

Creative Hyperfidelity and Finnegans Wake: Reflections on the Translation of Joyce's Criticism of Racist and Nazi Discourse

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Abstract: *Finnegans Wake*, by James Joyce, is one of the most complex and enigmatic works in literature. For scholars like Len Platt (2007) and Vincent Cheng (1995), race is one of the central themes of this novel, which was a response to the nationalist and eugenicist discourse adopted by many right-wing thinkers and groups in the late nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth century, culminating with Nazism. In *Finnegans Wake*, Joyce satirised, by means of puns, portmanteau words and other hybrid constructions, the racial purity ideas then in vogue, as well as the Nazi ideology itself. The work proposed here aims to examine three complete translations of *Finnegans Wake* (two translations into French, one by Philippe Lavergne and the other by Hervé Michel; and one into Brazilian Portuguese, by Donaldo Schüller), in order to discuss the various solutions offered by the translators for transposing into French or Portuguese the passages in which Joyce satirises the ideas of racial purity, scientific racism and Nazism. One of the purposes of this analysis is to reflect on the different possibilities of translating a multilayered, multilingual, and polysemous text like this while retaining as much as possible its political and historical references. The main question to be discussed is whether there is a translation technique that favours the rendering of this kind of reference.

Keywords: *Finnegans Wake*, James Joyce, translation theories, “scientific” racism, Nazism.

Joyce's criticism of “scientific racism” and Nazism

Until a few decades ago, Joyce was seen as a writer who had revolutionised the literature of his time with stylistic and aesthetic innovations, but who had remained absolutely apolitical. In recent decades, however, this view was demystified by Joycean scholars such as Dominic Manganiello, Emer Nolan, Seamus Deane, Colin MacCabe and

Maria Tymoczko, among others. Some, like Len Platt (2007) and Vincent Cheng (1995), discussed race as a central theme in Joyce's works, and particularly in *Finnegans Wake*.

During the Second World War, Ireland maintained an official position of neutrality. In spite of that, many Irish – including members of the Irish Republican Army (IRA) – supported Hitler, seeing the rise of Nazism as an opportunity to undermine the power of the British Empire. This position was not shared by Joyce, as evidenced by a comment he made in a letter to his patron, Harriet Shaw Weaver, after the Nazi *Putsch* in Austria in 1934: “I am afraid poor Mr Hitler-Missler will soon have few admirers in Europe apart from your nieces and my nephews, Masters W. Lewis and E. Pound” (Ellmann, 1982.675). The reference to Hitler as “Mr Hitler-Missler” evokes the adjective “hit-or-miss”, denoting someone who acts hastily. Wyndham Lewis and Ezra Pound, both central figures of English modernism, had been Joyce's friends, but they eventually drifted apart. Lewis's and Pound's support of Nazi-Fascist regimes and rhetoric was certainly one of the factors that led to the end of their friendship with Joyce.

Ira B. Nadel (1988.31) contrasts Joyce's response to fascism with that of Wyndham Lewis: Lewis saw order and power as a way of crushing conflict and establishing a welcomed hierarchy, while Joyce rejected the uniformity and authority of fascism and protested by reaffirming linguistic anarchy and freedom through parody, invention, puns, borrowings and re-creations.

According to Vincent Cheng and Len Platt, *Finnegans Wake* was a response to the nationalist and eugenic discourse adopted by many right-wing thinkers and groups in the late nineteenth century and in the beginning of the twentieth century, culminating in Nazism.

In *Joyce, Race, and Empire* (1995), Cheng, writing in the post-colonial tradition, analyses the issues of race and empire in Joyce's work in the context of the history of Ireland, a country marked by the experiences of oppression and resistance linked to the British colonisation. *Finnegans Wake* is considered an ingenious attack on the racist and imperialist ideologies – an attack carried out with weapons of humour and creativity. In the essay “Ireland, Island of Saints and Sages” (1907), written in his youth, Joyce shows full awareness of the racial stereotyping mechanisms:

Nations have their ego, just like individuals. The case of a people who like to attribute to themselves qualities and glories foreign to other people has not been entirely unknown in history, from the time of our ancestors, who called themselves Aryans and nobles, or that of the Greeks, who called all those who lived outside the sacrosanct land of Hellas barbarians. (1959.154)

Joyce (1959) attributes most Irish problems to the English economic subjugation of Ireland:

The English now disparage the Irish because they are Catholic, poor, and ignorant; however, it will not be so easy to justify such disparagement to some

people. Ireland is poor because English laws ruined the country's industries, especially the wool industry, because the neglect of the English government in the years of the potato famine allowed the best of the population to die from hunger. (167)

In response to the stereotypical way many English people at the time regarded the Irish, labelling them as an "inferior race", many Irish nationalists sought to exalt the Celtic culture and the "purity" of the Irish race. Joyce repudiated the Anglo-Saxon ethnocentric stereotypes, but he didn't share this idealised view of the Irish nationalists. In the same essay, "Ireland, Island of Saints and Sages", Joyce (1959) argues:

What race, or what language [...] can boast of being pure today? And no race has less right to utter such a boast than the race now living in Ireland [...] Do we not see that in Ireland, the Danes, the Firbolgs, the Milesians from Spain, the Norman invaders, and the Anglo-Saxon settlers have united to form a new entity, one might say under the influence of a local deity? (165-166)

In Cheng's (1995) view, Joyce was a writer who, opposing anti-Semitism, racism, blind nationalism, male aggression and imperialism, sought to give voice to those silenced, marginalised and exiled – all his works were marked by a central concern with issues of race/ethnicity and their relation to imperial power. Cheng defines *Finnegans Wake*, particularly, as a "subversive book full of dark insurgencies challenging the clear authority of white, Eurocentric empire – a night world/text which defies and decenters the authorised grammars of language, psyche, systems, power, empires, and daytime consciousness" (7). According to Cheng (251), the ideological issues of race and empire are layered, astonishingly, into each page of *Finnegans Wake*.

Len Platt is another scholar who has thoroughly studied the issues of race embedded in *Finnegans Wake*. In *Joyce, Race and Finnegans Wake*, Platt (2007) states that *Finnegans Wake* is "a very particular and specifically targeted response to the betrayal of progressive and humanist ideologies" (2) that emerged from the Enlightenment as doctrines of equality. (2)

The Aryan myth, based on the false assumption that language is a racial characteristic, prevailed throughout the nineteenth century. Linguistics had a central role in this process, but not an exclusive one. By the late nineteenth century, scientific racism was supported both by biological and social sciences, and race became a crucial factor in archaeology, anthropology, history, palaeoanthropology, and sociology. Linguistics and Darwinism combined to "prove" the workings of "progress" in the social as well as the natural world and yet, on the other hand, to identify a process of social and cultural "degeneration" so dramatic that it could lead to a historical regression. These theories led many Western intellectuals to understand modernity as a degradation of the Enlightenment's original ideals or even as a cultural condition stemming from flawed ideas of "natural rights" and false principles of "equality". Many of Joyce's "modernist"

contemporaries, such as W. B. Yeats, Ford Madox Ford, Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, Percy Wyndham Lewis and D. H. Lawrence, strongly identified with right-wing radicalism (Platt 3).

Platt (2007) argues that in *Finnegans Wake* Joyce takes a political position on race that contrasts with that of these intellectuals. Joyce's view on race is not essentialist; race is seen as a construct whose primary purpose "is understood in terms of the maintenance of social cohesion and consent. Race identity here becomes not a matter of biology but of culture" (4). So the racism which disguised itself as the rational measurement and management of difference is exposed as "an ideology, operating at the structural levels of culture and society as knowledge, authority and power." The identification of the politics of race, which is central in *Finnegans Wake*, involves the recognition that the scientific racism legitimised by such a politics "was not an English, colonial aberration, but a European phenomenon closely linked to the rise of modernity, to myths and fantasies about the self and cultural identities that the European academy once privileged as advanced and precious human knowledge. However irrational and absurd scientific racism may appear today, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries it was embedded in the major cultural institutions of the so-called Western intellectual life.

The Project

This postdoctoral project in the field of Translation Studies (FFLCH-USP), supervised by Prof. Dr John Milton and funded by CAPES, will examine three complete translations of *Finnegans Wake* in order to discuss the various solutions offered by the translators for transposing into French or Portuguese passages in which Joyce satirises the ideas of racial purity, scientific racism and Nazism itself: two translations into French, one by Philippe Lavergne (the first complete translation of the book, published in 1982), and the other by Hervé Michel (an unpublished translation, available online) in its latest version, dating from 2016; and, the Brazilian Portuguese translation by Donaldo Schüler, published between 1999 and 2003. One of the purposes of this analysis is to reflect on the different possibilities of translating a multilayered, multilingual, and polysemous text like this one while retaining as much as possible its political and historical references.

An important factor to be taken into account is the critical and exegetical studies available to each of these translators, as the period covered by the three translations is relatively long: from 1982 (Lavergne's translation) to 2016 (the most recent online update by Michel, who has been working on his translation since 1997). When Lavergne published his translation, there were few studies on the political thought of Joyce, whereas Hervé Michel, in the most recent updates of his translation, had at his disposal a remarkable collection of studies, from many different approaches, focusing on Joyce's political views. (Michel cites Vincent Cheng, John Gordon and Afonso Teixeira Filho, among other scholars, in his paper "Pourquoi j'ai traduit *Finnegans Wake*", written in 2016.) Schüler's translation, published between 1999 and 2003, lies somewhere between

the other two. Schüler cites several studies on Joyce in the Bibliography of *Finnicius Revém* (volume 5), including a few political studies, but he could not, for example, have read Platt's *Joyce, Race and Finnegans Wake*, which was published in 2007.

Besides the comparisons between the original and the three translations, the work will also involve checking whether the various allusions to racism and Nazism are related to one another and whether there are, in the book as a whole or in parts of the book, networks of meaning associated with racism or Nazism. If there are such networks, it will be necessary to verify to what extent the translations reproduced them properly.

The main question to be discussed is whether there is a translation technique that favours the rendering of these allusions. To try to answer this question, we will resort to two theories (or, to use Berman's term, "analytic") of translation: Berman's analytic and Augusto and Haroldo de Campos's transcreation.

The French theorist Antoine Berman (2000) mentions *Finnegans Wake* as a "limit case" (296) when commenting on the superimposition of languages that characterises every novelistic work. Berman says that translation threatens this superimposition, because "The relation of tension and integration that exists in the original between the vernacular language and the koine, between the underlying language and the surface language, etc. tends to be effaced" (296). Berman's reflections on the "deformations" of translations and his defence of the "translation of the letter" may be helpful in our quest for a translation strategy. For Berman (1985), the "work on the letter" is "neither a calque nor a (problematic) reproduction, but rather paying attention to the play of signifiers" (36).

The first translations of *Finnegans Wake* by Augusto and Haroldo de Campos were published in 1957, and in 1962 they brought out a book called *Panaroma do Finnegans Wake*, containing the translation of eleven fragments of *Finnegans Wake* accompanied by interpretative comments. The technique used by the de Campos brothers (2001.21) in the translation of these fragments deserves to be studied in detail. Their strategy was to capture the details, the microstructures of Joyce's text. The poetic transcreation proposed by Haroldo de Campos (1987), based on Ezra Pound's model, seeks to render the three dimensions of poetry (melopoeia, which deals with the sound effects, the musical properties of words; phanopoeia, related to the visual imagery, and logopoeia, the play of meaning, linked to the words and their connotations and associations). Haroldo de Campos (1987.60) explains that in his theory the semantic parameter (meaning, content), although displaced from the dominant role that the so-called literal translation, word for word, conferred on it, was not made void (emptied), but rather it constituted, so to speak, a moving horizon, a virtual "vanishing point": "the boundary of the recreative task" [...]

According to Nóbrega and Milton (2009), Haroldo's transcreation does not mean free adaptation of the original, but extreme fidelity. It means a reconfiguration that takes into account all elements of the poem. Creativity here means being able to find solutions within the semiotic scope of the poem, and not outside it. Or, as Haroldo de Campos said

in an interview to Nóbrega and Giani (2011), hyperfidelity aspires to render not only the communication content, “but also the very semantisation of syntactic and morphological categories, a semantisation that also magnetises the phonic level of a poem” (259-260).

Translation is a metonymic process in which each translator makes choices and set priorities (Tymoczko 1999). And because *Finnegans Wake* has many different aspects, it is possible to translate it without rendering the references to racism and Nazism. But if the translator is concerned with fidelity to the source text, and if it’s true that race is central in *Finnegans Wake*, then this translator should make an effort to translate those references. My hypothesis is that the best way to do this is by following the path indicated by Berman (the work on the letter) and the Campos brothers (making use of all the dimensions of the text – acoustic, visual and linguistic).

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