Countlessness of Livestories: Narrativity in Finnegans Wake

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Most readers of Finnegans Wake would probably hesitate to call it a novel, and one of the reasons for this reluctance is that it lacks anything that could unproblematically be called a narrative, something which even such exceptional texts as Tristram Shandy and Ulysses, for all their oddity, can be said to possess. Yet narrative is hardly absent from the Wake; indeed, in the words of the text itself, at one of its many auto-descriptive moments, “Countlessness of livestories have netherfallen by this plage, flick as flowflakes, litters from aloft, like a waast wizzard all of whirlworlds” (FW 17.26–29). Finnegans Wake is a great mound of stories, a gigantic accumulation of the world’s narratives, but it seems that it is not one of them.

To explore this paradox, it will help to establish a working definition of narrative. Let us say that it is 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). Individual narratives work in different ways to produce pleasure and perhaps some form of understanding or insight, but what they all have in common is the condition of being narratives, of engaging with the world and the mind in the specific manner of narrative. I propose to call this quality narrativity, and my suggestion is that narrativity, so defined, is a crucial element in our enjoyment of any narrative as a narrative. The word narrativity is not recognized by the second edition of the Oxford English Dictionary, but it does appear in the titles of a few books and in the work of some narratologists. Gerald Prince, for instance, defines it as “The set of properties characterizing narrative and distinguishing
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it from nonnarrative; the formal and contextual features making a narrative more or less narrative, as it were" (64). Though the final phrase reveals Prince's uncertainty about his own definition, this remains a more technical (and perhaps emptier) employment of the term than the one I'm suggesting; my interest is not so much in a "set of properties" as in a quality or timbre, inseparable from the operation of readerly desires and satisfactions, that is precisely not reducible to any objectively ennumerable features or rules.

Narrativity, that is to say, has everything to do with the reader's performance of the text as he or she reads it (which is a strange kind of performance, since it involves being performed by the text as well). Our consciousness that we are experiencing not a series of events as they might unfold "in the real world" but a dynamic structure built out of inherited cultural materials according to (but also in deviance from) known codes, a series of events possessing a certain phantasmal quality, is not a hindrance to our full enjoyment of the narrative but on the contrary a precondition of it; and our appreciation of a skillfully deployed narrative sequence in a literary text is in part a savoring of this quality of narrativity as it is foregrounded and exploited.

Among the many other things they do with narrative, Joyce's first three books of fictional prose all practice a certain stretching of it, to produce an experience of controlled exiguousness. To take one example from Dubliners, "The Sisters" arouses a host of expectations as it encourages its readers to recall familiar plots involving youthful induction into the mysteries of the adult world (of knowledge, of sin, of death), yet it ends with those expectations unfilled, with an awkward silence whose awkwardness is not just that of social intercourse brought up against a deeply embarrassing event but also that of a structural closure that fails to satisfy narrative norms. A Portrait offers more in the way of accepted narrative satisfactions than Dubliners, but has many sequences that stretch—and thereby raise for a kind of questioning—narrativity itself; the extended recitation of Father Arnall's sermons would be one example. Moreover, the central narrative of A Portrait—the familiar story of the growth of the artist through obstacles and false starts to maturity—is one that is constantly ironized by other forces in the book, questioning Stephen Dedalus's own exploitation of that narrative as a guide to life even as it questions Joyce's exploitation of it as a novelistic schema. Ulysses plays at extraordinary length with the familiar narrative patterns of sundering and union, departure and homecoming, trust and betrayal, and in that extraordinary length it too foregrounds narrativity itself: we do, it is true, experience a certain traditional kind of tension as Bloom continues to find more and more ways of postponing his return home, and we're aware of rising expectations of conventional resolution as his and Stephen's paths converge more and more closely, but to read Ulysses for its narrative tensions and resolutions (or non-resolutions) would be like reading Middlemarch for its eroticism. The sequence of tensions and resolutions do constitute, however, an essential cord
on which everything else is strung, a cord stretched almost to breaking point without actually snapping. And the final word of the novel does somehow manage to release the multiple tensions built up throughout the book's extraordinary length.

In *Finnegans Wake* the connecting cord is gone. The broad scheme of day (perhaps), evening, night, and morning that structures the text is not a narrative scheme at all; it arouses no tension (we aren't asking "Will night fall?" "Will morning come?"); it hooks onto no pre-existing narrative formulae, it offers no enigma to be solved or human crisis to be resolved. Heroic and ingenious efforts have been made to derive from the multifarious and ambiguous episodes an overarching narrative—for instance, the story of a publican who dreams epic dreams after a hard day's work, waking only in the penultimate book to make somewhat unfelicitous love to his wife—but apart from its thinness as it is spread over several hundred dense pages, any such derived sequence of events fails to engage with the traditional resources of narrative, and hence lacks momentum or drive. What is more, this kind of simple linearity hardly corresponds to the experience of reading the text of *Finnegans Wake*, page by page, sentence by sentence. This is not to deny the sense of a beginning at the beginning and the sense of an end at the end (which are not overridden by the syntax that links—fairly weakly, I would argue—unfinished end and uninitiated beginning); but my argument is that these are structural, not narrative, features of the book.

On the other hand, narrativity abounds in *Finnegans Wake*; the book's very texture is a tightly woven web of stories. Through his extraordinary development of the portmanteau technique, Joyce found a way of interweaving narrative possibilities at several levels simultaneously: a paragraph, a sentence, a phrase, or even a word can offer a mininarrative to the reader. Linearity—a crucial feature of narrative—goes out the window. There are two requirements for this technique to work successfully: (1) most of the narratives must be familiar ones, so they can be triggered by the smallest fragment or allusion (and we might note in connection with this that among the books Joyce owned in Trieste was Georges Polti's *Thirty-Six Dramatic Situations*, which claimed to derive all the world's narratives from thirty-six basic situations); (2) the book must be a long one, so that it can produce its own multiply reiterated versions of familiar plots (the sin in the park, the captain and the tailor's daughter, Buckley and the Russian General, and so on), and set up its own complex network of allusions and easily triggered associations. The result is a certain emptiness of narrative—the stories are not new ones, and they keep coming back again and again—and a fullness of narrativity, a rich layering of stories allowing narrative echoes to fly back and forth among holy scripture, ribald joke, national history, pantomime, literary masterpiece, nursery rhyme. I'm reminded of the opening of Barthes's "Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives":
Numberless are the world's narratives. First of all in a prodigious variety of genres, themselves distributed among different substances, as if any material were appropriate for man to entrust his stories to it: narrative can be supported by articulated speech, oral or written, by image, fixed or moving, by gesture, and by the organized mixture of all these substances; it is present in myth, legend, fable, tragedy, comedy, epic, history, pantomime, painting . . . , stained-glass window, cinema, comic book, news item, conversation. (95)

Of course, the *Wake* for the most part uses one substance, the verbal (though there are visual and musical narrative effects too); but it can certainly be said to be "an organized mixture" of all these sources of narrative — there isn't one in Barthes's list that's not mined by Joyce.

The effect of this excess of narrativity over narrative could be described as a *staging* or *performing* of narrative, a putting it into play, a testing of its limits.³ (In a similar fashion, one might say that the *Wake* has an excess of, for instance, referentiality over reference, metaphoricity over metaphor, descriptivity over description, ethics over ethics, that results in a kind of staging of reference, metaphor, description, and ethics.) A single sentence, chosen more or less at random, will help clarify my argument:

> Fudder and lighting for alle looty, any filly in a fog, for O'Cronione lags acrumbling in his sands but his sunsunsuns still tumble on. (FW 415.20–22)

Different narratives of death and succession intermingle here: Cronos succeeded by his son Zeus; John Brown's body molding while his soul lives on to inspire his followers; the topos of monumental statuary (Ozymandias, perhaps?) crumbling into the sand while humanity persists regardless of individual claims to greatness. Two of these stories—Cronos and Ozymandias—entail disrespect for patriarchal authority, and the carnivalesque scene after the death of the father is depicted also in "Fudder and lighting for alle looty"—food (or fodder) and illumination made available for everyone (*für alle leute*), with a suggestion of "loot" as well—and in the (male) sexual promiscuity of "any filly in a fog." But there's a story of authoritarian rage here as well, in the initial thunder and lightning; and perhaps one of circumnavigation (reinforced by the immediate context of this sentence) in the tumbling suns and in the allusion to Phileas Fogg, whose voyage around the world in eighty days is another one of our culture's recycling and recycled narratives, going back, of course, to the *Odyssey* itself.

Within the context of the whole book the narrative texture of this sentence is even richer, since other stories of fathers and sons, parental anger and filial disrespect, sexual adventures and circuitous travels are evoked. We note the Irishness of the fallen hero ("O'Cronione"), and the tripleness of his offspring ("sunsunsuns") who, in two contrasting stories that depend on the ambiguity of "tumble," either dance on his grave, or, in their turn, fall as well. Yet in none of these stories do we make any narrative progress; we know their
begins and ends already (and where there is more than one end in the
tradition, Joyce usually gives us both, simultaneously and undecidably). What
provides the special pleasure of reading *Finnegans Wake* is the way these sto-
ries in so many different registers map onto one another, and the way the
power and fascination of narrativity is by this means instanced, exploited, and
ironized. When we consider sections of the text larger than the short sen-
tence, of course, this complex texturing of narrative, and resultant heighten-
ing of narrativity, operates even more intensely and (if you’re in the right
frame of mind) enjoyably.

One cannot read *for* narrativity, however; it’s like that dim star in the cor-
ner of the sky that disappears as soon as you look directly at it. *Narrative* is
what one reads for: the particular narrative or simultaneously unrolling nar-
ratives that are engaging the attention at the moment of textual contact, with
the exercise of recognition, memory, and prediction that they entail. Even in
the *Wake*, narrativity is never present as such, but its effects are more strongly
felt than anywhere else in literature, as the narratives keep short-circuiting,
overlapping, exploding into multiple destinies, and blocking any attempt to
turn them into transparent accounts of how it is with people and events in the
world.

Does this pushing of narrativity as far as it will go make the *Wake* unlike any
other fictional text? I don’t think so—as I’ve argued before in relation to other
features of the book, the *Wake* represents an extreme of the literary that re-
veals with particular clarity the characteristic modes of literature’s function-
ing. Foregrounded narrativity is that which marks literary narrative as distinct
from other kinds of narrative (though this is not to make any “high art”/“pop-
ular art” distinction—foregrounded narrativity can be found in the produc-
tions of the mass media as much as in those of the exclusive salon, as Kimberly
Devlin has demonstrated—in a response to an earlier version of this argu-
ment—in using the concept to discuss the endless and multilayered narratives
of television soaps). Thus it is not merely a question of fictional as opposed to
nonfictional narrative: we might find no staging of narrativity in a wholly
uninventive story or anecdote. At the same time, there are nonfictional nar-
ratives of which we might wish to say that in them narrativity is being per-
formed and tested, though only, I would argue, if they had a certain “literary”
quality and thereby encouraged a “literary” reading. The accurate recounting
of a sequence of real events—even a story-shaped sequence—would not be
likely to produce the experience of foregrounded narrativity I have been de-
scribing; but Rousseau’s *Confessions* or Gibbon’s *Rise and Fall* might. We might
risk the assertion that a literary narrative—fictional or not—is a narrative in
which narrativity is played out at some distance from itself, a process which
does not in any way inhibit its power to excite, to move, to delight.

*Finnegans Wake* is thus the limit case of literary narrative—as it is the limit
case of literature in so many other ways. We put it down and turn with plea-
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sure to other fictional constructions where narrative is strong and narrativity weak. But our pleasure in these other stories is not entirely that of relief, since reading the *Wake*, learning how to enjoy its excess of narrativity, is also a schooling that can enhance all the other narratives we encounter—not because it gives us lessons on what narrativity is, but because it diminishes our dependence upon what Joyce called "goahead plot" and attunes our faculties to the dance of narrativity wherever it is to be found.

NOTES

1. Michael H. Begnal, who has worked assiduously to find within the overdeterminations of the *Wake* a relatively straightforward account of the actions and speeches of a determinate set of characters, offers the following as the "basic plot of *Finnegans Wake*" (after the preliminary material of book 1):

II.1, the children are outside in the yard, playing a game after school until their parents call them in at dusk for supper; II.2, after dinner, Shem and Shaun do their homework, while Issy sits on a couch, knitting and kibitzing; II.3, Earwicker presides in his pub until closing time, finishes off the drinks left around by the patrons, falls down drunk, and staggers up to bed later; III.4, the Earwickers are awakened by the cries of Shem in the throes of a nightmare, and they soothe him, return to bed, make love, and once again fall asleep as dawn is breaking; IV.1, Anna Livia awakens, and her thoughts form the monologue which concludes the book. (51–52)

Not much narrative drive or proairetic complication there. And some of the connecting links that produce a linear account of domestic life derive more from a tradition of commentary initiated by Edmund Wilson and by Campbell and Robinson than from clearly articulated statements in the text—for example, the "supper" or "dinner" that joins II:1 and II:2, the continuity of the name "Earwicker," and the event of the publican's staggering up to bed (presumably so that he can be found there in III:4).

2. Joyce owned the French original, *Les trente-six situations dramatiques*, published in 1912; see Ellmann 48, 124. (Thanks to Jorn Barger for bringing this book to my attention.)

3. A parallel in another medium might be the heightened apprehension of the possibilities and the limits of the dodecaphonic tonal system in an inventive piece of music (even if the hearer possesses no technical musical knowledge at all), where we might say that we enjoy not only the unfolding of harmonic sequences and melodic patterns but also the staging of harmonicity and melodicity. On the question of inventiveness, see Derrida's "Psyche," an essay to which I am much indebted in my thinking about Joyce.

4. See chaps. 7 and 8 of *Peculiar Language*.
WORKS CITED


