



Nearlylife

'Finnegans Wake', Joyce's greatest work, ranks him among the rare artists who actually achieved the spiritual condition they sought

“Wringlings upon wringlings among incomputables about an uncomeoutable (an angel prophetethis? kingcorrier of beheasts? the calif in his halifskin? that eyriewringing one?) and the voids bubbily vode's dodos across which the boonomouths from their dupest dupes were in envery and anononously blowing great”

By Rory O'Sullivan

WH AUDEN said that “when a man can occupy himself with counting syllables, either he has not yet attempted any spiritual climb, or he is over the hump”. In ‘Finnegans Wake’ Joyce finally loosens up and counts syllables. It is one of the world’s ironies that unpoetic ‘Ulysses’ is the book for which he is celebrated, and which was read out on the smug streets of Dublin this Bloomsday, as it is every year.

Whatever its value as a novel, as a work of art ‘Ulysses’ is a failure. Joyce is pulled between the world he wants and the one he has, like Dedalus; like Bloom, he knows there cannot be one without the other. Joyce heaves his language around everywhere with the greatest difficulty, in each chapter restarting and starting over again in a new style, but each time it does not do what he wants. ‘Ulysses’ swells and shrinks and blows all over the place.

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What Joyce, the artist, wanted, was not to give us an exposition of the world we think we live in, but to represent the world we do live in – to recall us to our lives. He was not a philosopher but a soul-saver, a missionary, and throughout his work, even ‘Dubliners’ and ‘Portrait of the Artist,’ his subject is not the meandering waters of life, as is so often believed, but conversion.

What, exactly, to convert people into, most of the time he was unsure of. The last lines of the early books (Stephen’s diary: “Old father, old artificer, stand me now and ever in good stead” – Gabriel looking at the snow “falling faintly... faintly falling”) are Damascene moments, but they resolve not so much to carry out the work as to figure out which work to undertake.

Joyce experienced the artistic version of the human tragedy of finitude. For an artist who succeeds, the reward of their years of labour is an insight strictly secret and personal: theirs is a Church of One.

‘Finnegans Wake’, the hymnbook of Joyce’s Church of One, has a remarkable coherence and unity, not just of style, but of tone: it is rapturously exultant. In literary terms it is the anti-‘Ulysses’: ‘Ulysses’ puts clear and ordinary characters into a plot so straight and narrow it is hardly worth the name, drowning them all in a schizophrenic variety; whereas ‘Finnegans Wake’ moves with steadfast integrity towards and across nothing. It is birdsong. It is tempting to call it a poem

instead of a novel, but that would be no less arbitrary because it is something altogether new.

Of course, the book does not make sense. But nor does it make nonsense. Its language is not only consistent but highly worked, careful, and complete: the seventeen years Joyce claimed to have worked on it were busily spent. Some of its lines are as beautiful as can be, and even Borges in his negative review of the book said that they were “not inferior to Shakespeare”.

Lines such as: “The augustan peacebetothem oaks, the monolith riding stark from the moonlit pinebarren” and “By the rivering waters, hitherandthithering waters of. Night!”

These should empower us once and for all to reject the idea that the book is complete nonsense – with as much force as the academics who study it now do the ‘Skeleton Key’ of its twentieth-century professional decoders, Joseph Campbell and Henry Morton Robinson.

‘Finnegans Wake’ is nearly sense, a nearly book of nearly words that nearly rhyme and reason – that is how it is a masterpiece. It is easy to write nonsense (monkeys, typewriters etc), hard to write hundreds of pages of coherence; but what Joyce did is breathtakingly difficult, not to mention outlandish.

Beckett, in his essay ‘Dante... Bruno. Vico.. Joyce’ claims that ‘Finnegans Wake’ is an attack on, well, everything – at least our concept of ‘everything,’ and that this attack is all about language because Joyce recognises how the world as we know it is a language, an ulterior language of languages. He is like Dante in how he attempts to return the Lingua Inglese to the status of a Questione, how for him the dictionary words are a degeneration from the Adamic lexicon.

Beckett is right that English is “full of sophisms”, words that mean nothing outside themselves. He gives the example that the word ‘doubt’ suggests not a single state or condition but stands vaporously above several and obscures them (unlike e.g. Latin, *Dubitare*, which specifically imagines ‘wavering’).

We can join Beckett in scouring the lexicon of ‘Finnegans Wake’ for a ‘desophistication’ of English, in the vocabulary and syntax of which, in exchange for the paltriness of semantic knowledge, we have bartered away wisdom.

If we do so, Beckett and Joyce start to look like the early Derrida – the one who was not yet a celebrity; the Husserlian metaphysician who, some morning in the 1960s, woke up and realised that new technologies were revealing how language, brings forth to us the world in a symbolic act (which he called “writing”) and, with the same stroke, murders it on arrival. The Derrida who wrote: “Writing is unthinkable without repression”.

This Derrida would have said that Beckett relies too much in his essay on the concept of a raw Being, beyond language, defined as a presence in the Now: True Being conceived as silent noondays walking along the cliffs.

On the other hand, ‘Finnegans Wake’ does not do this. Let me make a comparison based on those anterior ideals of which words are the metaphorical expressions in daily consciousness: ‘Finnegans

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Wake’ is ‘Don Quixote’. Charging at windmills, Quixote is full of nonsense (we think at first), and those around him are at least on the right planet; but somewhere down the pages things muddle and then at last it is hard to tell just whose, anymore, is the fantasy.

Some readers dismiss Quixote or else diagnose him with something and move on; others take it as a challenge to outdo him in sentimental thoughtlessness (Harold Bloom was one, and he had the same reaction to ‘Finnegans Wake’) but above them sits Cervantes, the author, who is neither and both of Don Quixote and Sancho Panza, who has achieved the spiritual condition of thinking in nearlensense.

The question does ‘Finnegans Wake’ make sense? is a quixotic one. If there is a difference between Cervantes and Joyce it is that Joyce is more direct: Cervantes takes the horse to water, but Joyce rams it down by the head to drink.

His directness affords him the capacity to strike not just at feelings and imaginings but the whole edifice of reason formed of itself out of something immanent but inscrutable. What is art if not this (so to speak) fucking with people?

But even still, it is not all desecration: ‘Finnegans Wake’ builds something. It is undoubtedly Joyce’s greatest work, placing him in the tiny rank of artists who actually achieved the spiritual condition they sought. And like them, in achieving it he expanded the concept of what that condition means in general, and therefore expanded the human concept of humanity itself, which is to say that he discovered the truth of certain paradoxes: first, that a word is at once an object and a subject and a sound and none of these; second, that the end of life is neither an end nor a beginning; third, that sense and nonsense are not different at all.

In the place of ‘New Life,’ the book that revealed to Dante his entire mission as an artist, Joyce discovered ‘Nearlensense’, a celebration of futility which is also freedom, beauty, justice, and truth.

That the world largely ignored this discovery and preferred ‘Ulysses,’ should not surprise anybody. It is more of the biblical tale of Moses and the mountain: a tale that, like all others, in the envisioning of ‘Finnegans Wake’, will repeat itself again and again in the huge open circle of time, vastness without cease – you can see why the spiritual climb ends with counting syllables. **L**

