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**JOYCE'S FICTION  
AND  
THE NEW RISE  
OF  
THE NOVEL**

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*edited by  
Franca Ruggieri*

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JOYCE IN THE SHADOW OF WAR AND FASCISM:  
A REVIEW OF *FINNEGANS WAKE* BY MARIO PRAZ  
(1939)

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“Children may just as well play as not.  
The ogre will come in any case”  
(*LIII*: 144)

This essay offers a contextualisation of the reception of *Finnegans Wake* around the time that Britain and France declared war on Germany, when the ogre of totalitarianism was on the rampage in Europe, and when European culture was moving into a state of suspended animation, or taking flight across the Atlantic. It will consider Joyce’s distraught state on the day of that declaration, which related specifically to Lucia, though also more generally to the reception of his book which had appeared in May; it will consider in passing the value of biographical criticism; and it will examine one hostile review which appeared in *La Stampa* in December 1939, written by the great critic Mario Praz.<sup>1</sup> This fascinating review deserves – though it has not received any<sup>2</sup> – attention, especially as questions arise from it: if *Finne-*

<sup>1</sup> A translation of this review appears at the end of this essay in an appendix. I am immensely grateful to Stefano Rosignoli who did the lion’s share of the translation, and also helped with a sense of Praz’s reputation in Italy.

<sup>2</sup> Umberto Eco drew attention to Praz in 2008, focusing on his 1930 ‘Commento a Ulysses’ (which he incorrectly says came out in 1939). See Eco (2009, 253).

*gans Wake*, as Phillippe Sollers later famously described it, was the most formidably anti-fascist book produced between the two wars, then how far might a negative review written in Italy in 1939 express a fascist aesthetic?<sup>3</sup> Did responses to *Finnegans Wake* reflect political divisions of the day? Is it possible for a critical response to be autonomous and isolated from cultural politics? Or do such questions draw on simplistic assumptions about the cultural politics of the time? Praz's review is a place to try out these questions, though it offers no easy answers.

On 3<sup>rd</sup> September 1939, Joyce sent a telegram from the town of La Baule in Brittany to his son Giorgio in Paris. I retain the capitals – that feature of telegrams that ensures their legibility – but offer it in the translation (slightly touched up) from the original French as it appears in the edition of Joyce's letters:

ABSOLUTELY NO PROVISION MADE HERE TO RECEIVE MAISON DE SANTE STOP DELMAS THINKS HE CAN ARRANGE EVENTUALLY IN A WEEK OR FORTNIGHT STOP MEANWHILE LUCIA IS ABANDONED IVRY IN SPITE OF ALL MY ARRANGEMENTS STOP TRY TO GET IN TOUCH WITH THE STAFF OF MAISON WE ARE AT HOTEL ST CRISTOPHE HERE TELEPHONE 21-30 COURAGE GOOD LUCK BABBO(LIII: 454)

The editors of Joyce's *Letters* did not transcribe the time at which this was sent or received, something telegrams normally record. The original being in private hands, it is difficult to check: but the time is of potential interest – did Joyce know, as he dictated the message, that Britain and France were at war with Germany? At 11.15 am, the British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain had announced on the radio that Britain had been at war since 11, when the ultimatum had expired. Did Joyce write this in the morning or evening, before or after the announcement? Was Joyce listening, like most people, to a radio? Have all the “clever hopes expired” yet, as Auden had declared they had al-

<sup>3</sup> Sam Slote (2004, 397).

ready on 1<sup>st</sup> September, or were they just about to? The content of the telegram, in either case, is silent on this matter. Is the silence a sign of Joyce's indifference to the bigger picture, an indifference produced by his sometimes troubling fatalism which knew that "children may just as well play as not. The ogre will come in any case." (LIII: 144)? Or does it simply reflect the efficient concision of telegrams, the enforced brevity of which is a vehicle for wit, condensed impersonality, terse instruction, stoic directness? Joyce knew this genre well, inserting a 'cable' comically into *Finnegans Wake*: "Starving today plays punk opening tomorrow two plays punk wire splosh how two plays punk Cabler" (488.27-28). But if he doesn't yet know, is the message dictated, with a fraught expectation at the end when he bids his son 'COURAGE, GOOD LUCK'? Or can we detect an edge in the urgent tone, anxious about the imminent bombardment of Paris, where Lucia remained? Whatever the answers, the lack of allusion to the day's events has an enigmatic eloquence.

The declaration of war was shocking but came as a surprise to no one. A minority harboured hopes or retained fears of a settlement that might signal yet more appeasement. Among these were the economist John Maynard Keynes and certain dead souls who spoke to Geraldine Cummins, the spiritualist medium for *Psychic News*.<sup>4</sup> The realist Joyce, unimpressed by Chamberlain (see LI: 367), was, I would guess, not among them. Joyce's pessimistic fatalism, as seen in the 1926 letter to Harriet Shaw Weaver, quoted above, is adaptable to the circumstances, since the ogre can be read variously as death, repressive regimes, totalitarianism, war itself. The sentiment provides the narrative line for chapter II.1, the 'Nightgames' of *Finnegans Wake*; Joyce's prophetic realism echoes powerfully in 1939, with the ogre on the rampage; and we have heard echoes of it stomping in 2017.

Joyce's pessimism was uttered not as a warning, however, nor as something to discourage us from play. It says one must ignore the inevitable doom: drink and be merry, though tomorrow we die. Make

<sup>4</sup> Buckland (2005, 435).



music, even though war will come down upon us. Harry Levin (whose review was Joyce's favourite) picked up on this quality of gay abandon – or gay science – when he described *Finnegans Wake* in the autumn of 1939 as gaily proclaiming the millenium, and, in his introductory book, as a “genial proclamation of doom”.<sup>5</sup> Given the powerful expectation of war, preparations were well under way, including, in France, general mobilisation, and the mass evacuation from Paris of children and vulnerable hospital patients, like Joyce's daughter Lucia. Evacuation is the primary explanatory context of the telegram, and sharpens any intuitions we have of Joyce's anxiety. Lucia had, since 1936, been at a *Maison de Santé* just south east of Paris, in Ivry-sur-Seine, run by the relatively liberal psychiatrist, Dr. Francois Achille-Delmas. The plan, once war was declared, was for the building in Ivry to be requisitioned by the State. There were also expectations of air raids (which we now see were exaggerated), and so the patients would have to be evacuated. Joyce seems to have been told that this would happen the minute that mobilization of troops in France began – which was on 1<sup>st</sup> September. Joyce had thus arrived at La Baule in advance, had been waiting there anxiously, and was now furious to find no Lucia, believing her ‘abandoned’. The evacuation from Ivry was perhaps delayed because Delmas had not found a suitable place for his patients, or because it was proving tricky to organise a fleet of cars to move the patients, or because the sense of urgency had subsided (LI: 407). To Joyce it seemed Delmas was irresponsibly breaking a promise; but I suspect Joyce had misunderstood what must have been provisional plans for the evacuation, and by turning up in advance had over-reacted. In any case he is allowing little leeway for the complexity of the situation, which was typical of him at the time.

Indeed, as Geert Lernout has shown, Joyce's letters of this period – many waiting to be published – were anxious in the extreme: he was impatient, irritable, bordering on paranoid and tyrannical, as he blamed everyone, except himself and his family, for any perceived

<sup>5</sup> Levin (1939, 460) and Levin (1941, 121).

problem or slight – even such devoted friends as Harriet Shaw Weaver and Paul Léon.<sup>6</sup> The trials of his children, the labour of completing *Finnegans Wake*, his vulnerable health, his drinking, had all been taking their toll. And so too was the underwhelming critical response to *Finnegans Wake* which had come out four months before in May.

Lucia would finally arrive, with other patients, on 11<sup>th</sup> September, and be safely installed, as planned, with other patients at a hotel in Pornichet, just next to La Baule.<sup>7</sup> Joyce would remain – at the St Christophe hotel – for over a month, before returning to Paris. He may have visited occasionally at weekends but it is possible this was the last time he saw her. At Christmas he moved to be near Maria Jolas at St-Gérand-le-Puy near Vichy. Travel across France was challenging, especially after the fall of France in June 1940, and, after he'd gone to Switzerland in December, Joyce could not affect a transit visa for her. She stayed at Pornichet till 1951, when she was transferred to Northampton in the UK.

Even if critics accept the idea that biography can be relevant to the works of an author (after all, some do not, though I am willing to make a case for it), this vignette and my analysis, might seem to bear little or no relevance to Joyce's works, since all of it post-dates the appearance of his last work, *Finnegans Wake*. I'm dwelling on it for a number of reasons, however.

First, it's not exactly true that *Finnegans Wake* was finished. As he was writing from Brittany to Giorgio, a copy of the unbound sheets of *Finnegans Wake* were, as Joyce had requested, winging their way from Faber & Faber in London to Paris, care of Paul Léon. Joyce had yet to correct the first flawed edition, something he wouldn't get around to for another few months. He was however filling in a notebook (VI.B.48), as if developing ideas for a new novel – or unable to alter his habitual practices. We tend to think of the publication date of *Finnegans Wake* as May 1939, that it was completed before the war,

<sup>6</sup> Lernout (2013, 3-32).

<sup>7</sup> Bowker (2012 512).

giving it a particular symbolic valency. But what appeared in May was botched in several – though very minor – ways. Joyce not only corrected, but also altered the first edition. They are indeed different texts, which you can think of as in series to each other or in parallel. An example of their difference: a question in the 1939 text is turned, in 1940, into an exclamation, as if the latter seems to be answering the former: “The sweetest song in all the world?” asked the first edition, receiving the echoing answer: “The sweetest song in all the world!”<sup>8</sup> Uncertainty is transformed, as if scorning the mixed reviews, into an assertive confidence. So *Finnegans Wake* is not strictly an inter-war text: its composition was still – *just* – taking place against the backdrop of a major war in Europe. The war, moreover, prevented the corrections being inserted into the published version of the text for several years.<sup>9</sup> So this period remains part of the compositional context of *Finnegans Wake*, and its publication history.

Secondly, the work does not of course stop at publication: it continues in its reception, and also in an author’s responses to that reception, responses which are themselves shaped by the author’s situation. We can describe these exchanges between critics and authors as *annexes* of the text. One critically prominent expression for this position appears as “readers write texts”; *Finnegans Wake* has its own version: “his producers are they not his consumers?” (497.01-02). In September 1939, we remain in that period when there are still dialogues between Joyce and his readers, still loops that will only be interrupted by death. I consider these textual “annexes”, in which responses can potentially still affect revisions to the text, as primary contexts because of the author’s involvement. The subsequent loops between readers and readers we can consider as secondary contexts. A good example is Joyce’s correction of “blunders” made by Edmund Wilson in his hasty review for ‘The New Republic’, June 1939 (LI: 405). The genealogy of interpretations of the completed *Finnegans Wake* was in

<sup>8</sup> Fordham (2002, 48).

<sup>9</sup> They were incorporated first in Faber’s 1950 edition. See Slote and Crispi (2007, 493).

its early stages. In spite of the impact on subsequent readings, I'm separating from this genealogy such early responses as 'Exagmination...', because they were responding to an unfinished work. Biography is crucial to help construct these annexes to the text. Alongside Joyce's anxiety about Lucia, close beneath it, this vignette gives a window into a period when Joyce was depressed about the reception of *Finnegans Wake*. In letters at the time his responses to the reviews look like someone clutching at straws. Gone are the confident moods, alternating between excitement and indifference in his responses to the banning of *Ulysses*. Some reviews must have confirmed his opinions of the philistine readers, and the philistine times; but others, including negative reviews like the one by Mario Praz, which it is quite possible he read (see LI: 408), would have come as a bitter blow. It is, admittedly, not at all easy to assert clear links between Joyce's amendments and the reception of the book, or the world now at war. But this is itself significant: the amendments were made according to rules established within the world of the book. Joyce kept the world outside it at arm's length.

Thirdly, the anxiety about Lucia is an important, if painful, context for *Finnegans Wake* in general, both to its composition and, as we see increasingly, its interpretations. Lucia within the *Wake* has become an extraordinarily fertile field for scholarly and, in particular, creative responses. It is well known that, as Joyce's work on the *Wake* faltered, so too did Lucia's dancing career. The *Wake*'s uneven composition and his daughter's uneven development ran alongside each other, especially in the 1930s. In Joyce's mind – the developing young woman, the developing text, and her developing illness became co-eval. Joyce indulged in magical thinking – by completing the book he believed Lucia would be cured.<sup>10</sup> As long as he was writing it and she was unwell, both he and the book seemed cursed (see LI: 403). It was as if he'd struck a deal with the world to write a visionary book: but he would lose his daughter as an unintended consequence. In this he

<sup>10</sup> Potts, (1979, 209).

resembles the mythic fathers Agamemnon and Jephthah who achieved their worldly desires, but sacrificed their daughters in the process. As I've written elsewhere, a tragic line is scored across Joyce's original intention of a cyclical 'comic book'. Now that, in 1939, that book was abroad, taking the air as it were – at a time when the air was a threatening place – she was still not better, still institutionalized. His hopes for the book's reception, for Lucia's recovery, and for contributing to the latter – were simultaneously dashed. And while he was able to devote himself to Lucia's care, for a while, Lucia eventually seemed to be healthier without him there.<sup>11</sup> The tragedy of Lucia's life and Joyce's family life, was still playing out in this telegram to Giorgio, nor is its impatient tone entirely detachable from moments in the *Wake*, that "paroxysm of wroughtness" as Beckett called it. For the reader oriented towards Joyce's biography, his expressions in and outside the *Wake* come together as continuations and adaptations of each other. Perhaps a writer's *mood*, their personality even, are relevant contexts for a work, even when finished. Though in stark contrast to theories of impersonal art, I would be willing to argue for it. It is a complicated, provocative, and, even after the historical turn, still an unfashionable suggestion. But I will leave it for another day, as, like Stephen Dedalus, I'm not sure I believe my own theory.

Fourthly, and finally, I dwell on this telegram, because it contributes in a small way to a research project I am working on: an examination of cultural life in Britain and of British citizens, or of people resident in Britain, or networked with British culture – at a particular moment of shock – the declaration of war, the day this telegram was sent, which, in England and France, happened to be a bright and very warm Sunday. This telegram, which gives us a direct insight into Joyce's activities on that day, will form one piece in a mosaic of multiple vignettes detailing the activities of many cultural figures. As well as the usual suspects from the period (Orwell, Woolf, Eliot, Waugh), the study examines Brits abroad (Auden, Isherwood, Huxley, Britten,

<sup>11</sup> Bowker, 517.

Bertrand Russell, Wyndham Lewis, Alfred Hitchcock) and emigrés or visitors in Britain (Freud, Mondrian, Stefan Zweig, Anais Nin).

I am also aiming to see how far the days around that moment can be presented as a hinge or fulcrum on which people's lives and their cultural production swung or turned. Many shifted ideologically from individualism to patriotism; from pacifism to militarism (A.A. Milne); from supporting Soviet Communism, to supporting liberal capitalist democracy (Rex Warner). Others held on doggedly to their Fascist or Stalinist or pacifist standpoints. Tastes shifted also. Some did not change – Joyce amongst them, even though his life was affected for the worse. I want to examine especially how experimental art and its consumption were threatened by the priorities of a war effort, which demanded practical and instrumentalised arts, a clarity of general expression for what was perceived as the good of the broader community - in short, propaganda. Around the day of the declaration, cultural production and consumption were restricted (in the big cities theatres and cinemas were shut down, radio stations and the new TV service came off air; publishers soon found that paper was rationed). The war effort and preparations for it quietly and subtly undermined experiment, complexity, difficulty, subversion in the arts, and all those forms of art that demand time for their consumption and enjoyment, or that say little immediately about the concerns of supposed 'relevance' to people: this threatened the reception of Joyce's last work, and creative responses to it.

With this project, I am aiming to see in more detail how this ending or pause or suspension occurs, whether 'modernism' and the 'avant-garde' unravelled. Or whether, on the contrary, it held together, but went into hibernation, where it sought a way to survive and reappear in a new form after the hiatus of war, with its unpredictable duration, its disturbing violence, with the State's expectations of dutiful contributions. Beckett is perhaps the paradigm of this survival. His war period in France can be seen as a form of incubation for a nascent late modernist.

The fact of war and of imminent war, had a colossal impact on the early reception of *Finnegans Wake*. In Europe, it was a terrible

time to produce a vast avant-garde novel. The dominant taste with respect to new cultural forms was for first hand social realism (Mass Observation, for example) or documentary accounts of mounting horror from war zones around the globe (Spain or China). In the United States, however this trend was noticeably less advanced, and humanities departments at American universities were able to shore up a 'pure' approach to literature that was shortly – in 1941 – to be announced as the 'New Criticism'. Along with many modernist canvases, *Finnegans Wake* found "a way a lone" across the Atlantic. This assisted the establishment of Joyce studies in the U.S., and determined the U.S. as the home of Joyce Studies. Fulsome reviews and early studies of *Finnegans Wake* all came out in the States – beginning in 1939 with important pieces by Edmund Wilson, Harry Levin, John Crowe Ransom, then *The Skeleton Key* (1946), and, eventually, Adaline Glasheen's *Census* (1956). In the States, there was institutional support for this kind of work and fewer people were going off to war. As a contrasting example, Anthony Burgess, a Master's student at Manchester University, went off to train for the army in 1940, with, apparently, a copy of *Finnegans Wake* in his kitbag.<sup>12</sup> If he'd been in America, he might have made a start on a PhD on Joyce. Elizabeth Bowen describes the cultural atmosphere in Britain most sharply in a piece for the Dublin journal *The Bell* written shortly after Joyce's death:

Wartime England is in a state of reaction against what seems to her febrile or over-cerebral: she has only room, now, for the primary feelings, for plain speech and properly drilled thought.<sup>13</sup>

Bowen called on Ireland to take on Joyce as one of their own. Though not at war, Ireland was also strapped in terms of resources, and still had problems with Joyce. It would take decades for Bowen's call to be heard, at least at the institutional level.

<sup>12</sup> Biswell (2005, 77).

<sup>13</sup> Walshe (2011, 75).

The broad case for this argument – and for other consequences – is well known, but I suggest there is much more work to be done in the nitty gritty of detail around the reception of *Finnegans Wake*, especially in the complex context of cultural politics, and its role in emerging attitudes to the avant-garde. Material in archives is also beginning to show that the public expression of a critic in a review might well be at odds from their private expression in letters or diaries.<sup>14</sup>

The response in Europe, not including Britain and Ireland, was particularly distressing for Joyce (LIII: 463). It appears that there were only a couple of reviews in Germany which is hardly surprising, but also only two apiece in France (by Jacques Mercanton and Georges Pelorson) and in Italy, even though he had lived in both those countries.<sup>15</sup> Of the Italian reviews, one, by Salvatore Rosati, was positive and the other, by Mario Praz, negative. These early reviews of *Finnegans Wake* are fascinating because, unlike readers today, the reviewers were working with so little, by and large lost in the wood of Joyce's words, and guided or alienated by such critical works as had appeared. I want to focus on the negative Italian review, partly because of the occasion of this conference, but also because it has, as noted, received very little attention, in spite of being an extraordinary review. Its writer, Mario Praz, was a brilliant critic. Since he was key in establishing Comparativist Literary Studies in Italy, had taught Giorgio Melchiori and Franca Ruggieri, it could be argued, that without him, the annual Joyce Conference in Italy might not be taking place.

Praz's review appeared on 2<sup>nd</sup> December 1939, in *La Stampa*, the Turin newspaper for which Praz wrote a regular thousand-word review roughly once a month. 'L'Ultimo Joyce' – a translation of which appears below in an Appendix – appeared alongside a photo in Finland of crowds "under the menace of war." The Soviet Union had just invaded. When the Finns were winning Joyce famously declared that 'The Finn again wakes' as if his book had prophesied their victory

<sup>14</sup> For example Louis Gillet's private response to E.R. Curtius. See Bénéjam (2011, 745-50).

<sup>15</sup> See Lernout and Van Mierlo (2009) and Deming (1970).



(for a while), and the victory was a correct reading of the book, and a part of its reception (LIII: 464).

By 1939, Praz was already a well-established critic after a groundbreaking, and still dazzlingly insightful study of Romanticism called *La carne, la morte e il diavolo nella letteratura romantica* in 1930 (from which Beckett, we know, took notes), translated as *The Romantic Agony* in 1951.<sup>16</sup> In 1934, he was made Professor of Literature at “La Sapienza” in Rome, with the involvement of Giovanni Gentile (known as the ‘Philosopher of Fascism’). In 1939 Praz published an important study of imagery in 17<sup>th</sup> century poetry, showing an enduring affiliation to T.S. Eliot. He also wrote short articles for *La Stampa* in August, October and November 1939, which covered works about Emily Dickinson and Walter Pater. He wrote about Freud’s death in October for *La Prospettiva*. August he took off, so no article appeared around the time of the declaration of war. I suspect he was beginning to research for his Joyce review, which appeared in December.<sup>17</sup>

Praz’s review looks like one of the most negative responses to *Finnegans Wake* from the time, and this might explain why it has never surfaced within Joycean circles. We might call it ‘ogre-ish’. I want to present the review briefly, before trying to examine its relation to its moment through the lens of ideology, with hostilities breaking out across Europe, and totalitarian ogres in the ascendant. I recommend the reader now turns to the Appendix to read the review.

Through the title ‘L’Ultimo Joyce’, Praz implies Joyce is writing himself off to a mythical edge of the map: to Ultima Thule, beyond which there is only an icy blankness. This might seem like a compliment, conjuring courageous explorations of extremity, voyages to the void in a sublime Mallarméan way. But we soon discover it is not: Joyce should in fact be punished for writing *Finnegans Wake*, in a Dantean Inferno. He has abused Art, which – quoting Dante’s Virgil –

<sup>16</sup> Ackerley (2002).

<sup>17</sup> See list of publications in Vittorio (1996).

Praz tells us is God's nephew. Praz, adopting an exalted position, is unable to hold back this heavy Shaun-like judgement of the artist-as-abuser, and has not noticed that such a judgement is already caricatured in the book itself. The denunciation sounds a particularly harsh note in a review that, while negative, is also often playfully over-articulate. In his conclusion, by contrast, Praz seems to strike a sympathetic note: Joyce wrote the book as a therapeutic response to his blindness and his isolation. Grounds for mercy may appear here, but these are for Praz further signs of Joyce's self-engrossment. In this reworking, he chose to extend his criticism of Joyce's message, describing it as a "metaphysical nihilism". He sees neither joy nor affirmation in Joyce.

What little content Praz glimpses in *Finnegans Wake* is "invercondo" or "indecent". And perhaps with this as an alibi, he moves on quickly to the material level of the word. His own wit identifies a degree of fun in the wordplay, but he piles up examples to emphasise how Joyce pushed his point too far. Joyce's wordplay is for Praz trivial, which might be forgivable except that it is unrelenting in its triviality. His close focus rejects the gestalt interpretations of the book which appeared in what he describes cynically as the "sales pitch" provided by Joyce's circle. So Praz denies the possibility of some unifying intellectual content to the book: that it is for instance a night book, that it retells a myth of riverine civilisation, that it's structure is Viconian. Praz has done his homework, presumably through the Faber reprints of the 'Exagmination...' volume (1936) and Budgen's *Making of 'Ulysses'* (1937). He is hostile to such schemes because of what he sees as their idealism. Praz was hostile in general to idealism and especially to its advocates like Benedetto Croce, with whom he'd had a feud some years before.<sup>18</sup> "Vico" might well have been a red light for Praz since Croce was perhaps the most significant proponent of Vico's writings at the time.

This explains for me the most striking of Praz's images for de-

<sup>18</sup> Wellek, 256-7.

scribing *Finnegans Wake*, which is “quella specie di orario delle ferrovie della Luna” – “this kind of timetable for railways on the moon”, a good line of surrealist poetry, its form in part determined by the restricted position he takes. There is no middle ground in Praz’s approach to the book: he denigrates the text from close-up, and denies any distant readings. There is no acknowledgement that there might be meaning at the level of the sentence, story, character, or theme. Seeing Joyce – mistakenly in my view – in a tradition of nihilism, he denies the possibility of affirmation. He is perhaps too shocked by whatever meanings he manages to gather beyond the harmless wordplay to look any further. His classicism is of a prudish kind.

It is also of the kind which identifies traditions, and great exponents of traditions. Praz is exceptionally erudite, dazzles with allusions to a huge range of writers, and clearly sees Joyce’s connections or at least relations to the traditions they embody: he alludes to futurists, Dante, Shakespeare, Laforgue, Max Ernst, Lewis Carroll, Milton. But in each case, the comparison is negative: Joyce is degenerate alongside them, even when they were limited in the first place. Joyce marks, for Praz, an outer limit of experimentation, a warning sign of where not to go, or the point where you end up if you follow a certain route – what we now call the modernist route – to its inevitable end. He repeats this in a review of English Literature in April 1940, with Italy on the point of joining war: *Finnegans Wake* is “the utterly delinquent liquidation of half a century of symbolist, decadent and futurist experimentation.”<sup>19</sup>

Praz sees Joyce in terms of literary history, but not in terms of contemporary history. He is not concerned about whether – or how – the *Wake* speaks to its own time, to what extent it is a “genial proclamation of doom”, as it was for Harry Levin. Relevance is not relevant. And doom – what doom? There may be a doom of culture, but not for European politics. The avoidance of such allusion is one way in which

<sup>19</sup> ‘Clima letterario inglese d’oggi. *Il Popolo di Roma*, 16<sup>th</sup> April 1940. Reprinted in *Cronache Letterarie Anglosassoni*, II, (Roma: Ed. di Storia e Letteratura, 1951), p. 64.

Praz avoids potential political content. Praz tended to judge style in art, protecting classical values of clarity, beauty, balance, respect for tradition, and detachment. He also reintroduced the term '*horror vacui*' as his way of understanding the clutter of 19<sup>th</sup> century interiors in the context of 19<sup>th</sup> century poetry.<sup>20</sup> It is assumed that he criticized this principle from a modernist perspective of pure clean lines. And yet he was an avid collector of 19<sup>th</sup> century antiques and paintings, and his apartment in Rome, now the extraordinary Museo Mario Praz, seems rather to *embody* this aesthetic, than resist it. It is instructive to put this alongside the dense detailed lettristic texture of *Finnegans Wake* for it too, modelled as it is on the intricate illuminations of the Book of Kells, seems to express a *horror vacui*. *Horror vacui* can be expressed, and its muddle neutralised, through an intense patterning and ordering: Praz, presumably thought *Finnegans Wake* was chaotic.

But was Praz's apolitical stance developed out of a cautious desire for self-preservation? He makes an effort to find puns on Italian material and smiles at the operatic allusions in Joyce, but he misses Joyce's allusion to Mussolini and his War in Abyssinia skewered by Joyce in the words "Minuscolini" (226.15) and "his coglional expansion" (488.31). The avoidance of politics can mark a stubborn and righteous refusal to surrender to a dominant discourse which determines 'relevance'. But it can also signal, implicitly or accidentally, an accommodation of those who would prefer the cultural field to be silent about the political. These alternatives leave me with the riddle, relevant to my project about shifting cultural politics around war's declaration: is there a political allegiance in this review, and if so what is it? How far does its lack of political alignment reflect and respect Italian neutrality at the time? Or might the expression of allegiance be unimportant, the goal of a game that only critics play, having even less political impact than the original art works and their critics ever had? To ask the questions is perhaps more important than finding definitive answers. But to pursue the answers one needs to know Praz's relation

<sup>20</sup> Praz, 1970, 172.

to fascism. Informally, I have gathered a variety of views about this: that he was in no way a fascist; that he was a kind of fascist; that he was a covert fascist; that he had no politics. It is quite murky, and, in the context of Italian cultural history, it seems controversial, contested. Perhaps it explains why Praz is known for having the ‘malocchio’ or evil eye, so to mention Praz’s name is taboo, its utterance bringing bad luck. The curse reflects there being something anomalous and questionable about the survival of this aesthete into the 1980s. The review itself has nothing explicitly political in it. However, it is perhaps an obscurely coded review, with its allusions to Virgil and Dante – complex figures for Italian national identity, and to futurism, a cultural cornerstone for fascism. ‘Futurism’ is for Praz ‘white magic’ in comparison with Joyce’s ‘black magic’. How might ideas of racial purity enter this colour-coding? Has Joyce corrupted the futurist legacy, or is this its inevitable outgrowth? The review is moreover polylogic, adopting voices and a variety of positions. We could read the code in a number of ways, detect tongue-in-cheek irony, perhaps unintentional ambiguity, a sub-text working in the opposite direction. Praz pulls out the stops for this review – he is clearly in awe of Joyce.

We may return to view things from Phillippe Sollers’ perspective in 1975, as located above, that *Finnegans Wake* is the most formidably anti-fascist book of the inter-war period. The judgment is attractive for those fans of *Finnegans Wake* who happen also to be anti-fascist (presumably a vast majority): it’s excellent branding. And if Sollers is correct, then to attack *Finnegans Wake*, as Praz did, is to contribute to the fascist culture war. There are indeed instances of fascists disliking *Finnegans Wake* – Ezra Pound, for example. And there are few instances of fascists who admired *Finnegans Wake* – though one of the French reviewers, Pelorson, became a collaborator in occupied France.<sup>21</sup> The binaristic thinking of ‘pro-’ and ‘anti-’, of being with us or against us seems simple and effective. But it also resembles the attitude of Mrs. Mooney in ‘The Boarding House’ in *Dubliners*

<sup>21</sup> See Giroud, 2000.

who “dealt with moral problems as a cleaver deals with meat”. And that is questionable. Sollers simplifies, but is simplistic. ‘Fascism’ had become easy crude shorthand by the 1970s. But Fascism within Italy in the 1930s had many shades, and it is a totalitarian gesture towards the past not to appreciate its proper nuance. Moreover, if Sollers were right about the anti-fascist qualities of Joyce’s last work, we might have to accept that, as such, it achieved nothing and was hopelessly ineffective.

I want to give Praz the benefit of the doubt: he bravely committed himself to art and seems to have followed the logic of the aestheticist’s position. This justifies the separation of the artistic from the political on certain firm and not unreasonable grounds: the artwork’s meaning is contingent; what little power it may have – through its reception – is hardly relevant to actual politics, which unfold in a different administrative regime. This might all seem irresponsible to the ideological critic of culture, and it might underestimate the power of art to shape discourse, which resists dominant discourse. But in his focus on art, Praz is protecting certain forms of life and expression. He might have been wrong about *Finnegans Wake*, but it’s childish to point a finger at someone and say that therefore, they’re sympathetic to fascism. The protection of the aesthetic is a huge responsibility. *Finnegans Wake* might appear retrospectively as profoundly anti-fascist, but at the time it was not yet sufficiently iconic for it to be enlisted in one cause or another: its capacity to be interpreted politically was limited by its status as an enigma. This uncertainty makes the critical positioning around this time of cultural stagnation and political upheaval, all the more interesting. These arguments about politics and culture keep returning, they go round and round, and are unresolved in the end. They are perhaps a form of play, and to be defended as play: “We may as well play as not”, even if, after all, “The ogre will come in any case.”

## Appendix

### “Ultima Joyce”

*Ultima Joyce*, as we say *ultima Thule*, a literary Finisterre, beyond which nothing remains but the immaculate Arctic spaces of the blank page. *Finnegans Wake* (London, 1939), of more than six hundred pages blamelessly printed, which I borrowed from a friend who in turn had received it as a gift from the author himself, and who had not even had the strength to cut its pages, will remain, surely will remain in literary histories, as the extreme example of something, as the ultimate stage of a movement which in its first youthful steps was called ‘futurist’.

The naïve *chimismi lirici* of a quarter of a century ago, the verbal white magic, so transparent, of our avant-garde writers, what cheerful and mild things they seem to be next to this shady black magic, this sinister art of Joycean equivocation, whose meaning, when it is glimpsed, is for most of the time shameless!

This artist, who once was great, has been ruminating, for seventeen years, on this enormous cryptogram, and may truly be said to have touched bottom, or rather, in the English fashion, to have touched Bottom, to have brought to the sublime, by persisting in verbal witchcraft, the art of the bloomer that Bottom in *Midsummer Night’s Dream* is revealed to possess in its raw, primitive state.

To get hold of the wrong end of the stick for more than six hundred dense pages, this is what Joyce has proposed to himself, and because he has not taken his proposition as a joke, but as the occupation worthy of a poet, as a message capable of being communicated to men, then it is incontestable that a place in Dante’s Inferno awaits him, for having abused art - God’s nephew.

An abuse, on the other hand, for which he is the first to pay the price; the superb tower that Joyce has striven to build for years and years, is literally a Babel, the incomprehensible Babel, to whose lingo God brought confusion: *Work in Progress*, as he called this work during its gestation, now reveals itself, complete (but how can it be considered complete when the last word is an article, *the*, not followed by any punctuation, but by the white space of an un-limited potential ex-

pansion?), is no more nor less than a paradigm for the confusion of tongues.

They want the subject of this book to be the night of man, that one of the “most beautiful” parts depicts the myth of river civilization, the name of Giambattista Vico is whispered as the thinker who provides the philosophical substrate for the work: all are rumors circulated in part by Joyce himself, in part by his immediate circle in the form of an impressive sales pitch.

But let’s content ourselves by examining from out of the book not the hypothetical projections onto the astral plane, but the verbal cell, the word, the phrase. I have said that, after all, the author of *Finnegans Wake* is a brother, though infinitely more complex, of Bottom. In this way, if you like, Joyce can be brought alongside Shakespeare, the Shakespeare of equivocations and word plays, which is certainly not the best part of him.

Except that where Bottom spoke out of a pretentious ignorance, Joyce speaks as an amateur philologist, one for whom the knowledge of many languages has made his head spin, so that, rather than applying himself to try to decipher Etruscan, he began himself to create a new indecipherable Etruscan.

So, let’s take a minimal verbal cell of this cryptogram, and let’s choose an Italian phrase, since, among the many languages that contribute to the creation of this sort of lunar railway timetable that is *Finnegans Wake*, there is Italian too. Simple examples: *La Colunnia è un Vermicelli*; *Ragazza Ladra*. We remember that Joyce for a time was devoted to *bel canto*, and we smile.

A bit more complex: *Mortadartarella*. The word, which recalls, in the first instance, “mortadella”, contains not donkey meat, but no less than two literary works, the *Morte d’Arthur* and the Ossianic *Dartthula*. One does not struggle to recognize, in this cynegetic and sylvan group of words: *Mesdaims*, *Marmouselles*, *Mescerfs!* *Silvapais!*, and beyond the deers, stags, marmosets (from the French *marmouset*, “grotesque figure”), and a town made out of wood (a quasi-*Silvaplana*), we see a banal: *Mesdames*, *Mesdemoiselles*, *Messieurs*, *s’il vous plait*.



And there is a lot of fun to be had writing *Libelulous! Inzanzarity!* which stuffs the Italian word *libellule* ["dragonflies"] and *zanzare* ["mosquitoes"] into the two English words: libellous ("defamatory", a word whose etymology is shared with "dragonfly": the Latin *libellum*) and insincerity; or calling *teargarten* the German *Tiergarten* (as if it were: "garden of tears"); or disguising under *Marmarazalles from Marmeniere* the *Mademoiselle of Armentières* – that popular song from the other war; or, through a sound-association between *baby* and *Babylon*, converting into nursery rhyme the famous Psalm 136 or putting in the mouth of a harlot this semi-Spanish corruption of *pulvis et umbra sumus* ["we are dust and shadows"]: *pelves ad hombres sumus*; or reading in *haphazard* ("randomly") two names of London department stores, Hope Brothers and Harrods, to make, *hopeharrods*.

All this, taken individually, can be amusing, as it can be amusing to find in Laforgue a sporadic *sangsuelle*, or *violupté*, just as the daring and erudite *collages* of Max Ernst are amusing, but, like any good game, it aims to last for just a short time, whereas here it goes on relentlessly for more than six hundred pages. I cannot say that I read these six hundred pages with the same interest with which I have read the humorous *Hunting of the Snark*, the incomparable nonsense poem by Lewis Carroll, for the simple reason that *Finnegans Wake* is, on the whole, unreadable.

Although reading the book has been useful for something, if not to me, then to my wife, for while I was reading aloud a certain passage, hearing the words *apple harlottes*, she emitted a scream: "My pudding!" and had to run to the kitchen, where not exactly an apple charlotte (deformed by Joyce by contaminating it with "harlot", "whore"), but a similar kind of dessert had been cooking for too long.

And people have thought of Rabelais, whom one of our eminent philologists would believe is immortal for his contribution to language, but not for his art, as art and poetry should form a "delicacy of feeling", and of such a soggy thing, well really, no trace can be found in Rabelais, nor for that matter in Joyce; and as for the contribution to language, it is very doubtful whether that blend of erudite and dialectal elements which Rabelais attained has been attained by Joyce, at

that level that is infinitely more abstruse and abundant in claims to musicality.

And one might even recall Milton, for Joyce, coming to lose his sight like the poet of *Paradise Lost*, in a similar fashion came to concentrate on pure sound, has become more and more oriented towards an auricular exclusivism. These were the sounds that delighted the ear of Milton:

By knights of Logres, or of Lyones,  
Lancelot, or Pelleas, or Pellenore...

And Joyce (to choose one example out of thousands):

Hear, O hear, Iseult la belle! Tristan, sad hero, hear! The Lambeg drum, the Lambog reed, the Lumbag fifer, the Limibig brazenaze.

What can a well-tuned set of syllables not achieve if uttered by a musical voice –whatever the chord of syllables may be. Perhaps *Finnegans Wake* is nothing but a run-on lullaby with which this restless man, whose eyes are almost sealed to the world, soothes his own loneliness.

1939

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