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## BOOK REVIEWS

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**Donald Phillip Verene, James Joyce  
and the Philosophers at *Finnegans Wake*.  
Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press,  
2016. 152 pp. \$34.95**

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That reading Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* is an extremely difficult endeavor is common knowledge – it arises spontaneously from the very first acquaintance with the book. Therefore, everyone making the effort to join the club of connoisseurs of complicated literature is faced with the challenge: how to deal with *Finnegans Wake*? First, of course, is the question: why do we need to make an effort?

I've tried to read this book several times for different reasons. First time was out of snobbery – I was studying philosophy and made a show of knowing about deeper levels of reality, so somebody gave me *Finnegans Wake* as a gift, believing in my ability to understand what it was all about. I tried and failed; it made me just impatient and I could not even get through the first ten pages. Then, for my part, I passed it on, giving it to a friend who translated English and American literature and claimed to be one of the best educated in the field. I wouldn't say he was very happy about it, because afterwards he never uttered a word about Joyce, at least not in my presence and to my knowledge.

My second attempt came much later: after reading a comparison between Carroll's linguistic play and Joyce's use of language in his last book. However, the attempt proved futile again: a familiarity with and liking for Lewis Carroll's puns and his playing with portmanteau words wasn't basis enough to appreciate Joyce's ... how to put it... Unbearable linguistic sumptuousness?

Joyce's *Wake* language is a work of art in itself – even the single words disclose constellations of meanings, provoking associations by the very manner of writing them. That is why I considered a joke the alleged claim ascribed to Beckett, that he had written some fragments of

*Finnegans Wake* under dictation by Joyce, while working as his private secretary. I think that such a statement might be taken at face value only by people who never tried to read the book. Beckett could not seriously think that anybody would be able to write even a single sentence of this book under dictation. Beckett's contribution to the famous collection of essays on Joyce's forthcoming *Work in Progress*, as *Finnegans Wake* was then known, *Our Exagmination Round His Factification for Incamination of Work in Progress*, states that the words in *Finnegans Wake* have to be looked to and listened to, because "his writing is not about something, it is the thing itself." Joyce had to write and certainly did so, every single word himself, no matter that he was nearly blind while finishing the book.

One has then to perceive the language in *Finnegans Wake* as a work of art. That much I understood. I could even somehow grasp the atmosphere, but the book again overwhelmed me and I could not see the sense of putting so much effort into an activity that depressed me more than it gave me pleasure. Joyce was far too idiosyncratic for me.

Now I am on my third try to "crack" the book. Professor Verene's work *James Joyce and the Philosophers at Finnegans Wake* gave me the boost, because it offers a key. A very complicated one – it turns out that in order to understand Joyce's last work, you need some close familiarity with the history of philosophy. Donald Phillip Verene certainly does. He is Charles Howard Candler Professor of Metaphysics and Moral Philosophy at the prestigious Emory College of Arts and Sciences in Atlanta, Georgia. He is also Director of the Institute for Vico Studies. I suppose that it is his capacity as a Vico expert that makes Verene such a fluent Joyce scholar. Understanding *Finnegans Wake* through philosophy and mainly through Vico's work is actually following Joyce's advice. Joyce, who knew Italian and claimed to be influenced by Vico's *La Scienza nuova*, often recommended reading Vico.

Of course, some may argue that Joyce was just making one of his jokes, being a kind of literary jester. One could even argue that the whole book is but a complicated joke. However, such a view leads to the lazy conclusion that there is no point to probe any deeper and try to reach behind the linguistic twists. There are people, like me, who, far from being experts in literature, are moved by intellectual curiosity and would want to discover at least the reasons for the worldwide fame of Joyce's last book. Snobbery would be another easy, but highly insuffi-

cient explanation. Joyce might have played to the snobbish reader, but all this play occurs on the basis of a huge amount of theoretical knowledge. This fact overrules another easy explanation of Joyce's book, that it was written and composed as a stream of consciousness. However, this assumption could be considered just a simplification and cannot get the reader beyond some false conclusions about the author.

Beckett obviously believed that some knowledge of Vico was necessary for the proper understanding of the sense and the meaning of *Finnegans Wake*. But Verene goes further. He follows all the philosophical tendencies in *Finnegans Wake*, mainly but not exclusively in the light of Vico's ideas about language, poetics and the development of knowledge and sensitivity.

I am not sure if Joyce had wanted to follow Vico's periodization of history, and if he had added a fourth period to the theocratic, heroic and humanistic ones. I do not know if the book mirrors some views of Giordano Bruno, or some other Renaissance thinkers. I am inclined to trust Verene's philosophical expertise, whose conscientious work on Joyce deserves every respect, but my gratitude for his investigation lies in his having provided a persuasive answer to my initial question about the point of reading such an enigmatic literary work.

There is no doubt that the language of *Finnegans Wake* is an artwork in itself, but there is something even more interesting. Verene helped me realize that Joyce's last book can be regarded as an intellectual puzzle. And the key to this puzzle is Vico's interdisciplinary conception of knowledge.

Now I am again on my way through the pages of *Finnegans Wake*. It is too soon to say that I'll happily reach the end, which as we know even without having read the book, is its beginning. My reason to be optimistic this time is that I now have a reliable guide, Donald Phillip Verene's *James Joyce and the Philosophers at Finnegans Wake*, a work that not only shows the way to a deeper understanding of this forbidding text, but also provides an excellent example of patience and precision, a valuable scholarly quality.