

Interview with Fritz Senn

Por Vitor Alevato do Amaral

The interview with Fritz Senn took place on 21 March 2019, at the Zurich James Joyce Foundation. The questions were defined in collaboration with Dirce Waltrick do Amarante. The transcription and translation of the audio were done by the interviewer.

The video of the interview in English with subtitles in Portuguese is available at <https://www.facebook.com/revistaqorpus/>.

Good morning, Fritz Senn. Thank you for receiving me here at the Zurich James Joyce Foundation. It is a real pleasure. And thank you for talking to us, friends in Joyce from Brazil. I have a few questions for you and would be delighted if you could give us some answers. The first one is about *Finnegans Wake*. It was published in 1939 and it turns 80 years old this year. Do you think that after eight decades the language of the book is more accessible to readers? And how do you evaluate the role of translations for the readability of the work?

Ja. Now, first of all, *Finnegans Wake*... it is eighty years old and I think they have all the celebrations about it. Now, you said, “has it become more accessible?”. It certainly has become more popular. I mean, it has moved into the focus. I mean, there’s a lot of scholarship devoted to it. Maybe even more than the rest of the books you would see at the conferences, all that. I don’t quite know. I mean, people are more willing to face *Finnegans Wake* than they were before. I mean it’s a ... as a challenge and ... whether it’s more accessible I couldn’t tell. From my own experience, I must say I have – that might surprise you – given up *Finnegans Wake* as a scholar. We read it with pleasure [in the Foundation], we have probably been reading it longer than most people. It has to with my age. But I gave up as a scholar because I don’t know enough to pose as a scholar. I think what we don’t know about *Finnegans Wake* is still the majority. And I think that we only, collectively, have found out about thirty percent, so it’s lamentable how we failed. And scholars don’t care. And the only one who cares, I couldn’t pose as a scholar because... You see I am getting quite upset. We’ve read it several times, and still most things I don’t know: what is going on, why the changes are, and things like that. I myself have failed with *Finnegans Wake*. The scholars don’t think they have failed, fortunately. Otherwise they would stop. I just have to say that as my thing. But, I mean, it’s interesting. It’s a challenge. Its mere existence as something is important, you know. It can also be done like that. So, its existence in a way puts the whole literary world into a kind of motion, you know.

And the role of the translations? Do you think it has helped?

Well, of course, then there is translation. I simply don't quite know how it is... in some way, of course, it is... not translation, of course, it is quite obvious, you don't have to explain that, in the sense that you could hardly do *Finnegans Wake* scholarship based on the translation. Translation has, say, a value as a work of art. It can be pleasant. As I think you do it, you can bring out this potential as music, and that's great, that's a performance. But I don't think you could do a study of *Finnegans Wake* on the translation. You can do a study on the translation of *Finnegans Wake*. That's a different thing. And, of course, I think simply because it cannot be translated it should be translated. I mean, because all culture depends on translation and all translation is... incomplete. Everything we have is somehow translated from one culture into another. And, of course, it's easy to say: "don't look at translation", but the alternative is usually nothing, it's not the original, because most people have no access to the original. So, translators do something very important. And, of course, it should be done. In some odd way, I think it [*Finnegans Wake*] is even easier to translate because the normal kind of... criteria don't apply. It's futile to say, "but there's a meaning you didn't get". Of course, there are many meanings you don't get. Whereas in a more ordinary piece of [literature] you can fault the translator for not giving it more or less exactly. But, *Finnegans Wake*, it has more scope. If you have a good idea that brings life into the translation, you should do it. It will be different, but with a similar effect. So, I think it should be more oriented towards effect.

Thanks, Fritz. Again, on *Finnegans Wake*, what is your tip for readers who want to approach *Finnegans Wake* for the first time?

Well... I mean, just try, just go ahead and try to figure out what you can. Don't be discouraged if you don't understand it. *Ja*. And now, of course, it depends on how you do it, [if you] do it on your own, as many people do, that is. One of the interesting things is that *Finnegans Wake* is probably still the most advanced. You can't outdo *Finnegans Wake*, I believe. You can't go beyond it. I wouldn't know how this should be. Ironically, the way we read it, we read it in a traditional way, in groups, like in the Middle Ages, when we seated around the text. So, the procedure we do goes back in time for the piece of literature that is most advanced in time. So, reading in a group is something. On your own, the question is really... should you rely on annotation and all of those things? One probably needs it, or something like that, but I can't tell how one should read. I started reading it on my own. There was nobody around. I looked up words and things like that. I believe where we usually fail to understand it – certainly I do – is that we look too much... we look at the words, and we can look up words, there's the alphabet and things like that, but we often don't hear the sense behind it. Often the letters, the constellation of letters is something that, I feel, it hides some sounds, some word sounds which I can't get at. So, I think it is our failure to hear, which is more important than to read ... You can always... Words you can find out. The computer helps you and all of that. I mean, the one thing is, and it's easy to introduce *Finnegans Wake* to create some kind of pleasure, it has really unique pieces of richness of meaning and pleasure and humor and all of that. There are very, very good and attractive passages. Perhaps the best way would be to read it using

chosen bits, like these fables, “The Ondt and the Gracehoper” or “Anna Livia”, that in a way can be followed better than some other parts, and perhaps a selection that would be... And I say you get some great experiences that are quite unique when you find more and more. In fact, I have a little project – nothing original – to put out a calendar with, for every day, one piece of thing in clear writing, isolated, because when you see it clearly, not hidden on the whole page of the book, it makes an impression. I would call that *appeteasers*, so that people would, I don’t know, would be drawn in and sucked in. That would work quite well. But, that’s different from the whole thing and, saying something decisive about that, as I say, I don’t quite understand that people who probably do not understand *Finnegans Wake* much, much better than I do can write books about it. It’s different from, say, genetic studies and things like that, because that’s hard work and quite useful. But, as I say, most... most passages we... it’s... But that shouldn’t deter readers from doing it. It has a great effect. Or, putting differently, it is precisely those great moments of what we call aha experiences that make it more... more impressive, that... In other cases, you don’t get out of it anything at all. But that’s my own feeling.

That’s what we are interested in, your feeling, your impressions. Now, about *Ulysses*, what is its place in 20th century literature? And is *Ulysses* the most influential novel of the last century?

It might well be. I mean, it is hard to mensurate, but I think it has a... It probably has had a great impact, *ja*. I mean, one thing is simply that it helped to... in the fight against censorship, in a way, that was a great breakthrough to have it. And then, of course, Joyce shows how many things can be done, you know, how the changes... or that kind of focusing in on the interior processes, thought, and all of the interior monologue and things like that. Also, the allusiveness and all... I think it has had a great impact. I mean, it’s... every, I suppose almost every writer – that’s exaggerated, though – would have to react to it. Either you say, “that’s too much to me. I don’t follow this”, but then you become too..., or else you do something similar. But what do you do then? It is now not very original to write a novel about one day in Zurich, you know, that kind of thing. And it’s also unsettling. You can see that Irish writers sometimes almost have compulsively tried to do something else so as not to do a kind of second-rate Joyce. I remember quite well, Anthony Burgess, who wrote very illuminating books about *Finnegans Wake*, a great fan also, once said, “Joyce is a damn nuisance”. And I understood he said, “well, he does something that... we cannot do the same thing and at the same time we cannot not do it”. You know... you are inevitably compared to Joyce.

I see, I see.

And I think... I guess [on] what you can do with language, I think that Joyce had a great influence. And, as to translation, it is still possible to do *Ulysses*. It’s certainly not quite the same thing, but enough comes probably across. Also because of its bulk there’s so much of it that even if you mainly single many aspects you can’t do much. For example, what do you do when certain people in *Ulysses* speak that kind of Anglo-Irish, the kind of English that is affected by Gaelic that characterizes some people? There’s no equivalent in

Portuguese, there's no equivalent in German, you know. So, you inevitably, through nobody's fault, you lose a lot. Or how can you – now you do it in Portuguese – how can you recreate a song that Joyce knew but now nobody even in Ireland knows anymore? And there's no basis, with the Bible, with Shakespeare. It's impossible. As I always said, the results of a translation are, inevitably, "something is lacking". But the problems are always fascinating. And so, what I do now is rather than looking at translations – it's always antique to find mistakes and something that isn't good–, it's much better to see, if you are not satisfied by a translation, to see what in the original causes that. So, you see, there is some problem there, and the more the translations go apart or seem to go somewhere else, what is it? So that's what's more profitable than just to be feeling superior.

True. Now, Fritz, the “James Joyce Industry”, the so-called “James Joyce Industry”, has not stopped growing. Will it ever reach a sort of point of saturation? What do you think?

Well... It almost has to. I have always been surprised... I mean, I have been around a long time, I thought it in the fifties, and there was a lot, and I've seen it grow, we had conferences and then publications. You can see in the Foundation how much there is. I always thought that somehow the stock, the stock market would go down, but it hasn't so far. For example, there was, forty or fifty years ago, at every conference, somebody who would have talked about Faulkner. And now hardly anyone does that. That is not saying anything against Faulkner, but in Joyce there has always been something. Maybe because there have always been new ways of looking at Joyce, often promoted by new theories, the French and things like that. And so, you do it from a number of points of view or fashions... neo-colonial, or you now get disability studies, whatever is the fashion. Feminism of course. Whatever is the fashion. So, that has kept things going, but I don't know whether this will last. Somebody said, it would make sense, that there will be a peak in 2022 – a hundred years of *Ulysses*. There would be all kinds of things. As you know the public celebrations really celebrate the decimal system. Simply because it's a hundred years doesn't mean that we better ideas. It may subside. I don't know. It hasn't yet but I say I wouldn't be surprised, because other writers... other fashions come. Apart from this, the Humanities are being a bit reduced, the money, the universities don't put so much in, what we are doing is not important enough, certain right-wing politicians are certainly not in favor of that. So, there may just be fewer of us, who walked by ourselves in literature. But I think Joyce will obviously have space and it's... I think what has always attracted me is what can be done with language, and there I think Joyce is quite supreme, and it's how we can handle it.

Now, how do you respond to the trend that now avoids writing on individual authors, Joyce included?

You mean academics.

Yes, academics.

It's no longer... *Ja*. It doesn't concern me. I'm an amateur. I did it on my own. In fact, as I always say, I had one great disadvantage: I never took a Joyce course. And I had one great advantage: I never took a Joyce course. So, I am a bit outside. But, of course, academically, there are fashions. Right now, they don't encourage people to write about one... I don't see why... I have occupied myself with only one writer, more or less. That doesn't mean others should do it. I also don't see why it should be discouraged. If you have something important to say about a whole movement, Modernism, or if you have something to say about one writer, I don't quite know... But I said, it's not my concern. It's a concern of the academics and it's serious.

I see. But do you have anything to say about the future of Joyce Studies?

It's very hard to say. I could never have predicted what would happen, so I don't know. I'm still a kind of relic. I always say I am an old-fashioned, pedestrian philologist. That is not modest. There is nothing wrong with pedestrian feet. But I need... I want to know what it is. I see the language... It's quite interesting that even scholars from backgrounds with only English, they pay less attention to language, whereas for us, who had to learn English, we know it is something strange and we know we don't know it, whereas native speakers might be led to believe they do know it. We are more careful. And I think we, and especially me, see language in a way, and talk about language more than anything else.

I see. And to finish, we plan to show this interview on Bloomsday in Brazil. What does Bloomsday mean to you?

Ja. Well, I mean, let's put it this way: it's quite something. It's something about Joyce that he, in a way, created a day on the calendar. There's no Hamlet day and things like that. So that is always something. And, of course, we need these festivals and that sort of thing. Bloomsday, however... There's a certain danger of things becoming too much action and commerce as well, you know. It's also something like that. So, I'm ambivalent about it. I mean, Joyce is now something you can make money with. Not writing books about it, but selling souvenirs and stuff, giving tours, and all that. And that can go a bit far. On the other hand, I think Joyce would have been amused that he became, kind of he became popular culture, you know, which is also part of his books, that people do funny things, and that's an effect, a connected effect from his books. And that's perhaps the mood in Joyce that sets things in motion, it's dynamic, it makes us do something. Even if you go hating Joyce, you could hate Joyce much better than somebody else. I've seen that. So, he was a great force in the physical sense. My concern is always with the dynamics of Joyce's texts. They are not just things that become a property, but they do something. In fact, they changed some lives, I mean. It helped me through difficulties of my own. For me, as I said, I did it on my own, at home, alone. It was quite an interesting thing to feel that you can pass on something and tell them what you experienced and encourage others to read. That's a good thing.

Thank you, Fritz Senn, Director of the Zurich James Joyce Foundation. Thank you so much for your time, for your words.

Ok, and hello to all the Brazilian Joyceans.

Please, say hello to everybody in Brazil. Thank you.

Ok.

Entrevista com Fritz Senn

A entrevista com Fritz Senn foi realizada no dia 21 de março de 2019, na Fundação James Joyce de Zurique. As perguntas foram elaboradas em colaboração com Dirce Waltrick do Amarante. A transcrição e a tradução do áudio foram realizadas pelo entrevistador.

O vídeo da entrevista em inglês com legendas em português está disponível em <https://www.facebook.com/revistaqorpus/>.

Bom dia, Fritz Senn. Obrigado por me receber aqui na Fundação James Joyce de Zurique. É um grande prazer. E obrigado por conversar conosco, amigos joyceanos do Brasil. Tenho algumas perguntas e adoraria que pudesse nos dar algumas respostas. A primeira é sobre *Finnegans Wake*. O livro foi publicado em 1939 e completa 80 anos agora. Você acha que depois de oito décadas a linguagem do livro é mais acessível para os leitores? E como avalia o papel das traduções na leitura da obra?

Ja. Primeiro, *Finnegans Wake*... completa 80 anos e eu creio que todo tipo de comemoração esteja ocorrendo. Você pergunta: “o livro se tornou mais acessível?”. Tornou-se, certamente, mais popular. Quer dizer, entrou em foco. Quer dizer, há muita pesquisa sobre ele. Talvez até mais do que sobre os outros livros nas conferências. Não sei bem. As pessoas estão mais dispostas a enfrentar *FW* do que antes. Quer dizer, é um... como um desafio e... se é mais acessível, não saberia dizer. Pela minha experiência, devo dizer, e isso pode surpreender você, que desisti de *FW* como pesquisador. Lemos com prazer [na Fundação], e talvez por mais tempo do que a maioria das pessoas. Tem a ver com minha idade. Mas desisti como pesquisador porque não conheço o suficiente para me posicionar como pesquisador. Creio que o que o que não sabemos sobre *FW* é a maior parte do livro. E creio que descobrimos, coletivamente, apenas cerca de 30 por cento. Então é lamentável como falhamos. Ainda assim, os pesquisadores não se importam. E o único que se importa, eu não consegui posicionar como pesquisador, porque... Você vê que eu fico irritado. Continuamos a ler *FW* e ainda assim não sabemos a maioria das coisas: o que está ocorrendo, o porquê das mudanças, e coisas do tipo. Eu mesmo falhei com relação a *FW*. Os pesquisadores não acham que falharam. Ainda bem. Do contrário teriam parado.