbish. (*ibidem*)

These are some of the comments written over the years both by anonymous and well-known readers. Curiously enough, much criticism of *Finnegans Wake* came from Joyce's previous supporters, Ezra Pound being an example. However, the most devastating and unexpected attack on Joyce's last novel came from Stanislaus Joyce, the author's brother, who described the text as an unnecessary proof of intellectual arrogance:

With best will in the world I cannot read your work in progress. The vague support you get from certain French and American critics, I set down to pure snobbery. What is the meaning of that rout of drunken words? It seems to me pose,

the characteristic you have in common with Wilde, Shaw, Yeats, and Moore. You want to show that you are a superclever superman with a superstyle. It riles my blood to see you competing with Miss Stein for the position of Master Boomster. But whereas she never had anything to lose, you have – knowledge of what you write, breadth, sanity, and a real style, which was a registering instrument of rare delicacy and strength. (*apud* Ellmann, 1966: 216)

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Joyce was not indifferent to all these attacks on his work. In a letter to Harriet Shaw Weaver, dated the first of February 1927, his anxiety and his uneasiness are evident: "Do you not like anything I am writing. Either the end of Part I Δ is something or I am an imbecile in my judgement of language. I am rather discouraged about this as in such a vast and difficult enterprise I need encouragement" (*apud* Gilbert, 1966: 249). Nevertheless, not even a defence of the novel, promoted by Joyce and executed by Samuel Beckett, William Carlos Williams, Stuart Gilbert, among others, pompously entitled *Our Exagmination round His Factification for Incamination of Work in Progress*, was able to spare Joyce's last work from a torrent of negative criticism.

But why should the successor of the praised *Ulysses* raise such negative criticism? In this essay, I intend to prove that the answer to this question lies not entirely in the design of the text, but also in the readers themselves.

Indeed, there was not a single reader totally prepared for the revolution brought by *Finnegans Wake*. By being a metafictional text, that is, "fiction that includes within itself a commentary on its own narrative and/or linguistic identity", to use Linda Hutcheon's definition (Hutcheon, 1991: 1), *Finnegans Wake* uses up an inordinate number of words – and an inordinate amount of reader's time! – describing its own process of coming into being:

(Stoop) if you are abcedminded, to this claybook, what curios of signs (please stoop), in this allaphbed! Can you rede (since We and Thou had it out already) its world? It is the same told

all. Many. Miscegenations on miscegenations. Tieckle. They  
lived und laughed ant loved end left. (FW, 18)

If only you were there to explain the meaning [...]. (FW 28)

[H]oping against hope all the while that [...] things will begin  
to clear up a bit one way or another [...]. (FW, 119)

Is the strays world moving mound or what static babel is this,  
tell us? (FW, 499)

Of all the stranger things that ever not even in the hundrond and  
badst pageans of unthowsent and wonst nice or in eddas and  
oddes bokes of tomb, dyke and hollow to be have happened! The  
untireties of livesliving being the one substance of a  
streamsbecoming. Totalled in toldteld and teldtold in tittletell  
tattle. (FW, 597)

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The production and reception of the text becomes its primary  
focus to the detriment of

a linear (though often multileveled) account of recognizable  
characters and events, engaging with the reader's pre-existing  
mental schemata to arouse expectations, and to modify,  
complicate, defeat, or partially satisfy those expectations,  
arriving at full satisfaction – or something like it – only at the  
end (thereby constituting it as the end). (Attridge, 2000: 126)

This is Attridge's definition of narrative and it is also what most  
readers hoped to find in *Finnegans Wake*. However, the beginning  
of the novel immediately defeats the reader's expectations by  
presenting an end of a sentence, as if the story had already started  
and the reader had been neglected: "riverrun, past Eve and  
Adam's, from swerve of shore to bend of bay, bring us by a  
commodius vicus of recirculation back to Howth Castle and  
Environs" (FW, 3). Although that was not at all the text's intent,  
*Wakean* readers sometimes felt exploited and mocked. As Margot  
Norris observes:

The opening of *Finnegans Wake* drops us, without a map, clock, compass, glossary, or footnotes, into an unknown verbal country, and the voice of the tour guide, alas, speaks their language rather than ours, although we catch enough cognates to keep from drowning altogether in that verbal stream. (Norris, 1999: 161)

It is true that the text addresses the readers all the time – “Now, patience; and remember patience is the great thing, and above all things else we must avoid anything like being or becoming out of patience” (FW, 108), one can read in *Finnegans Wake* – but it usually does so in a dialect in which they seem not to be proficient. All communication is, as the text itself points out, “told in sounds in utter that, in signs so adds to, in universal, in polygluttural, in each auxiliary neutral idiom, sordomutics, florilingua, sheltafocal, flayflutter, a con’s cubane, a pro’s tutute, strassarab, ereperse and anythongue athall” (FW, 117).

What the readers may fail to understand is that the choice of a new language, far from being a caprice or a mere experimentalist impetus, was the author’s way of voicing the night:

In writing of the night, I really could not, I felt I could not, use words in their ordinary connections. Used that way they do not express how things are in the night, in the different stages – conscious, semi-conscious, then unconscious. [W]hen morning comes of course everything will be clear again... *I’ll give them back their English language.* (Joyce *apud* Ellmann, 1982 [1959]: 546, my emphasis)

Joyce’s statement makes clear that he alone is the master of the raw material of his work and that comprises the English language and all languages and all words.

Also, this choice of a new linguistic tool clearly reveals Joyce’s will to create “a language which is above all languages, a language to which all will do service” (Joyce *apud* Parsons, 2007: 57). I would add to Joyce’s definition, a language inclusive enough to cross the barriers of incommunicability imposed by

illness. In "*Finnegans Wake* and the Daughter's Fate", Carol Loeb Shloss underlines the importance of Lucia's illness to the creation of *Finnegans Wake*, by defining the novel as "the dream of a common language" (Shloss, 1998: 109). Indeed, the world of dreams that shapes *Finnegans Wake* bears a close resemblance to the fragmentation, the disorder, the simultaneity of spatial and temporal plans and the coexistence of multi-personalities of schizophrenia. Only a new language could say all this; only a new language could voice the "psychic community" (Bishop, 1993: 212) that inhabits Joyce's work.

Thus, the singularity of *Finnegans Wake* forces the reader not only to adopt new reading and interpretative strategies, but also to become more actively involved in the process. What kind of reader are we talking about then? Does he have to be a superclever superreader to match Joyce's *superstyle*? >>

The answer is no. The reader does not have to be a superman or a superwoman, but he or she will certainly have to abandon any passive attitude towards the act of reading, in order to meet his or her responsibilities as co-creator of the text. Quoting Linda Hutcheon:

The reader is explicitly or implicitly forced to face his responsibility toward the text, that is, toward the novelistic world he is creating through the accumulated fictive referents of literary language. As the novelist actualizes the world of his imagination through words, so the reader – from those same words – manufactures in reverse a literary universe that is as much his creation as it is the novelist's. (Hutcheon, 1991: 27)

In my MA dissertation, I had the time and the opportunity to reflect on different conceptions of the reader developed by critics working on what has come to be called Reader-response Criticism, a framework for understanding text reception by analysing the way in which the reader's faculties interact with the text. For obvious reasons I cannot do it so broadly here. Thus, I shall only mention the concept of "implied reader",<sup>2</sup>

developed by Wolfgang Iser, because it is, as far as I can see, the most relevant concept to the understanding of *Finnegans Wake*.

The "implied reader" should not be mistaken with an ideal reader. In fact, according to Iser, there is no such reader. If this reader did exist, he or she would be the one to share Joyce's exact same code and, therefore, he or she would have been able to assimilate, in one single reading experience, the totality of the text's meanings. The "implied reader" is, instead, the one who should receive, explore and up-date the potentialities of each text. He is the one who should take an active part by filling in the gaps that all texts contain (Iser, 1976: 60). Without the consciousness of the reader the text remains unaccomplished.<sup>3</sup>

Moreover, Iser totally rejects the hypothesis that interpretation could be made by reduction, that is, by eliminating wrong roads until the right one is found. There is not one single road to a text; there are multiple ways in which the same text can be up-dated, by different readers. Each reader has a responsibility towards the text. Certainly the text will always have something to give him, but he must give something in return. Reading is not passive consumption; it is a constant move of give and take.

That is one of the reasons why I firmly oppose those who say that *Finnegans Wake* excludes, by its opaqueness, almost every reader.<sup>4</sup> As Joyce himself explains, the aim of the novel is exactly the opposite; every reader, regardless of his or her personal encyclopaedia, has both something to get from and something to give to the *Wakean* text:

You are not Irish... and the meaning of some passages will perhaps escape you. But you are a Catholic, so you will recognize this and that allusion. You don't play cricket; this word may mean nothing to you. But you are a musician, so you will feel at ease in this passage. When my Irish friends come to visit me in Paris, it is not the philosophical subtleties of the book that amuse them, but the recollection of O'Connell's top hat. (Joyce *apud* Bulson, 2006: 103)



"Work in progress", designation used by Joyce to identify *Finnegans Wake* while the definitive title was not publicly revealed, is, in fact, a great definition of the act of reading and the very specific act of reading *Finnegans Wake*. It not only highlights the long seventeen years Joyce spent working on the text, but it also implies that the job of the reader, as the receiver of the text, is always unfinished. In *Narcissistic Narrative – The Metafictional Paradox*, Linda Hutcheon explains that: "This non-passivity is true of all reading [...]. What is interesting here is that it is fiction itself that is attempting to bring to readers' attention their central and enabling role" (Hutcheon, 1991: xii). When the reading process begins, the author leaves the scene and the reader is invited to plunge into action by filling in the gaps left by the author; by recreating the text without granting any attention to authorial intention, especially because, according to the text itself, one "shall be misunderstood if understood" (FW, 163).

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The commitment of the reader is surely essential and even more so when we are talking about *Finnegans Wake*. Joyce's last novel went so far as to represent, not the consciousness of the characters, through the techniques of representation of *stream of consciousness*, as in *Ulysses*, but a universal unconsciousness, a clandestine space that not even the characters have access to. That is the reason why Harry Levin speaks of "stream of unconsciousness" (Levin *apud* Bulson, 2006: 93) to define the technique used by Joyce in the composition of *Finnegans Wake*.

Indeed, in the nocturnal world of dreams that shapes Joyce's last novel, it is not the consciousness of the dreamer that is exposed, but the unconsciousness, fittingly unruly, uncontrolled and fragmentary. All metamorphoses, all encounters and all associations become possible in this "chaosmos" (FW, 118), to use a *Wakean* word. The origin of the chaos is the dream itself and only the reader can turn it into a cosmos through interpretation. "Suppotes a Ventriloquorst Merries a Corpse" (FW, 105): the corpse is the text; the

ventriloquist is the reader who speaks for the text. The textual corpse will always need the reader to recreate it; to continue at the aesthetic level the work started by the author at the artistic level. It is through this interaction that all works of art are born, says Iser (1976: 48).

In the history of literary criticism, there were times and theories that tried to totally disregard the reader by completely focusing on the text, its form and/or its intrinsically hidden meanings. By mentioning Iser's "implied reader", by reinforcing the necessity of the reader's action over the text to up-date its potentialities and, finally, by taking the *Wakean* text as a paradigmatic example, I hope to have produced enough clues to show that the reader is always a key figure in the process of reading.

Reading is hard work; reading *Finnegans Wake* is even harder because Joyce "needed to ensure that the materials he was providing were sufficiently rich to serve as a rewarding basis for our creative efforts" (Kitcher, 2007: 47). Northrop Frye defines the novel as "the chief ironic epic of our time" (Frye, 1957: 323). However, an epic implies the presence of a hero, who, according to Frye, could not be anyone else, but the reader himself:

Who then is the hero who achieves the permanent quest in *Finnegans Wake*? No character in the book itself seems a likely candidate; yet one feels that this book gives us something more than the merely irresponsible irony of a turning cycle. Eventually it dawns on us that it is the *reader* who achieves the quest, the reader who [...] is able to look down on its rotation, and see its form as something more than rotation. (Frye, 1957: 323-324)

Thus, no reader should miss the opportunity to read *Finnegans Wake*. It is undeniably creative; it rewards all your time and patience through its clever design and its irresistible humour; it is a never-ending story or a "tobecontinued's tale" (FW 626), in which you can be the hero. <<

## NOTES

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[1] This essay is based on my Master's dissertation presented, in January 2008, at the Faculty of Arts of the University of Porto. Its original title was "*Tobecontinued's tale*": *Lugares do Leitor e do Narrador em Finnegans Wake* ("*Tobecontinued's tale*": Spaces of the Reader and the Narrator in *Finnegans Wake*). This essay was first delivered, as a paper, at the IASIL annual conference (International Association for the Study of Irish Literatures), in July 2008.

[2] Cf. Stanley Fish's concept of "informed reader." See both "Interpreting the *Variorum*" in *Reader-response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-structuralism* (Ed. Jane Tompkins, London, The John Hopkins Press Ltd, 1980 [1976], pp. 164-184) and *Is There a Text in this Class? – The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (London, Harvard University Press, 1980).

[3] For an interesting text on this subject, see Tim Conley's book-length study *Joyces Mistakes: Problems of Intention, Irony, and Interpretation* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003).

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[4] Cf. Wayne Booth's statement in *The Rethoric of Fiction* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1961, p.303).

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