Finnegans Wake: The Obliquity of Translations

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1. THE GLOSSIC/LALIC VEINS IN FINNEGAN'S WAKE

One can easily imagine the lack of understanding that must have prevailed after the confusion of tongues at Babel, which, until the remedy of translation, made an unintelligible babble of each post-Babelian parlance. This lalic (from Greek lalein: to babble) relationship that languages bore to one another may be compared with the ecstatic manifestations in the Biblical charisma of glossolalia, also called the gift of tongues in allusion to Pentecost, with which it has often been assimilated by Biblical exegesis, especially in the Pentecostal view. However, an operative distinction must be kept between these various linguistic events. Whereas the glossolalic utterance in the Corinthian experience as described by Paul is unintelligible and its communality spells division and disunity (Mills 104–5), every one Galilaean spoke intelligibly in a foreign, previously unknown tongue, according to the Lucan account of the Pentecostal miracle (Acts 2:6–8ff.), an act made possible by the intercession of the Holy Spirit. Pentecost is therefore a manifestation of what is now more technically referred to as xenoglossia, while the gift of tongues, or glossolalia proper, cannot be likened to any known idiom (despite various inconclusive attempts) on account of its semantic unintelligibility. Although glossolalia also bears some basic features of existing languages (such as recurrent phonic patterns, which it emphasizes artificially) and children’s secret talk (Samarin esp. 140; see also McHugh), its foregrounding of the phonological apparatus on which there is no need to impose a semantic system (Samarin 127) and its ultimate lack of (grammatical) rules place it outside the scope of meaning—hence outside the sphere of languages, which are the vehicle for meaning and
any ideology that language users might wish to encode. This extralinguistic phenomenon could be the model on which God had planned to undo the language of a sinful ideology so as to revert it to its former state as the innocent language of infancy. However, Antoine Compagnon's remark that “parler en langue ou en langues, cela revient au même, à l’unique dans la diversité” (826) may be used to point to the convergences between speaking in tongues (glosso-lalia proper), speaking in existing alien(ated) tongues (what one could call post-Babelian xenolalia), and speaking in reconciled idioms (Pentecostal xenoglossia) as overlapping currents in the _Wake_.

At first sight, _Finnegans Wake_ is run through by post-Babelian xenolalia; its opaque, foreign-sounding, alien-looking texture causes the signifier to be foregrounded and deprives the written trace of spontaneous semantic intelligibility, and the (temporary) disruption of the link between signifier and signified leaves the reader/decipherer in a maze of arcane sounds.

The gift of tongues or glossolalia also appears in the _Wake_ in all its best known recurrent features (alliterative, vocalic, and other truly lalic phenomena), especially when “Wakese” becomes ecstatically self-conscious of its rhythmic and phonic patterns (e.g., FW 186.20–21). If the _Wake_’s post-Babelian xenolalia is the outcome of edification, Saint Paul reminds us that the gift of tongues has more to do with self-edification (1 Corinthians 14:2–4). In a passage that invites comparison with the unbelievers’ equation of the Pentecostal tongues with libation in Acts 2:13 (for which see FW 624.34–35), the _Wake_ describes HCE in his cups, blubbing and self-edifying, as “thrums through all to himself with diversified tongued through his old tears and his ould pleased drawl.”3 This double lalic vein turns the theme of misunderstanding and the quizzes (FW 1.6) and riddles often left unguessed into structural elements. Both currents would intersect in Nimrod’s much-glossed infernal glossolalic babbling as rendered by Dante in _Inferno_ XXXI 67 (Baranski 130) and in Jacques Lacan’s view of Joyce’s linguistic elation or _élangues_ (see Aubert 37).

Then, as a child who gradually acquires a language, the reader finds his/her way through the musical ballet of words and sentences; hears, sees/understands,4 that is, invests them with stratified layers of reassuring meanings by reducing them to isolatable (recurrent) elements. Thus, s/he may eventually hope to account for the proliferation of languages by an overall problematic that would offer the promise of their reconciliation (Milesi esp. 174–75, 177–78). Within Joyce’s linguistic melting pot, a basically Irish family, like the Galilaeans, is made to speak in foreign idioms unknown to them before.
The various idioms confused in the babel of *Finnegans Wake* remain glossolalic and xenolalic to one another, as long as mediation between linguistic elements is not established, until the advent of Pentecost (divine forgiveness) or translation (the human remedy bypassing the need for Pentecostal atonement). From Babel to divine Pentecost (as the restoration of tradition) or from Babel to human translation there is only a double step, a duality of readings in which the linguistic war between God and wo/man is inscribed, between *traditio* and *traductio*, human duplicity and treason (*traditio*) or wo/man's refusal to expiate. God's Pentecostal forgiveness must be felt as imminent but forever deferred in order to perpetuate the linguistic struggle against him, the lability (Latin *labi*, past participle *lapsus*: to slip) of the Wakean "lapsus lang-ways" (*FW* 484.25) and the *felix culpa* of its cyclically renewed creative falls. It is in that sense of a struggle against the Holy Word that one should understand the contract of translation that, in their effort to unite, men must draw up, so as to establish a passage (Latin *translatus*, past participle of *transferre*: to carry across, transfer, translate) from one language to another, between "nativeness" and "foreignness," and restore semantic intelligibility and communication out of the babel of inarticulate utterances. Attempting to fight against the horizontal dimension of language(s), a consequence of their dissemination after Babel, without the possibility of re-creating the verticality of an originary erection of language, the use of translation can appropriately be described as an oblique makeshift, the human alternative to God's creation but also to divine leniency.

2. THE TWO WAYS OF TRANS-LATION

If we consider the sur-vival of a text that is a legacy, the narrative or the myth of the tower of Babel, it does not constitute just one figure among others. Telling at least of the inadequation of one language to another . . . of language to itself and to meaning . . . it also tells of the need for figuration, for myths, for tropes, for twists and turns, for translation inadequate to compensate for that which multiplicity denies us. In that sense it would be the myth of the origin of myth, the metaphor of metaphor, the narrative of narrative, the translation of translation, and so on. It would not be the only structure hollowing itself out like that, but it would do so in its own way (itself almost untranslatable, like a proper name), and its idiom would have to be saved.

The presence of interpreters (*FW* 91.3–4, 478.8, 479.9, etc.) mediating between various characters emphasizes the role of translation in the linguistic fabric of *Finnegans Wake*, not to mention the numerous generic references (*FW* 152.12–13, 215.26–27, 276.F6, 419.24–25, etc.). But the subtler impact on the work's writing, especially on the unfolding of the polysemic sentence, is achieved in what Atherton aptly described as the "trope of translation"
(203): in "drim and drumming on her back" (FW 223.10) the Irish *drum/drom* is translated into English "back" whereas a shift in signifiers ("drumming") twists, turns, tropes, trans-lates, or meta-phorises, the first element into the first link of a second semantic chain. The break from monosemy is thus obtained by variations on the paradigmatic axis (the vertical dimension of the portmanteau word as a concretion of signifiers and signifieds) as well as syntagmatically (the horizontal dimension of various linear readings), breaking down the barrier between intralingual and interlingual translation through a constant switch between the phonic and the graphic poles of language. As such, these plural readings are in need of the reader's singularly oblique intervention. In the light of this tropic use of translation to establish narrative polysemy, one can see how the inbuilt vein of intralinear translation is coupled with a status of untranslatability. The exploration of the passage between languages in the *Wake* precludes a later passage of the whole work from the source parent language into any other language without disrupting its tightly knit polyglottal mosaic: the Wakean creation partly preprograms the defeat of its filial re-creations.8

The untranslatability of Joyce's Babelian work bears the inscription of God's real project motivating the confusion of tongues if we adopt Derrida's account of the Tower of Babel episode. For Derrida in "Des Tours de Babel," God compelled wo/man to translate Babel, the proper noun born with the Father's will, into a common name; that is, God set humankind the necessary as well as impossible and forbidden task of translating what by nature can only be transferred and not translated, since a proper noun is beyond the scope of all existing languages.9 The untranslatable nature of proper names is also developed by Hélène Cixous in conjunction with Stephen's efforts in *A Portrait* to think of God's names "in all the different languages in the world," efforts that reveal the mystery of the difference and identity of being in its relation to language (Cixous 261).

This detour through God's name, the logos responsible for Babel or the confusion of language, shows how translation means identity in difference/difference in identity, an essential feature of the language altered by humans as early as Adam in paradise.10 However, these interpretations must be confronted with the more classical view of translation as wo/man's own palliative for the loss of the universal language, which thus stands in opposition to the idea of a divine retaliation. The human way aims not only at doing away with the Pentecostal forgiveness, hence with the filial debt to the Redeemer, but also at giving a secular, debased version of God's project, an immanent reduplication immediately frustrating the design of the transcendent Being. The translation of the nameable and translatable would thus be superposed on the divine wish to set wo/man to translate the unnameable and untranslatable. This opposition shows through the texture of *Finnegans Wake*, a medley of Babelian languages bonded together in part by translation and thus equally bear-
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ing the scars of a partial structural untranslatability imposed by the Law of the Word, and of the entropy of translation caused by the differences in what languages must convey, according to Roman Jakobson in "On Linguistic Aspects of Translation." Predraft compilation of linguistic elements from several languages, belonging to the same semantic field (linguistic interferences across the whole range of the Buffalo notebooks) or related by theme and motif (and often in indexes or clusters), gives better evidence of the impact of (inter/intralingual) translation on the polyglottal fabric of the Wake than the final text, in which Joyce's compact research is diluted and made less visible by the adjunction of several other linguistic layers. Here are a few examples scattered throughout the work:

"Achdung! Pozor! Attenshune!" (FW 100.05); German Achtung! = Slavonic pozor! = French attention!: be careful!

"Byfall. Upploud!" (FW 257.29-30); German Beifall: applaud, which somehow means "up loud." This follows the sixth thunderword, semantically unified around the notion of closing the door.

"Comme bien, Comme bien! Feefeel! Feefeel!" (FW 420.12-13); French combien? = German wieviel?: how much?

This simple version (from Latin vertere: to turn) of the trope of translation discussed above helps to highlight the Wakean reformulation of intralinear translation, which sets aside the historical developments of national languages and groups them together following Joyce's own associative decisions so as to reestablish a creative passage between sound and sense, if not a lost universal concord. We are not far from the approach of Walter Benjamin in "The Task of the Translator," which Derrida's "Des Tours de Babel" analyzes after preliminary "framing" reflections on the Babel episode in Genesis. For Benjamin the intralinear version of the sacred text is the model founding the possibility of translation in general; translation makes tangible the active presence of a universal language and "ultimately serves the purpose of expressing the central reciprocal relationship between languages . . . [which are] not strangers to one another, but are, a priori and apart from all historical relationships, interrelated in what they want to express."11

This anhistorical practice counteracts the consequences of Babel insofar as exhausting the possibilities of combinations between languages also goes against the symbolic choice of one fragmentary linguistic medium for each oral and textual utterance, a choice that was made necessary by the division of the whole linguistic community after Babel. While subverting linguistic parentage, already inscribed in a narrative of filial betrayal and trans-lation of paternity,12 it also points towards the originally plural dimension of Wakese as a mode of linguistic displacement, the ontological loss of the unicity that the myth of Babel had placed at the "origin" and had established as being proper to the Father only.13 The original language of Finnegans Wake is already
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derived by the effects of these various modes and appropriations of translation. Derrida further notes that the original is a priori indebted to translation(s) insofar as it owes its survival to the scission of languages, which enables its proliferation by rewritings in other idioms ("Des Tours de Babel" 178–79; and McDonald 121ff.). Taking his cue from Walter Benjamin's notion of the Überleben and Fortleben of the original in translation, Derrida also writes in "Living On—Border Lines" that it is the mixed status of (un)translatability that enables the text to live on (102), a paradox that he and De Man had pointed out in the ambivalent title of Walter Benjamin's essay: Aufgabe (task) also means "giving up."14 (One may add that the sense of "giving up" and "surrender" is precisely contained in the Latin traditio seen above.) In this double bind one may register the linguistic war between Father and sons, since a parallel may be established with the debt that binds God, the original creator, to his human creatures, whose mission on earth is to promote his adoration, first in one language then in the various post-Babelian tongues through God's deed of translation. (The divine punishment seems therefore a desire to strengthen the filial bonds within the human race by reenacting the secretion or scission of the origin—God multiplying his substance in humankind—in a linguistic scene in order to ensure for veneration of his Law and Word in a multitude of languages.) But in return the origin of language(s) is indebted to those who perpetuate it/them from generation to generation. In Joyce's work the English substratum stands for the derived original logos, the traditional law of language already displaced in the first drafts, which was gradually revitalised by the multilayered grafting of foreign vocables but which never ceased to impose its grammatical constructions as substructure for the literal translation of foreign parts of speech:15

“agentlike . . . thundersday” (FW 5.13); German *eigentlich*: really, where -lich is equivalent to English -like, and German Donnerstag: lit. "thundersday," i.e. Thursday.

“cubehouse” (FW 5.14); literal translation of Arabic Ka'aba, the Black Stone at Mecca, the centre of Islam.

"cowrieosity" (FW 14.2–3); the context also invites "cowrie" since an informal name for it in French is pucelage, which also means "maidenhood."

"clearobscure" (FW 247.24); "chiaroscuro," of Italian origin, rendered literally.16

Finnegans Wake is traversed by a dialectical tension between the amalgamation or naturalization of foreign imports and the alienation or "foreignization" of the source parent tongue. In Shaun's satirical portrait of his mixed brother Shem the Penman, the "outlex" (FW 169.3), outside the law (or beyond the pale) of normative English and using "several lingua" (see entry in Buffalo Notebook VI.B.17 36), but also an "inlaw" (FW 169.4) destroying the language within its limits, is said to wage a linguistic-ideological war against
the law of the English language: "he would wipe alley english spooker, multaphoniakscially\textsuperscript{17} spuking, off the face of the erse" (\textit{FW} 178.6–7). The loss of the capital \textit{E} in "english" may be seen as Shem's desire to debase the English Word, though like any act of profanation, his desecration implicitly depends on a prior recognition of the Law.

The translation of Joyce's work cannot be envisaged as a faithful rendering of meaning into another language, nor even into "deforeignized" English, precisely because of the English substratum on which the \textit{Wake} is ineradicably grounded and which is yet already displaced. (Likewise, in the \textit{Convivio}, I viii \textit{14}, Dante mentions the impossibility of transposing the tightly knit musical fabric of an artistic creation into another language without disrupting it.) To recognize this level of (un)translatability, a true dimension of any literary work, which the \textit{Wake} fully exploits, let alone when it is itself already somehow a translation,\textsuperscript{18} is to forgo in part the meaning imparted by the language of the Law and to experience a lalic \textit{jouissance} from the babelization of writing. The reduplication of original English vocables in the process of translation dispossesses them partly of their semantic-ideological value as they become enmeshed with new coinages in new fictions, giving another orientation to the new text. One must recall at this stage the extracts from "Anna Livia" that Joyce recast into French (in 1930) and Italian (in 1937) with the help of several collaborators, each time transposing a tangential part of the original in order to adapt it to the new linguistic context, where the language was allowed to be "powerfully affected by the foreign tongue."\textsuperscript{19} Since meaning is the result of the negative estrangement of language from its referential field, its evacuation points the way to the recapture of the original, universal language in which words and things tallied and therefore meaning did not exist . . . but nor did humankind's subversive ideology! \textit{Finnegans Wake} is full of undecidables or structural hesitencies. Its (un)translatable nature, that of the proper noun Babel, itself a metaphor, acquired despite the intralinear human translation born of the interplay between the seventy-odd Wakean languages, anchors in writing the ceaselessly renewed opposition between the son and the Father, the jubilation in the fall into languages serving in part to undo paternal supremacy, to which the Wakean hero will however try either to cling or to accede. The trans-lation between languages and meta-phorical passage from generation to generation stop where the covers of the book meet and we enter the derived (\textit{FW} 3.1: "riverrun") realm of the untranslatable possible translations of the original Wakean struggle between the creator and the created.

\textbf{NOTES}

1. \textit{La Bible de Jérusalem} 1573 n. g, 1659 n. f; and Samarin 16. Mills (esp. 101–5) maps out several exegetical links between the theophany at Mount Sinai and the
Tower of Babel story in the Old Testament and the Pauline and Lucan texts in the New Testament (the book also has an abundant bibliography on glossolalia). Finally, one cannot fail to mention Borst's monumental study (1:224) for another connection between the episode on Mount Sinai (esp. Exodus 19:16ff.) and Pentecost.

2. However, aligning himself with the Pentecostal position, Michel de Certeau understands the mystery of the Pentecost as another ecstatic utterance, which the Apostles explained according to the hermeneutics of meaning and intelligibility (30). I wish to take a more "literal" view of this crucial passage, which I regard as the actual, however allegorized, restoration of communication between estranged peoples and languages. For a further synthesis of contrastive positions on glossolalia and xenoglossia, see, e.g., Samarin 109–15 and Williams 25ff.

3. FW 381.19–21. Of interest for Wake readers is Samarin's account of the glossolalic outburst of a psychoanalysand who had recently been involved in Pentecostalist religion, in connection with his guilt feelings about certain sexual acts (90ff.). A decoding of his talk could proceed along associational lines not unlike the linguistic mechanisms of the Wake's dream techniques.

4. For an account of exegetical emphasis on hearing as opposed to speaking in the Pentecostal narrative, see Mills 60–61. The Pentecostal tongues of fire may also be regarded as a visual translation of the voice heard on Mount Sinai (Schlossman 157).

5. For a similar post-Saussurean view of translation as both a diachronic (vertical) and synchronic (horizontal) process through time and space—and despite my reservations about how he chooses to consider the "vertical" and "horizontal"—see Steiner 31.

6. Fritz Senn's admirable readings of creative issues of intralinear translation in Joyce's œuvre, in between the "so familiar and so foreign" of Joyce's English, must be recalled here (see e.g. Nichts gegen Joyce 207–77; his other cited works are pertinent in their entirety). See also Bosinelli for a recent discussion of some implications of translation as writing and reading process in Finnegans Wake.

7. Jacques Derrida, "Des Tours de Babel" 165. That Derrida's brilliant opening tells the inadequation of translation can be checked against the corresponding original fragment (209).

8. For similar arguments, see Heath, "Ambiviolences" 35 (curtailed English version in Heath, "Joyce in Language"), and Risset 58–59, who quotes from the French translation of Walter Benjamin's essay on translation, to which we shall come back.

9. Derrida, "Des Tours de Babel" 170ff. See also Derrida in the roundtable discussion on translation (in McDonald, esp. 101–2); also Derrida "The Post Card" 165; and of course the whole of his reading of "he war" (in "Two Words"). The Derridean double bind of writing and translation is taken up in Benstock, "Letter of the Law" 174 and "Apostrophizing the Feminine" 590.

10. For instance, in Paradiso XXVI 133–36, Dante uses Adam himself to recant his earlier doctrine of the immutability of the Adamic language expressed in De Vulgari Eloquentia, especially in connection with its original essence, the divine name. Adam had accounted for the lability inherent in human language even before Nimrod's generation, by man's fallible desire, as found at lines 124–32. For Dante's constant rewritings of earlier positions, including his conflicting views on the loss of a man-made or God-given original language, see Tambling, esp. 129–63.
11. Walter Benjamin 72. Benjamin further adds that “all suprahistorical kinship of languages rests in the intention underlying each language as a whole—an intention, however, which no single language can attain by itself but which is realised only by the totality of their intentions supplementing each other: pure language” (73).

12. “[Joyce] confronts the problem of parenthood, as well as the problem of translation and betrayal, on the level of language itself, not merely on the level of language-as-narrative” (Deane 52).

13. Derrida, “Des Tours de Babel” 174. For the bearing of our argument on Walter Benjamin’s text, see also Andrew Benjamin 100, and De Man.

14. De Man 80. In the case of Derrida, this indication is given only in the French version of “Des Tours de Babel,” later collected in Psyché: Inventions de l’autre (212).

15. It would take another study to unravel the metaphorical web and thematic complexities tying together mother tongue and the fathering law of language in Finnegans Wake. Such an analysis would have to consider relations of parentage and filiation between English, Irish, and Anglo-Irish as these are implemented in Joyce’s text and might take as a starting point Heidegger’s insight into the notions of idiom and dialect (Mundart) as the language of the mother but also, in the first instance, the mother of language, as well as starting from Derrida’s observation in “Le retrait de la métaphore” that “langue maternelle ne serait pas une métaphore pour déterminer le sens de la langue mais le tour essentiel pour comprendre ce que ‘la mère’ veut dire” (Psyche 76).

16. For FW 450.20–21, 22, see Gilbert 72 and my “Italian Studies” 125ff.

17. Note the intrusion of the Finnish translative ending ~ksi, which registers the impending process of transformation (see my “L’Idiome babelieu” 204).

18. “Translations . . . prove to be untranslatable not because of any inherent difficulty, but because of the looseness with which meaning attaches to them” (Walter Benjamin 81).

19. Walter Benjamin 81, quoting from Rudolf Pannwitz’s Die Krisis der europäischen Kultur. Or “a translation touches the original lightly and only at the infinitely small point of the sense, thereupon pursuing its own course according to the laws of fidelity in the freedom of linguistic flux” (Walter Benjamin 80) and “the translation must be one with the original in the form of the interlinear version, in which literalness and freedom are united” (82).

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