

Finnegans Wake in Ricardo Piglia's La ciudad ausente

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Abstract: *Ricardo Piglia writes his fiction as an answer to the “fiction” of the monologic official discourse of the State, and from this definitively historical and ideological position, faces the issue of Argentine cultural and literary identity with a self reflexive narrative whose meaning is built mainly through an intertextual poetics. In this context, Finnegans Wake is assimilated and transformed in La ciudad ausente (1992) as a homage to James Joyce. This article aims at showing how this work is achieved through a montage based on a metaphorical isotopy whose main analogy is the syntax used in both novels. It also proposes an approach to Piglia's novel as an interpretation and explanation of Finnegans Wake through fictional discourse, as a commentary on Finnegans Wake, to show how the bitextual structure opens the possibility of reading Piglia's novel from the narrative premises of the Irish novelist.*

Anglophone Literature and, more specifically, American fiction have been powerful influences in Ricardo Piglia's writing. In several interviews and in an autobiographical *nouvelle*, “Prisión perpetua” (1988), he has referred to how, as an adolescent, he was initiated into literature by an American writer called Stephen Ratliff. “Prisión perpetua” is his tribute to Ratliff and to American literature; in *La ciudad ausente* (1992) he pays homage to the Argentine writer Macedonio Fernández¹ and to James Joyce, especially to his *Finnegans Wake*.

La ciudad ausente proposes a generalized investigation into Argentine History and the state of our society from a utopian perspective of resistance. Piglia is a postmodern writer – because he published in the last decades of the twentieth century, but also on account of his writing strategies; yet, his postmodernism is one of resistance. He writes his fiction as an answer to the “fiction” of the monologic official discourse of the State, and, from this definitively historical and ideological position, faces the issue of Argentine cultural and literary identity with a self reflexive narrative whose meaning is built largely on the basis of an intertextual poetics. In this context, *Finnegans Wake* is assimilated and transformed in *La ciudad ausente* as a homage to James Joyce. This article aims at showing how this work is achieved through a montage based on a metaphorical isotopy²

whose main analogy is the syntax used in both novels. I also propose an approach to Piglia's novel as an interpretation and explanation of *Finnegans Wake* through fictional discourse -in Genette's terminology, as a commentary on *Finnegans Wake*- and, viceversa, it aspires to show how the bitextual structure opens the possibility of reading Piglia's novel from the narrative premises of the Irish novelist.

The events narrated in Piglia's novel take place in Argentina in the third millennium, in 2039 or eventually in 2239; the readers who are familiar with Joyce's work will remember that *Finnegans Wake* was first published (in London by Faber and Faber and in New York by Viking) in 1939. The state of society Piglia investigates about bears the marks of a recent cataclysm and the events narrated as real get mixed up with the stories produced by a machine. The references both to the Argentine history of the second half of the twentieth century and the names of streets, buildings and neighbourhoods of Buenos Aires perform the function of anchoring the reader to a reality from which the fantastic elements are always trying to take him away. Though there is then a real geography and a historical time, as a consequence of the desolate landscape associated with the epilogues of catastrophes or big wars, the control over lives and thoughts exerted by the State through a sophisticated technology and the revolutionary forces of resistance working from the underground, Buenos Aires is blurred, erased in a sort of transterritorialization – or deterritorialization- of censorship, oppression and pain. It becomes “la ciudad ausente”, the absent city. The atmosphere of the novel is similar then to that of so many dystopian novels of the end of the twentieth century. The novel has in fact most of the components of a dystopian novel, a product of the weakening of the utopian impulse and imagination; according to Frederic Jameson (25), a novel of maximum future which portrays a nightmare society, with a plot and characters that normally end in an unsuccessful runaway or insurrection.

The central piece of the mystery Junior, the journalist who functions as a detective, tries to elucidate is related to a machine, which is jealously kept in a Museum. There are different versions about the origin of the machine, but in all of them the machine was once a woman. In the first version, the machine was built by Macedonio after the death of his wife Elena in an attempt “to annul death and to build a virtual world”³ (*La ciudad ausente* 63). It was fabricated as a translating machine, but from the very beginning it transformed stories instead of translating them⁴ and it learnt as it narrated. Lately, the machine has begun to incorporate real events in its stories and it has thus become the only possibility of free and autonomous thinking – and consequently of resistance – in a totalitarian and telepathic State in the hands of a “mad president” with “psychopathic ministers”. This is why the State wants to destroy the machine.

The last story of the machine is called “Nudos blancos” – expression which could be translated as “blank nodes” or “white nodes”. The “white nodes” are “zones of condensation” of memory, sort of “myths” that “define the grammar of experience” (*Op. cit.* 74). The story has a dream-like organization since it is narrated from Elena's point of view at the time when she was at a rehabilitation centre, undergoing an

intoxication treatment, to alter the grammar of her experience, with the purpose of turning her inoffensive. The story ends with the image of sea turtles' shells that reproduce the white nodes, which "at an original time had been marks in the bones", "a map of a blind language common to all living beings" (*Op. cit.* 84). Wich makes, it possible possible to reach an island "at the border of the world": "the white nodes have been opened on an island" (*Op. cit.* 123), a refuge for dissidents and the hope of a new humanity; a linguistic utopia about a future life where a common language would be restored. The island is connected with the legend of a saviour woman – an artificial woman fabricated by a survivor from a shipwreck who was the first inhabitant of the mythical island- and thus the concept of resistance is associated with the feminine principle.

Only one person returned from that island, Boas, who went back to tell what he had seen. Boas' report was produced in 2039 – or may be in 2239 – and through his story Piglia also parodies many of the linguistic theories and practices of the twentieth century. According to the myth, Nolan, a militant from the Celtic-Gaelic resistance was the only survivor from a shipwreck; he settled on the island and with the elements he got from the river, he built a double entry recorder, which he programmed to talk with a woman. He loved her from the very beginning, but committed suicide after six years when he lost any hope of being rescued. When the first Irish exiles of the period of political repression that followed the counter offensive of the IRA reached the island, they found the machine lamenting her solitude in a "mild metallic murmur" (*Op. cit.* 138). "The only written source on the island is *Finnegans Wake*, which all consider a sacred book" (*Op. cit.* 138-139) and whose origin is explained through different myths. *Finnegans Wake* is the only written source on the island; it is written in all languages and consequently they can all read it, irrespective of the state of their language, which constantly changes.

Macedonio had conceived the machine that is now exhibited in the Museum on the basis of the theory of the white nodes, that is, of the existence of verbal nuclei that are preserved in the memory: recorded in the skull bones, they continue alive as flesh disintegrates. The machine that Russo – one of the conspirators- built for Macedonio is then "Elena's memory, it is the narration that always comes back eternal as the river" (*La ciudad ausente*, 163), but at the same time it is a plurality of women: Anna Livia Plurabelle, Molly, Hipólita⁵, Eva Perón, Ada Eva María Phalcon⁶ and Lucía Joyce. Macedonio died and the machine was left alone, the same as the wire woman built by Nolan "on the island at the border of the world", who lamented her fate in a metallic voice. Ultimately, both machines are one, in the same way as Nolan's mythical island, the home of the Irish refugees, is also the island in the Argentine Delta where Russo has his operational base: "Finnegans' island, deep into the Paraná, the other side of the Liffey" (*Op. cit.* 76).

All these motifs ultimately point to Piglia's central hypothesis: all narrations are variants of a very few fundamental stories. But they also support Piglia's idea that "fiction works with truth to construe a discourse that is neither false nor true" (*Crítica y*

ficción, 18). The machine's mechanism reproduces, in effect, the work of the novelist - as Piglia explained it fictionally in "Prisión perpetua"- and its creative processes thus become a metadiscursive reflexion about the work of the writer and its relationship with the raw facts of life. *La ciudad ausente* seems to show that literature has blurred the boundaries between reality and imagination, reality and virtuality, reality and dream. On the other hand, the stories produced by the machine appear as the only means to resist the fictions produced by the State, and in this sense, the machine has become an important strategy of Piglia's politics of counter-reality, since, as the author declared in an interview, the novel is, among other things, an opinion on our state of society "on the basis of an aspiration to something impossible" (Piglia in *La Voz del Interior*, 15/09/1994).

As mentioned, one of the most important intertexts of *La ciudad ausente* is *Finnegans Wake*. The motifs, characters and geography of *Finnegans Wake* are incorporated in the stories produced by the machine and, consequently, their presence follows the machine's organizational syntax, a syntax which is analogous to that of *Finnegans Wake*, whose mechanisms Campbell and Robinson defined precisely as similar to those of a dream, a dream that has freed the author from the needs of the common logic and which has allowed him to compress all the periods of history, all the faces of the development of the individual and of the race, in a circular design, from which every part is the beginning, the middle and the end (3).

In his assimilation and transformation of *Finnegans Wake*, apart from its grammar, Piglia privileged one section and one character: Anna Livia Plurabelle. Nolan built the machine with the elements "brought by the river" (*La ciudad ausente* 111) There is here an allusion to Anna Livia Plurabelle, who is identified with the Liffey. With all the litter and dirt accumulated as it flows across Dublin, the Liffey throws its waters into the ocean to restart the natural cycle again. Anna Livia represents then the principle of life, of perpetual movement and renaissance, and, consequently, a principle of resistance.

The story in which the presence of *Finnegans Wake* is more systematically developed is Boas' report. Let us remember that Boas was the only person that came back from the island. References to some parts of the report will give some instances of the way the motifs and the geography of *Finnegans Wake* are incorporated. For example, in the first part of the report, after a reference to the linguistic characteristics of the island, Boas reproduces a dialogue in a bar between Shem and Teynneson:

No empieces, Shem, le dice Teynneson, tratando de hacerse oír, en el barullo del bar entre los acordes del piano y las voces de los que cantan *Three quarks for Muster Mark!*, todavía tenemos que ir al entierro de Pat Duncan y no quiero tener que llevarte en carretilla.

Don't start again, Shem, Teynneson shouted, in the noise of the bar, the music coming from the piano and the voices of those singing *Three quarks for Muster*

Mark!, we still have to go to Pat Duncan's wake and I don't want to have to take you in a wheelbarrow.

As we know, in *Finnegans Wake*, Shem is one of the twins, who represents the interior energy, the spiritual and aesthetic interests. The burial alludes to the central theme of the first chapter of the book that narrates the fall, the death and the resurrection of Finnegan, who finally accepts to die when he learns that the new hero has arrived in Dublin. The song belongs to the last chapter of the second book. In this section, the father, HCE, lying on the floor, identifies himself with King Mark in the legend of Tristan and Isolde and imagines the young couple leaving on a ship. At the end of the third part of Boas' report we learn that the owner of the tavern is Humphry Chimden Earwicker, which points to the owner of a tavern in a suburb of Dublin in *Finnegans Wake*: Humphrey Chimpden Earwicker. The differences in the spelling of the names also allude to the fact that in Joyce's novel, HCE is a number of characters: he is the father, but at the same time he is related to a wide scope of gods, heroes and saints. The initials also mean "Here Comes Everybody" and "Haveth Childers Everywhere", expressions that stress the universality of the character and his role as progenitor.

As to the geography, the seventh part of Boas' report explains that on the island the space is defined "in relation to the river Liffey [...]. But Liffey is also the name that designates the language and in the Liffey are all the rivers of the world" (*La ciudad ausente*, 129). In *Finnegans Wake*, the Liffey, which is the river that structures the space of Dublin, also contains all the rivers of the world, and, as Anna Livia Plurabelle, represents the essential flux that engenders life. The structure of *Finnegans Wake*, on the other hand, is a fluid one, ruled by the Liffey. To reinforce the space analogies, the following part of Boas' report is devoted to the description of the capital city of the island, Edemerry Dubblen, DC. As you may realize, there is in the name not only an emphatic reference to Dublin and the "Celtic fringe", but a new parodic allusion to the poliglossia of *Finnegans Wake*. In this part of the report, the same as in the ninth part, the allusions to *Finnegans Wake* are mixed up to those of *Ulysses*. A brief reference to *Ulysses* in connection with the eleventh part, devoted to the myth of the origins, that is to say to Nolan and "the woman made of wire and red ribbons". In *Ulysses*, Nolan is the surname of one of the men in the tavern in Episode number twelve, but the surname of Piglia's character does not refer to him, but to James Joyce. Nolan's name is James, since Berenson refers to him as Jim, and according to the myth, Nolan loved the wire woman with red ribbons because he thought that she was Livia Ana, the wife of his friend, Italo Svevo, Trieste's most beautiful madona, with her beautiful red hair reminiscent of all the rivers in the world (*La ciudad ausente* 137). The third year after she was fabricated, she began to mix the words, producing phrases such as "Heremon, nolens, nolens, brood our pensies, brume in brume" (137). At this moment, Nolan began to call her Anna Livia Plurabelle. Going back to *Finnegans Wake*, let us remember that Italo Svevo was Joyce's friend and his wife's and that she was one of the motifs that

generated not only the Anna Livia Plurabelle section, but the whole novel, as Joyce declared to an Italian journalist (Ellmann, 572). Nolan is Joyce, but he is also HCE “singing against the waves” *Three quarks for Muster Mark*, all the years following the shipwreck (*La ciudad ausente*, 136).

In *La ciudad ausente*, Ricardo Piglia pays homage to James Joyce, and particularly to his *Finnegans Wake*. Now, if we consider the criticism on Joyce’s novel – for example, Campbell and Robinson’s opinion in *A Skeleton Key to Finnegans Wake*, we can see that it coincides greatly with the meaning the inhabitants of the mythical island have attached to their *Finnegans Wake*, which in Boas’ report is described in terms of a letter telling about Tim Finnegan’s fall from a ladder; a piece of written paper dug up by a hen that was pecking in the rubbish, with a tea stain as a signature, whose holes have been filled with sacred meanings by different generations to suit their needs according to their own historical circumstances. *Finnegans Wake* is a sacred book on the island and it has become a sacred book of the Western Canon, because -the same as the Bible and a few great books, such as Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, for example- it construes a cyclic vision of the life of man from fall to redemption. But, on the other hand, by making explicit the mechanisms of social discourse, the story gives Piglia the opportunity to parody the origin of sacred books and myths that explain how the word of God reaches man.

La ciudad ausente, and specifically Boas’ report, presents a different reading of *Finnegans Wake*, a commentary on one of the greatest books of the Western Canon made through a fictional text. On the other hand, and as anticipated in my introduction, the quotations and allusions to *Finnegans Wake* establish a bitextual structure that allows the reading of Piglia’s novel compared with the mechanisms, themes and motifs of Joyce’s masterpiece. Piglia’s homage is addressed to Joyce, the rebel, the revolutionary, and to the text of the “exile language” which, in his opinion, is a most extreme and exacerbated attempt at representing reality, at narrating the “real” events. Ultimately, in its homage to *Finnegans Wake*, *La ciudad ausente* also claims a place in the Canon.

Notes

- 1 Argentine writer (1874-1952) whose fiction was very influential in future generations of novelists. In *La ciudad ausente* Ricardo Piglia pays special homage to Macedonio’s novel *Museo de la Novela de la Eterna*.
- 2 Laurent Jenny’s terminology in his article “La stratégie de la forme”.
- 3 All quotations from *La ciudad ausente* are my translations.
- 4 For example, *William Wilson* turned into *Stephen Stevenson*, that is to say, the machine produced a different version of the topic of the double.
- 5 A character in one of the Argentine writer Roberto Arlt’s novels. Roberto Arlt (1900-1942) has also been an important referent for Piglia.
- 6 An Argentine tango singer famous in the 1950s.

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