

TRANSLATING THE UNTRANSLATABLE: THE EXPANDING UNIVERSE OF *FINNEGANS WAKE*

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Abstract: While *Finnegans Wake* has generally been regarded as entirely untranslatable, there currently exists a surprisingly large and increasing number of both complete and partial renderings in close to thirty different languages. These translations may interestingly be seen as constituting an expanding *Finnegans Wake* universe.

Keywords: *Finnegans Wake*; International Translations; International Translators

TRADUZINDO O INTRADUZÍVEL: O UNIVERSO EM EXPANSÃO DE *FINNEGANS WAKE*

Resumo: *Finnegans Wake* tem sido geralmente considerado totalmente intraduzível, contudo, existe atualmente um número surpreendentemente grande e crescente de traduções completas e parciais do livro em aproximadamente trinta idiomas diferentes. Essas traduções podem ser vistas como constituindo um universo em expansão de *Finnegans Wake*.

Palavras-chave: *Finnegans Wake*; Traduções Internacionais; Tradutores Internacionais

There is universal agreement that *Finnegans Wake* (*FW*) is in principle entirely untranslatable. Joyce himself, however, was the first to decide that this constituted no reason at all why it could not be transposed or transcreated or “translated” in some sense of that flexible term. After the appearance in 1928 of *Anna Livia Plurabelle* (*ALP*), he therefore organized and participated in an



experimental team translation – to continue using the convenient term – of several pages from it into French (Joyce *et al.*, 1931), shortly afterwards collaborated in a translation of a shorter excerpt into Basic English (Ogden, 1931), and finally took the lead in an exuberant translation into Italian of the same pages earlier translated into French (Joyce and Settanni 1940; Joyce and Frank 1979).¹

Despite its obvious untranslatability, complete renderings or versions or transpositions or transcreations of the *Wake*, following in Joyce's footsteps, now continue, after a very slow start, to appear. As of June 2022, indeed, no fewer than twenty complete translations exist in fifteen different languages altogether: three in French (Lavergne, 1982; Michel, 2004; Sénécot, 2021), three in Japanese (Yanase, 1993; Miyata, 2004; Hamada, 2014), two in Italian (Mazza 2018; Schenoni *et al.* 2019), two in Portuguese (Schüller, 2003; Amarante *et al.* 2022), and one in each of German (Stündel, 1993), Dutch (Bindervoet and Henkes, 2002), Korean (Kim, 2002), Polish (Bartnicki, 2012), Greek (Anevlavis, 2013), Spanish (Zabaloy, 2016), Turkish (Sevimay, 2016), quasi-Latin (Roberts, 2019), Serbian (Stojaković, 2020), Swedish (Falk, 2021), and Russian (Rene, 2021). As of this same date, and including the versions in these complete renderings, there also exist no fewer than 40 complete versions of *ALP* and a further 36 partial or fragmentary versions of *ALP*, in 26 different languages altogether.

The expanding universe of *Finnegans Wake* shows no signs of slowing its multilingual expansion in the 2020s and beyond. On the contrary, in fact. The first complete rendering of the *Wake*, by Philippe Lavergne in French, appeared only in 1982 and was the only one to appear in any language during the entire decade of the 1980s; 2 complete renderings appeared in the nineties; 5 in the

¹ The present paper, originally delivered at the International James Joyce Symposium at Trinity College Dublin in June 2022, presents an extremely brief synopsis of my book *Finnegans Wakes: Tales of Translation* (2022). For detailed discussion of Joyce's own renderings from *ALP* see O'Neill 2018.

2000s; 7 in the 2010s; and 5 so far already in the opening years of the 2020s; while no fewer than 8 further complete renderings have been announced as currently in progress. Of these latter, new complete renderings have been announced in Brazilian Portuguese (by Caetano Galindo), Norwegian (by Leif Høgøhaug), Finnish (by Juhani Lindholm), Georgian (by Tamar Gelashvili), Hungarian (by Ágota Bozai), and German (by Ulrich Blumenbach), as well as a second Turkish version (by Umut Çelikyay) and a complete Chinese rendering (by Congrong Dai). Three further Brazilian translators (Vinícius Alves, Afonso Teixeira Filho, Luis Henriques) have indicated that they are also planning new complete versions. Only French can so far boast three different complete and unabridged *Wakes* – though Brazilian Portuguese seems set fair to match and even exceed that figure quite soon, with a possible *six* complete renderings in that language.

H.G. Wells famously wondered who on earth James Joyce must have thought he was to demand so much of a reader's precious few years of life in attempting to read *Finnegans Wake*. How much more might translators of Joyce's extraordinary text wonder. But translators of the untranslatable *Wake* are clearly a very special breed – and clearly given to heroic endeavour. Luigi Schenoni, for example, began working in 1973 on what was planned to be a complete Italian translation and continued to work on it until his death 35 years later, by which time he had completed just twelve of the seventeen chapters. Ricardo Silva-Santisteban produced his first Spanish rendering of an excerpt in 1971 and his latest (to date) in 2000, almost 30 years later. Friedhelm Rathjen began translating the *Wake* into German in 1984 and was energetically continuing his labours more than 35 years later.

Earlier renderings (and some later ones) tend to be essentially explanatory, usually involving some degree of attempted normalization and a focus on what appears to the relevant translator to be the primary plotline. As opposed to such explanatory readings – Lavergne's French, for example – that attempt primarily to recapitulate the narrative, there is the Polish translator Krzysztof

Bartnicki's description of himself as a "molecular translator," one who deliberately avoided consulting any overarching critical works on the *Wake* until he had first attempted to render individual "letters, then morphemes, words, phrases, punctuation, paragraphs, etc." (Wawrzycka, 2016-2017, p. 172, 173).

Some translators make extensive use of annotations. Lavergne's version, for example, includes more than 600 footnotes. In a sense, explanatory rewritings such as Lavergne's can be considered as themselves a form of detailed extended annotation. Annotations, for their part, can of course both enhance and reduce readerly pleasure. In a similarly explanatory mode, some translators endeavour to produce a shorter *Wake*, whose common implicit ambition is clearly to demonstrate the real heart of the matter. Anthony Burgess's *A Shorter Finnegans Wake* (1966) played a key role in this particular approach, leading the way for relatively extended shorter versions in several languages, notably in Japanese (Kyoko Miyata in 2004) and Brazilian Portuguese (Dirce Waltrick do Amarante in 2018).

Taking a very different approach, other translators, especially more recent translators, enthusiastically accept the untranslatability of the text not only as a given but also as a liberating invitation to indulge in translatorial play rather than explanation or normalization – thus essentially following the example of Joyce's own Italian *ALP* in attempting to produce not a would-be replication of the text but a continuation of it. Hervé Michel's employment of pataphysicist free association in his idiosyncratically titled French *Veillée Pinouilles* has thus proven to be particularly influential among later translators such as Marcelo Zabaloy in Spanish or Umur Çelikyay in Turkish. Adam Roberts's *Pervigilium Finneganis* of 2019 involved Google Translator in producing a quasi-Latin rendering – which Roberts himself cheerfully described as being like a version produced on a prepared piano. This description found enthusiastic approval from Hervé Michel, who declared that this was exactly how he saw his own French rendering as functioning. Umberto Eco's paradoxical suggestion resonates that while the *Wake* may

indeed be untranslatable, in some ways it may also be the *easiest* of texts to translate.

Whatever the particular translational approach adopted, various renderings are printed with the original text on facing pages, thus allowing for (and inviting) a comparative reading. These include, for example, Schenoni's Italian (1982), Bindervoet and Henkes's Dutch (2002), Schüler's Portuguese (2003), and Bartnicki's Polish (2012). While, by implication, the translation is thus readable in all such cases as a detailed running commentary on the original, the reverse procedure is of course also available to interested readers. In the case of editions that do not include a facing-page version of the original text the target-language reader is faced with a quite different challenge, the same challenge in fact as faced by Joyce's original reader of the *Wake*, namely how to make unaided sense of the dauntingly complex text.

While many renderings appear under the original title *Finnegans Wake*, meanwhile, a number of imaginative variations on it may also be found, such as Schüler's Portuguese *Finnicius Revém* (2003), Michel's French *Veillée Pinouilles* (2004), Bartnicki's Polish *Finneganów tren* (2012), Rene's Russian *Na pomine Finneganov* (2021), or, most provocatively, Sénécot's French *Finnfanfun* (2021), which interlingually promises the primordial giant Finn's fans lots of fun, while evoking both the Marvel Comics giant Fin Fang Foom and the "Fee fie fo fum" of Jack's beanstalk giant. Clearly, all of these variations may provide target-language readers with intriguing target-language evocations – even if they do so at the cost of the evocations provided for the English-language reader by Joyce's original title.

As for *Wake* translators themselves, as a group they constitute a quite intriguing phenomenon in many ways. A striking feature is how many of them have scientific rather than literary backgrounds: Wilcock in Italian graduated in civil engineering, for example, Stojaković in Serbian in mechanical engineering, Volokhonsky in Russian in biochemistry, Hamada in Japanese in biology, Rene in Russian in physics. Lavergne in French was a telecommunications

engineer, Zabaloy in Spanish was originally a computer technician, Anevlavis in Greek is a medical doctor. Among other professional backgrounds, Stündel in German is a journalist, as was Grut in Swedish; Sevimay in Turkish is a former sales executive; Michel in French is a retired French civil servant; and Mezzabotta in Italian is a professional actor.

Another noticeable feature is the relative dearth of female translators. The first rendering by a woman of any part of the *Wake* was that of Maria Weatherall in the very early Czech *ALP* of 1932; the second, by Ingeborg Horn in German, followed only more than half a century later, in 1989. Another decade elapsed before the 2000s saw Marissa Aixàs's Catalan *ALP* and Kyoko Miyata's abbreviated Japanese *Wake*, both in 2004, then the first excerpts of Ágota Bozai's ongoing Hungarian *Wake* in 2007, and Dirce Waltrick do Amarante's Portuguese *ALP* in 2009. The following decade saw Book I of Congrong Dai's Chinese *Wake* in 2012. Dai and Bozai both aim to produce complete versions in due course, the first complete rendering in Chinese and in Hungarian respectively.

Stündel's 1993 German rendering was greeted with great fanfare as a media event, but critical reception was far less rapturous. Yanase's Japanese, Bartnicki's Polish, and Dai's Chinese were all received with enormous enthusiasm, while Kim's Korean, Hamada's Japanese, and Rene's Russian versions have generated disappointingly little reaction among potential target-language readers. Bartnicki in Polish and Dai in Chinese both reported finding the extended translatorial experience little short of traumatic. Schenoni in Italian, on the other hand, found it consistently exhilarating, while Słomczyński in Polish, based on his 1985 rendering of *ALP*, offhandedly considered the task to present essentially no great problem. Translators may of course also have their individual translatorial quirks, such as Lavergne's determination in French to find specifically Irish explanations (not always entirely convincing) for as many textual oddities and obscurities as possible; Schüler's flaunted onomastic playfulness in Portuguese; or Stündel's equally flaunted process in German of unrelenting and often entirely arbi-

trary verbal deformation combined with lower-body extravagances.

Given all of this, it is perhaps unsurprising that a certain number of colourful myths have circulated concerning *Wake* translators. It has variously (if erroneously) been reported, for example, that Yanase's Japanese version of the *Wake* in fact needed three separate translators, after the first disappeared and the second went mad. Other *Wake* myths include the legend of Luigi Schenoni's protracted survival on copious supplies of pasta provided by a conveniently available aunt and Dieter Stündel's claim to have invented 50,000 new German words in his rendering.

As for the individual languages into which the *Wake* has been rendered, partially or in full, one would almost certainly not have expected Czech, for example, to have been the first language to boast a complete rendering of *ALP* – which in 1932 was the most substantial translation in any language from what would eventually become the *Wake*. It would be almost three decades before partial renderings in Italian by Wilcock (1961) and in French by du Bouchet (1962) rendered a greater number of pages from the *Wake*. In more recent years, the *Wake* has been rendered in part or in whole into all the major and many of the minor European languages. The perhaps more unexpected languages to have put in (or at least promised) an appearance so far include Esperanto, Finnish, Latin, Hebrew, Hungarian, Korean, Turkish, Ancient Egyptian (Mezzabotta, 2018) – and the South American indigenous language Guarani (Medeiros 1999). Irish, meanwhile, is represented only in an intriguing rendering of the first six lines by Alan Titley (2008).

There exists also a sizeable ghost group of complete translations that might eventually have been, but never actually came to fruition. Whether or not an Arabic rendering exists remains a particularly intriguing puzzle (Battuti, 2012). The suggestion that Philippe Soupault, Raymond Queneau, Samuel Beckett, and others were engaged in a French rendering in the mid-1940s was a fascinating one, but the plan unfortunately led nowhere. Nevzat Erkmen died of Covid in 2020 before finishing the Turkish translation on which he had been working for two decades. A Romanian rendering was

advertised in the 1990s, but appears never to have actually been undertaken. Various plans for complete Spanish and Swedish versions were also abandoned – though complete renderings by other translators in both these languages now exist, Zabaloy's in Spanish (2016) and Falk's in Swedish (2021).

One final question that suggests itself, but will remain unanswered here, is which language or languages might be considered the most potentially productive in which to undertake a translation of or from the *Wake*. The ability and agility to generate puns and other forms of word play would obviously be entirely crucial. Joyce's fellow Italian translator Nino Frank initially objected to Joyce's planned Italian rendering of *ALP* (Joyce and Frank 1979) on the grounds that Italian, in Frank's opinion, does not lend itself to puns, and certainly not to Joycean puns. Joyce, aiming to extend the boundaries of Italian as he had already extended those of English, to quote Ellmann (1982, p. 632), triumphantly demonstrated that Italian was perfectly capable of doing so, and such later Italian translators as Schenoni, Mezzabotta, and Terrinoni and Pedone have very competently continued the demonstration. It is widely accepted that Chinese does not lend itself to puns in any European sense of the concept, and the same appears to be true for Japanese and Korean – but translators in all three of these Asian languages (Dai, Yanase, Kim) have devised a variety of ingenious compensatory mechanisms. Reviewers of recent Turkish *Wake* translations have written of the particular pun-producing advantages of Turkish as an agglutinative language, in which a single extended word may quite routinely combine several parts of speech. Other agglutinative languages such as Hungarian, Finnish, Japanese, and Korean may well share those advantages. Maciej Słomczyński, meanwhile, confidently claimed that Polish would actually have afforded Joyce far more scope for polysemous play than mere English ever did – and Naoki Yanase is reported to have made a very similar claim for Japanese.

Jacques Aubert went on record in 1967 as wondering at that point if any further, and inevitably failed, attempts to translate even parts of *Finnegans Wake* should really be undertaken at all. To

which, more than half a century later, and multiple renderings in many languages later, one can only respond, Certainly they should, and the more the better! An early reviewer's amusing quip that Lavergne's French rendering was undoubtedly a labour of love, "but so was the monster for Frankenstein" (Benstock and Benstock, 1985, p. 231) essentially asks the same question. Amusing, certainly, but the more such textual monsters we have, even allowing for wide and inevitable differences in translatorial approach and translational quality, however that might be evaluated, the richer, more varied, and more fascinating the expanding *Finnegans Wake* universe becomes.

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