FINNEGANS WAKE AND THE LINGUISTIC RENAISSANCE

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In James Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake*, there is a passage in which Shaun the Post describes the interior of his brother’s house. Because his brother, Shem the Penman, is a writer, it isn’t surprising to find that Shem’s house is cluttered with literary debris which has collected like dust-balls and cobwebs over the years:

You brag of your brass castle or your tyled house in ballyfermont? Niggs, niggs and niggs again. For this was a stinksome inken-stink, quite puzzonal to the wrottel. Smatter-afact, Angles aftenon browsing there thought not Edam reeked more rare. My wud! The warped flooring of the lair and the sound-conducting walls thereof, to say nothing of the uprights and impostes, were persianally literated with burst loveletters, telltale stories, stickyback snaps, doubtful eggshells, bouchers, flints, borers, puffers, amygdaloid almonds, mindless raisins, alphyettyformed verbage, vivilcal viasses, ompiter dictas ... once current puns, quashed quotatoes, messes of mottage, unquestionable issue papers (*FW* 183).³

Besides an impression of general clutter, the last thing we get from this description is a clear picture of Shem’s room. It is as if such a picture were irrelevant. The words are so busy calling our attention to themselves that the things they refer to get lost. Shem’s room is buried in “messes of mottage”; it is hidden beneath the very “alphyettyformed verbage” which should reveal it. The words themselves have more being and substance than the things they refer to. Moreover, though this is one of the clearer passages in *Finnegans Wake*, in order to puzzle it out, we will need either some knowledge of half a dozen languages or else own half a dozen dictionaries.

We might well ask, what ever happened to the straightforward story with a straightforward narrative? Why this apparent linguistic anarchy which Joyce himself calls the “ab nihilisation of the etym?” What happened in the period between Jane Austin’s genteel descriptions of drawing rooms and this seemingly chaotic version of a description?

To begin to answer these questions, I will first examine briefly the so-called 19th century discovery of language; then, I will outline the way in which much of 20th century literature embodies three ideas emerging from the linguistic renaissance: first, that words are objective, concrete entities; second, that words are “rooted” in the past and connect us with the order and culture of our ancestors; and third, that languages are interrelated. I will concentrate on Joyce’s last work, *Finnegans Wake*, which is in many ways a paradigm for the linguistic concerns of many of the writers of the 20th century.

During the 17th century the works of Descartes and Locke shifted attention to the nature of mind and thought, and thus eventually to language, the medium of thought. Language became the subject of a renaissance of scientific and philosophical inquiry which inevitably influenced literature, though not overtly until the end of the 19th century when writers began to scrutinize their artistic medium with a new intensity, making it part of their message. Thus, one of the characteristics of 20th century modernism is its linguistic self-consciousness, its unprecedented, heightened awareness of language.
This awareness, it is true, is in some degree an innate part of the genius of every poet; but by the 20th century, it had become an overtly conscious part.

When the philologists Rasmus Rask and Franz Bopp in the first decades of the 19th century led the way into the uncharted land of languages, the only equipment they took with them was the scientific method. The purpose of their expedition, and of the more refined ones conducted later, was to gather phonological and morphological specimens from several Indo-European languages, and, by comparative analysis, inductively to derive laws of linguistic change. For the first time with any real depth or consistency, language was being treated as an observable phenomenon. Words and their sound patterns were empirical entities that could be studied.

By the turn of the 19th century, after decades of scientific philology, the impact of which was popularly felt in the monumental and scholarly Oxford English Dictionary, the writer as never before was aware of his medium as a medium, with its own ontology. Words were now no longer simply transparent signifiers, but were seen to participate more directly in reality; they were objects in a world of objects. This insight was exploited not only by Joyce, but by Pound, Eliot and others, and forms a foundation for the poetic theory and works of William Carlos Williams, the Objectivist and later Projectivist poets, as well as the group of artists writing in what David Hayman calls the wake of the Wake.

Joyce’s work in this regard is paradigmatic. To his fictional protagonists, words first have an objective and empirical identity. The boy in the story “Sisters” is fascinated by the words “paralysis,” “gnomon,” and “simony,” which “had always sounded strangely” in his ears (D 9). Stephen Dedalus, whom Joyce called a “gentleman wordsharper,” also makes various lexical discoveries, including as a child the word “suck” whose “sound was ugly” (P 11). When we come to Finnegans Wake, however, like Stephen and the boy in the story, we, the readers, are the protagonists and discoverers of linguistic artifacts in the rubble heap of the book. When, for example, in the beginning we are confronted by a thunderword, we cannot help but marvel at the ridiculous thing snaking across the page as if it were alive, having a separate, unlikely existence of its own:

The fall (bababadalgharaghtakamminarvonkonnbronnontuonnthunntrovvarhounawnskawtoohoohoodndernthurnuk!) of a once wallstreet oldparr is retailed early in bed and later on life down through all christian minstrelsy (FW 3).

It is a word gone beserk, an impossible word which insists on its individuality as an aural and visual entity and on its right to exist as a thing, a sound-image which has meaning.

In Finnegans Wake the thunderword is the primordial sound of the Fall of God into his creation, of the fall of Finnegan, the hod carrier, off his ladder, and of humpty dumpty off the wall, events which initiate new cosmic and historical cycles. It is also the primal linguistic stuff of prelapsarian Babel, the divine first substance, Logos. Not only does its strange sound as a word draw attention to its substance and essence, but its visual, printed form is a necessary part of its being. Indeed, Finnegans Wake and many other “verbivocovisual” modern works need to be read with the eyes as well as with the ears.

The tendency in modern literature to treat words as objects is probably grounded as much in the technology of printing as it is in the scientific method of philology; in fact, taking a cue from Marshal McLuhan, it could be argued that the phonetic alphabet and the printing press necessarily had to be invented before the linguistic renaissance could develop. Print makes language an ob-
ject, giving it a visual presence which the artist can exploit. To appreciate much of modern literature, particularly poetry, we as readers must be “abecedminded” (FW 18.17) without being absent minded. We must be attuned to the visual puns and to the physical appearance of the word on the page, as well as to the music of the text. The “alphabittyform” of each thunderword, for example, consists of 100 letters except for the tenth thunderword which has 101 letters, making 1001 letters in all. Letters are the building blocks, the atoms of this linguistic universe, and the total number of them in the thunderwords is symbolic of birth and renewal, for the one thousand and first letter is the beginning of a new millenium, of a new cosmic cycle.

Philology, in addition to enhancing the modern writer’s ontological awareness of words, gave him an awareness of the history and interrelatedness of languages. Comparative and historical linguistics discovered that the genealogy of a word or family of words could frequently be traced to a single source or an a-priori root-word. Through metaphorical process and ordered phonetic change which could be stated in terms of laws, the root metamorphosed into various forms at various times in its descent to the present. Language, as Hugh Kenner has observed, was discovered to be

a complex coherent organism that is no more the sum of its constituent words than a rhinoceros is the sum of its constituent cells, an organism that can maintain its identity as it grows and evolves in time, that can remember, that can anticipate, that can mutate. Latin is not a dead language; everyone in Paris speaks it, everyone in Rome, everyone in Madrid. The poetic of our time grows from this discovery.\(^3\)

Or as the *Wake* puts it: “the sibs speeches of all mankind have foliated . . . from the root of some funner’s stotter” (FW 96).

Though such a discovery seems rather commonplace today, when Joyce was a young man studying Skeat’s *Etymological Dictionary*, it was a vision which had many implications for literature. Because language could be seen as something organic rooted in and growing out of the past, it was testimony to the continuity of human experience. At a time when science and Darwinism seemed to be cutting man away from God and meaningful existence, language was reconnecting him with his past, creating order and meaning for the present.

The language of *Finnegans Wake*, which Shaun calls “root language,” is the artistic embodiment of this second philological insight. It is constructed (though that is too static an image) out of the bricks of etymological root-words. With the Greek word “Bronton” (see note 2) embedded in the thunderword, for example, Joyce is connecting with the ancient world where the Thunderer, Zeus, ruled myth and religion.

Moreover, some of the techniques which Joyce uses to derive the *Wake*’s “root language” or “ur sprogue” are analogous to many of the theoretical processes which occur in the evolution of language. To give one example, Joyce plays with the phonetic law that describes one of the developments of the Celtic languages from proto-Indo-European, namely, the shift from /p/ to /k/, as seen, for example, in the cognate forms for “foot” which are in Latin pes, Greek pous, and Gaelic cos. Hence, the *Wake* word, “quotatoes.” A more involved example is Shaun’s attempt to convert Roman Catholics into proper Irish Catholics by calling them “roman pathoricks” (FW 27.02). Shaun’s word also demonstrates Joyce’s use of the linguistic phenomenon of L/R interchange. That is, he takes “Roman Catholics,” applies the P/K shift to derive “Roman Patholicks,” to which he then applies the L/R interchange rule to arrive at “roman pathoricks.”

Finally, if the word is a thread extending into the past, binding the past to the present, it is also a part of a fabric woven and inter-
woven with the threads of many other words or many other languages. That is, the philologist’s comparative method revealed that all Indo-European languages are interrelated. No language is an island. This awareness recovered for the modern artist some of the lost social and metaphysical coherence he was desperately seeking. Men are united by virtue of their language. In part for this reason, many 20th century writers, particularly Pound, Joyce and Eliot, freely use foreign words and phrases. Pound in the Cantos, for example, borrowed freely from Greek, Latin, French, Provencal, Spanish, Italian, as well as Arabic, Chinese and Egyptian Hieroglyphic languages. One shrinks from making an inventory for Finnegans Wake where such languages as Swahili and Polynesian have been identified. The thunderword, for example, is made up of many foreign words, as well as roots which mean noise and thunder (see note 2). It is an attempt at universality, at connecting all men and nations in a timeless moment.

I have tried here to sketch some of the ideas of the linguistic renaissance which affected one of the more obvious works of linguistic experimentation, a work whose major theme, as Hugh Kenner noted, is language itself. In this sense, Finnegans Wake can provide a key to the further linguistic study of modern literature, as well as to the concept of modernism in literature.

NOTATIONS

1 References to Joyce’s works will be cited parenthetically using the editions and abbreviations noted below:

2 A partial gloss of the thunderword:
   -gharaghtak  Gaelic: gaireachtach = boisterous
   -bronno-    Greek: to thunder
   -bronnton-  Greek: Thunderer, epithet for Zeus
   -ton-       Latin: toto = to thunder
   -tonner-    French: tonner = to thunder
   -skawn-     Gaelic: scan = crack
   -thurnuk-   Gaelic: thornach = thunder