

# When Women Speak

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**Abstract:** *I propose here a feminist reading of Finnegans Wake, or rather, another feminist reading of the novel, since this approach is not new: there are some quite solid studies on the theme. It is believed that in Finnegans Wake Joyce brings woman to light, contrary to what happens in Ulysses, a novel in which the writer leaves her (or them) practically mute for more than six hundred pages. My thesis is that Anna Livia is the great narrator of the Wake, but instead of silencing the other voices, she allows everyone to speak, and unites the talk of everybody in a colorful weave, a collage of narrative threads that she is careful not to break, so that they may have a continuity, albeit tenuous.*

**Keywords:** Finnegans Wake, Feminism, contemporary female artists.

I propose here a feminist reading of *Finnegans Wake*, or rather, another feminist reading of the novel, since this approach is not new: there are some quite solid studies on the theme.

It is believed that in *Finnegans Wake* Joyce brings woman to light, contrary to what happens in *Ulysses*, a novel in which the writer leaves her (or them) practically mute for more than six hundred pages. It should be remembered, though, that in the final pages it is Molly Bloom the protagonist in one of the most famous monologues in literature.

Molly Bloom would represent many women from the beginning of the twentieth century. Although she is a singer, which could be seen as a daring profession at that time, those who surrounded her refer to her with innumerable clichés about this profession for women, in a male-oriented world of the beginning of the last century.

But let's proceed to the "silence" imposed on Molly. According to the feminist American writer Rebecca Solnit (33; my translation), in her book *The Mother of all Questions*, the silence was what allowed the predators to attack throughout the decades, without impediments. It is as if the voices of these important public men devour and annihilate the voices of others in narrative cannibalism. In chapter XV, when Leopold Bloom confesses that he wants to be a mother, the critics (most of them male, but some female) say that he embodies the feminine man, and therefore *Ulysses* could not be considered a male-oriented novel or one that would privilege the point of view of the male characters. Dr. Dixon, one of the characters in *Ulysses*, refers to Leopold Bloom in this way: "Professor Bloom is a finished example of the new womanly man. His moral nature is simple and lovable. Many have found him a dear man, a dear person. He is a rather quaint fellow on the whole, coy though not feeble-minded in the medical sense" (613-614).

As a matter of fact, in *Ulysses*, woman appears to be silenced by men, men either like Dr. Dixon or Leopold Bloom. It is men who speak for the women, about the women, about their "simple and lovable" moral nature, for example (By the way, couldn't this be another

cliché reworked and given a new significance by Joyce?). In the end, men take the place of women, as when Leopold Bloom gives birth to more than half a dozen children.

The right to speak is a kind of wealth, as Rebecca Solnit emphasises, and obviously, in 1904, when the novel takes place, or in 1922, the year it was published, this silencing of feminine voices was even stronger. Although some women were already using their voices, such as Virginia Woolf and Gertrude Stein, whose voices were exceptions.

Moreover Joyce is attributed with the following utterance made to Mary Colum: “I hate intellectual women” (543). This particular declaration doesn’t seem incomprehensible, bearing in mind that some intellectual women didn’t like him either.

On one occasion, Richard Ellman tells us, the Paris-based American writer Gertrude Stein is reputed to angrily have said, “Joyce is good. He is a good writer. People like him because he is incomprehensible and anybody can understand him. But who came first, Gertrude Stein or James Joyce?” (543). Of course, in a heated discourse, reason doesn’t talk very loud. Stein, mother of the modernists, knew that Joyce wasn’t merely “good”. But, as a woman, she knew she wasn’t heard as much as Joyce was.

According to Solnit, the liberation struggle consists, in part, in creating the conditions for the silenced to speak and to be heard (32). It seems to me that in *Finnegans Wake* Joyce created these conditions, permitting his female protagonist to finally speak, in this case in a dream. Concerning the nocturnal nature of *Finnegans Wake*, darkness, says Solnit, is the only form we have for involving ourselves in another culture, another thought than our own, since darkness imposes a limit, everything can’t be seen clearly in it. This may have been the form used by Joyce to give woman a voice, knowing in advance, one may suppose, that he wouldn’t succeed in revealing the secrets of the opposite sex.

In accordance with all that has been commented so far, *Ulysses* would be a novel of men, told by and represented by men. Joyce appears to have understood this and made his mea culpa in *Finnegans Wake*. On page 123 of his last work, in the language typical for the novel, we read: “[...] lastly when all is zed and done, the penelopean patience of its last paraphe, a colophon of no fewer than seven hundred and thirtytwo strokes tailed by a leaping lasso — who thus at all this marveling but will press on hotly to see the vaulting feminine libido of those interbranching ogham sex up-andinsweeps sternly controlled and easily repersuaded by the uniform matteroffactness of a meandering male fist?”.

One could also add that it is Anna Livia Plurabelle who utters this phrase. I will explain why: if we depart from the thesis that *Ulysses* is prolonged in *Finnegans Wake*, as stated above, and considering that it is Molly Bloom who ends the first book with her monologue, in my view it can only be she that continues talking, in her dream, through Anna Livia Plurabelle, in *Finnegans Wake*. In the dream, Molly Bloom unfolds into Anna Livia, the wife of Humphrey Chimpden Earwicker, the extension of Leopold Bloom, who has three children, Issy, the extension of Milly Bloom, Shaun and Shem, I dare say that the twins could represent the dead child of Molly and Leopold Bloom, and/or Stephen Dedalus himself, “adopted” by Leopold Bloom.

Furthermore, *Finnegans Wake* ends with Anna Livia’s speech, and, as the final phrase unites with the first one, she is also the one that begins to tell the story.

But, as the critics use to say, and in part I agree with them, it is difficult to determine who the narrator in *Finnegans Wake* is. To some scholars, everybody is talking, everybody narrates the adventure in their own way.

My thesis, though, is that Anna Livia is the great narrator of the *Wake*, but instead of silencing the other voices, she allows everyone to speak, and unites the talk of everybody in a

colorful weave, a collage of narrative threads that she is careful not to break, so that they may have a continuity, albeit tenuous. Continuing from this affirmation I would also say that there exists a thread, or several narrative threads in the wakean weave that we can follow if we want, from the beginning to the end of the book (or from the end to the beginning). This is what I proposed in, for instance, *Finnegans Wake (por um fio)*, published in 2018.

Regarding the thread, the activity of spinning a thread is a womanly activist, in Chile, according to the Chilean artist, writer and performer residing in the USA, Cecilia Vicuña. In her native land, it is the women that spin the thread from the ball of wool from the vicuña, an Andean camelid; this because they do it carefully, so that the thread is never broken. With this image she concludes: "Woman is the one who conserves the unity and the union. This is the art of women, and that's why they are hounded all over the world, because the continuity of life depends on them." In *Finnegans Wake*, it would be Anna Livia's task to unite the various narrative threads of the novel.

Besides, in the book, Anna Livia is the life-generating figure, she symbolizes the river Liffey, water. In addition, her name is associated to *Danu*, *Anu* or *Ana*, the mother-goddess of Irish mythology, sometimes described as the Irish Eve. The legend says that Danu was probably the goddess of fertility, magic and the wind.

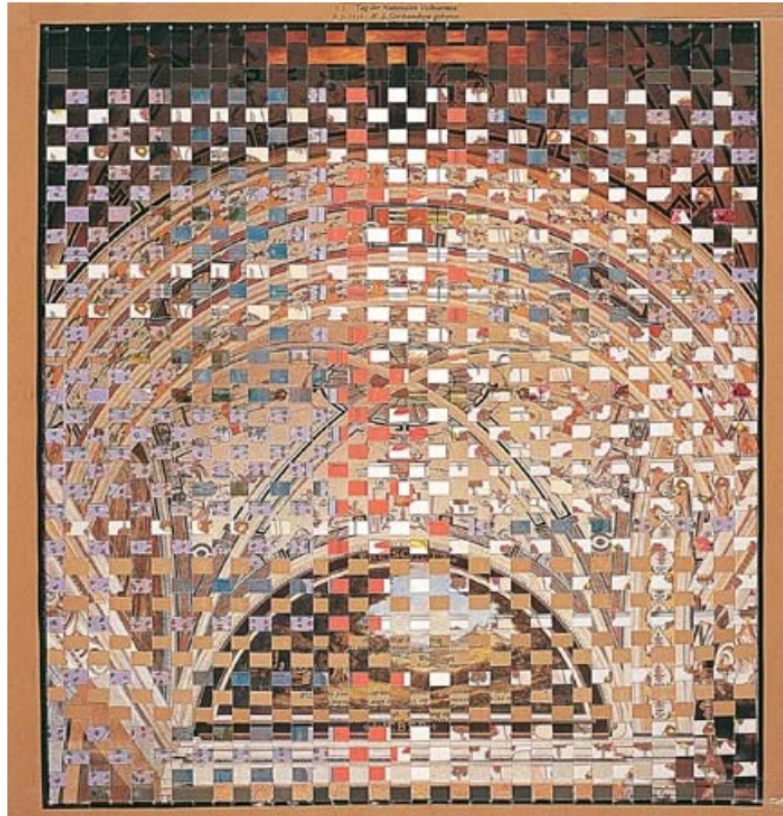
The poem "Word and thread" from the book *New and Selected Poems by Cecilia Vicuña* could serve to define *Finnegans Wake*. It says: "A line joining other lines./ A word written risks linearity,/ but word and thread exist on another dimensional plane./ Acts of union and separation./ Word is silence and sound./ Thread, fullness and empty/ The weaver sees her fiber as the poet her word./ Thread feels the hand, as word the tongue./ Sense structures in the double sense" (147).

As a weaver, Molly Bloom has by some critics been compared to Penelope, the mythical figure who weaves and unravels a cloak while waiting for *Ulysses* to return. In *Finnegans Wake*, the weaver is Anna Livia, who, with her *penelopean patience*, keeps weaving the threads in the Joycean weft.

On the role of the weaver, in the cited poem, Vicuña says that she "is both weaving and writing a text/ the community can read" (149). And the Chilean artist concludes, "An ancient textile is an alphabet of knots, colors and directions we can no longer read"<sup>7</sup>. But "To dream, the diviner sleeps on a textile made of *wik'uñá*"<sup>8</sup>. The seer could be us, the readers. In the fiction, Anna Livia could also be considered a seer: after weaving the cloak, she lies down upon it and narrates what she has weaved.

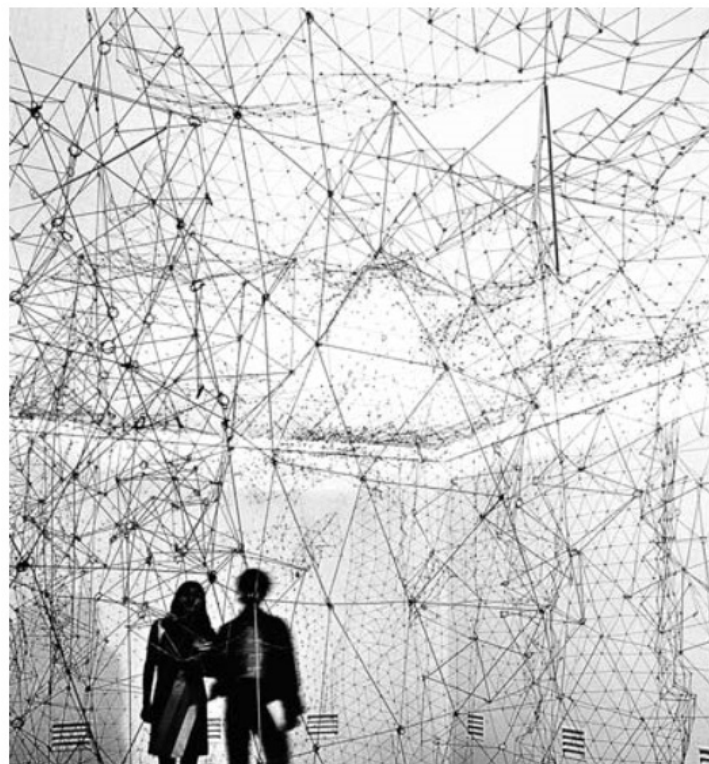
There are, in fact, many feminine elements in *Finnegans Wake*, elements that I perceive in the visual works of artists posterior to Joyce, as for example Ana Mendieta, a Cuban living in the USA, or Gertrud Goldschmidt, known as Gego, a German living in Venezuela, or the above-mentioned Cecilia Vicuña. All of them lived or, in Vicuña's case lives, far from their native country, like Joyce, who left Ireland as a very young man and settled in continental Europe.

Gego's work is quite similar to the Chilean artist's, in that she also uses the idea of weaving threads, especially in a series of works entitled *tejeduras*, where she crosses threads/lines, forming abstract images, but always united in a single space. The *tejeduras* are also a form of cubist collage (in this work she includes photographs, news magazines, cigarette packs, etc.), a form that according to the specialists would have inspired James Joyce when composing *Finnegans Wake*. Gego's *tejeduras* come very close to some works by Picasso, but also to the works of avant-garde artist Sonia Delaunay, one of her references.



"Tejeduras" Gego

To the Venezuelan artist, the threads can be transformed into anything, gain the most different formats. Often the lines of Gego create a mess in space, a chaos, in the style of *Finnegans Wake*, one could say.



The following consideration by Gego would serve to conceptualize every word of *Finnegans Wake*: “I discovered the charm of the line in and of itself—the line in space as well as the line drawn on a surface, and the nothing between the lines and the sparkling when they cross, when they are interrupted, when they are of different colors or different types”<sup>1</sup>. Gego once said: “I discovered that sometimes the in-between lines [are] as important as the line by itself.”<sup>2</sup>. Joyce knew the importance of what’s between the lines, between the words of his last novel. In this “between-places” resides the “caosmos” (to use a word from the book), the raw material of *Finnegans Wake*.

Moreover, Gego has another series of works called *Triangulaciones*; in them she always maintains a base, a point of stability for her threads, maybe the foundation that the reader, if so inclined, could try to find in Joyce’s nocturnal book. This is my search, and perhaps that is why I recognize in the triangulations of Gego my (feminine) form of reading the *Wake*.

As for the Cuban artist Ana Mendieta, she is known in particular for performances in which her body unites with the elements of Nature, as in *Buried in Mud* from 1975, where the artist is buried in mud, and after a while we see the mud breathe – not her. Intentionally, here it is woman that is being born out of clay, not man; he may emerge later, from one of her ribs. Mendieta said that emerging from Nature would only be something new if Adam was excluded, and that she too, as a woman, “wants to emerge from earth/nature or actually has – and not from some sleeping man’s rib, who later would prove too easily fooled”<sup>3</sup>.



In *Burial Pyramid* (1974), the artist is buried under rocks and slowly emerges from them, but not completely. It doesn’t seem difficult to see in these two performances specific wakean characters that are now river, now woman, now mountain, now man, now cloud, now etc. Talking about rocks, in chapter VIII of *Finnegans Wake* one of the washerwomen is turned to stone, going the opposite way to Ana Mendieta, who emerges from the stone.



With this reading I include contemporary women with the women in Joyce's fiction. This way I also propose that we may have a Mollybloomsday this year, perhaps the first of many.

## Notes

- 1 [https://www.levygorvy.com/wp-content/uploads/2016\\_05\\_01\\_Artist\\_Dossier\\_Gego\\_Art\\_Auction.pdf](https://www.levygorvy.com/wp-content/uploads/2016_05_01_Artist_Dossier_Gego_Art_Auction.pdf)
- 2 <https://uk.blouinartinfo.com/news/story/1429576/gegos-liminal-lines-at-dominique-levy-london>
- 3 *Covered in Time and History: The Films of Ana Mendieta*. Minneapolis; University of Minnesota, 2015, p. 39.

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