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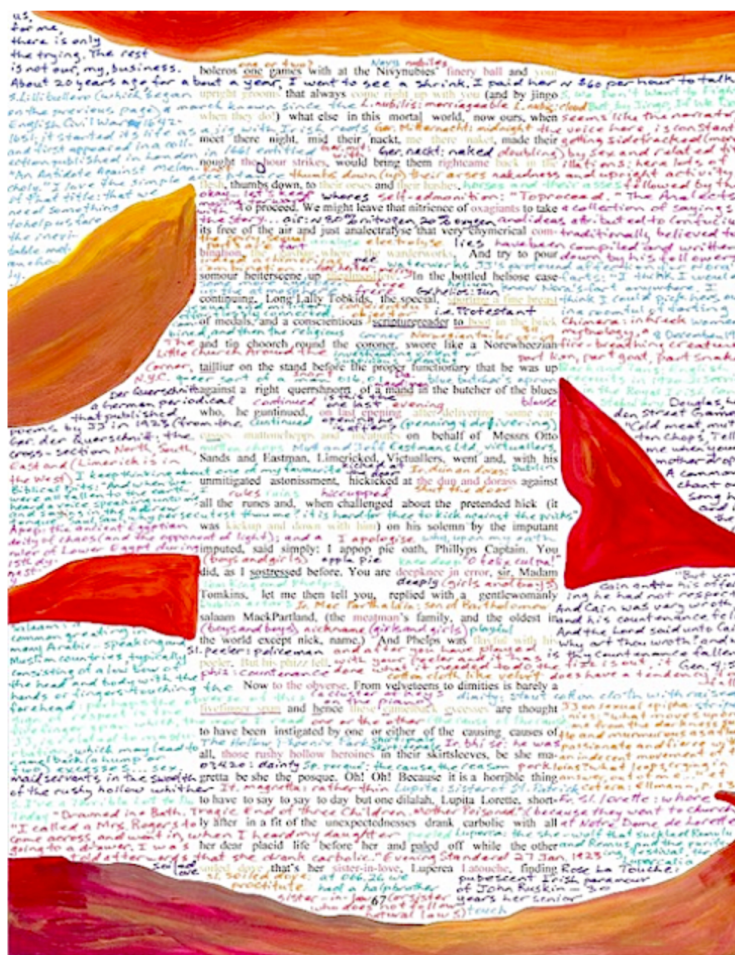


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## Reading Joyce in Guarani and Hieroglyphics.

A FORTNIGHTLY REVIEW.



*Finnegans Wakes: Tales of Translation*

by Patrick O'Neill

University of Toronto Press, 2022 | 399 pages | £72.99 \$66.90

By PETER O'BRIEN.



**THERE IS A tease about** the tales, trials, and tribulations of translating *Finnegans Wake*: “Oh you want to translate it? What language are you translating it from?”

Constructed over 17 years, James Joyce integrated about 80 languages into its 628 pages: the usual suspects, as well as Bearlagair Na Saer, a slang spoken by Irish tinkers; Chinese pidgin; Old Church Slavonic; and Volapük, an artificial language.

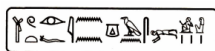
One could say that the book comes pre-translated. Or perhaps it's more accurate to say that Joyce's orthographic hydra – which many consider both unreadable and incomprehensible – is likewise untranslatable.

Patrick O'Neill and his publisher both fall on the “untranslatable” side of the linguistic ledger. The opening sentence on the dust jacket acknowledges that the book “is universally acknowledged to be entirely untranslatable,” and O'Neill, from the first page of his book (“*Finnegans Wake* can indeed not be translated, it can only be rewritten”) to his Appendices (where he references “would-be” wordsmiths “acting as if translation were possible”), continuously articulates the impossibility of the task.

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Once we appreciate that it's going to be a challenge to “prendre la lune avec les dents,” the fun begins. *Finnegans Wakes* plows, plays, and plods methodically through every known full and partial translation of *Finnegans Wake*. It does help if the reader has a comfortable familiarity with the closing / opening pages of the *Wake*, as well as the ALP chapter (‘Anna Livia Plurabelle’, from its opening delta of desire to the hitherandthithering words with which it ends) since these passages are multi-linguistically compared and contrasted throughout O'Neill's glottological text.

In contrast to the genetic studies that are very much in vogue these days, which reach back and investigate the various beginnings of the text, O'Neill follows a macro-textual path, focusing on the “post-textual,” and therefore extending the book “forwards in time, to include its multiple and multilingual translations.” Translatory folk, he says, have an irrepressible temptation “to continue transfiguring, transposing, rewriting, recreating, and thus extending” the *Wake*.



Along his literary way, O'Neill invokes a translation of the *Wake* into the South American indigenous language Guarani by the Brazilian scholar and poet Sérgio Medeiros; references the only children's version of the *Wake* in any language, by Donaldo Schüler, whose Portuguese translation of the entire text came out in 2003 in five volumes; and marvels about the transposition into Egyptian hieroglyphics by Orlando Mezzabotta of the title and the opening / closing pages of the book.

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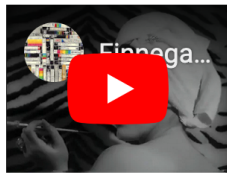
Particular attention is paid to the various texts in which James Joyce (who once referred to himself as Mr. Shame's Voice) had a direct translational hand. Before the book was published in full (back when the *Wake* was still known as *Work in Progress*), Joyce was involved with a French team translation of the ALP chapter. Philippe Soupault, a co-conspirator, said that the team “rejected, with Mr. Joyce's approval, everything that seemed contrary to the rhythm, the meaning, or the transformation of the words, and then tried to suggest a new translation.” In the late thirties, Joyce undertook a translation into Italian of ALP with the 22-year-old Italian writer **Nino Frank**. When Frank protested that Italian did not lend itself to puns, especially Joycean puns, Joyce replied: “We must do the job now before it is too late; for the moment there is at

least one person, myself, who can understand what I am writing. I don't however guarantee that in

two or three years I'll still be able to." Joyce also had a role in translating the closing pages of the book into Basic English, a radically simplified English (the vocabulary was strictly limited to 850 words, including only 18 permissible verbs!) developed by C. K. Ogden, an English linguist and philosopher. The current scholar Sam Slote observes: "While it might seem that Ogden's aims for Basic English are the inverse of Joyce's *Wake*, both aim toward a universalizing patois that begins from English. Joyce complicates English, whereas Ogden refines and simplifies it." And Joyce may also have had a hand in helping shape a German translation of ALP by Georg Goyert, Joyce's authorized German translator. It is fair and perhaps obvious to say that as a sly and cunning linguist, Joyce would have enjoyed these forays into other ways of writing and (to use a word that O'Neill uses) any effort to further complexify his text.

O'Neill's detailed and exhaustive overview not only tracks each and every translation to date, he also climbs into the personalities of the members of the translational tribe. He calls such people "clearly a very special breed – and clearly given to heroic endeavour." He notes that Bertil Falk's Swedish translation appeared in September 2021, fully 66 years after it was begun, and two others worked 35 years on their translations: Luigi Schenoni into Italian, and Friedhelm Rathjen into German. It's smuggly entertaining to read about British writer Adam Roberts spending about one week translating the *Wake* into Latin. Well, more context is perhaps appropriate. Roberts used Google Translator, which he had previously manipulated. In his words, he rewrote Joyce's "original into a rough 'regular English' approximation, perhaps by writing out his portmanteaus to make explicit multiple puns; running this through Google Translator and then recombining the resulting cod-Latin in various ways." As he says: "the machine translates, and I translate the machine."

Of course Joyce was interested in other types of translations, including cinematic. He made efforts to establish the Cinematograph Volta in Dublin in 1909, and would have been intrigued and very likely supportive of filmmaker Mary Ellen Bute's legendary 1967 "translation" of the book into film, *Passages from James Joyce's Finnegans Wake*.



Similar idiosyncratic concentration has surely been a part of O'Neill's multi-year task in building this compendium. Perhaps O'Neill would even say that one of the best ways to read the *Wake* is to investigate or navigate, as best one can, its many translations. Hervé Michel, who produced a complete French online translation of the *Wake* in 2004, was asked by Derek Pyle in the journal *Asymptote* what inspired him to consider translating the

untranslatable. Michel's response: "I soon found out that the only way for me to read it was to translate it."

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**Reading Joyce's *sui generis* text perhaps makes us trilingual, or even multilingual, in English.**

And I've always been delighted to read how Peter Fallon, the great, earthy translator of Virgil, talks in his "Translator's Note" to *Georgics*, of becoming "bilingual" in English. There is the language that we pick up as children: by listening, by osmosis. Then there is the language that we learn in schools and as we read. Reading Joyce's *sui generis* text perhaps makes us trilingual, or even multilingual, in English.

O'Neill presents his sympathetic research both chronologically and by language. Major attention is given to those indefatigable translators Erik Bindervoet and Robbert-Jan Henkes, who produced the first full Dutch translation of the *Wake* in 2002; to Congrong Dai, who caused a "publishing sensation" when she released the first pages of her Chinese translation in 2012 (her work is ongoing); and to Tamar Gelashvili who published the first pages of her translation into Georgian, in 2020 (her work is also ongoing) and who had to reach back to archaic forms of Georgian to capture Joyce's multivalent text.

Fleeting and even minor translational efforts get their own mention by the delightfully democratic O'Neill, and he also gives us a few mysteries. Does an Arabic translation exist? There was mention in an influential Egyptian newspaper of a complete Arabic translation of the *Wake*, but to O'Neill's present knowledge "no trace" of it has emerged. Considering, as O'Neill notes, that there is "no exact equivalent in the Arabic Muslim tradition of a funeral wake" – and despite Noam Chomsky believing that "all possible human languages are very similar" – we begin to appreciate some of the challenges that await any Arabic translation.

Throughout *Finnegans Wakes*, O'Neill demonstrates time and time again how much fun can be had with Joyce's polyglot puzzle, and that Joyce's perpetually generative text remains very much a *Work in Progress*.

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PETER O'BRIEN has written or edited ten books, including *Cleopatra at the Breakfast Table*, about studying Latin with his teen-aged daughter. He is about half-way through his multi-year artwork, *Lots of Fun with Finnegans Wake*, pages from which have been exhibited in Antwerp, Hong Kong, Montreal, New York, Philadelphia, Toronto and [here](#) in *The Fortnightly Review*, whence comes the art at the top of this page. More at [peterobrienart.com](#).

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