

# James Joyce Quarterly



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*THE ECHO IS WHERE*, by Peter O'Brien. Canada: Carbon Publishers, 2019. 104 pp. See <<https://www.yumpu.com/en/document/view/62455581/the-echo-is-where-peter-obrien-2019>>.

In *The Echo Is Where*, Peter O'Brien assembles an eclectic group of Joycean enthusiasts and non-Joyceans to compose essays to accompany a number of his textual illustrations of *Finnegans Wake*. This collection of forty-three catalog texts was produced "in honour and celebration of the 80th anniversary" of the publication of the novel (4). Joyce's text is overlaid with O'Brien's handwritten felt pen markings, watercolor brushwork, and carefully rendered ink drawings and brought together in one unified volume, subtitled *LOTS OF FUN WITH FINNEGANS WAKE*. O'Brien started with the intention to create "a form of intellectual folk art" (6), and this ambitious project takes many forms to fulfill his ambition. Parsing through the selection of pages included in the catalog (126-68), it becomes at times marginalia, illuminated manuscript, a text-image collage, or a portmanteau. For each essay, participants were invited to offer their personal expertise and sometimes participate in the creation of the page. Responders, who range in age "from 22 to 105" (5) and hail from around the world are academics, artists, writers, professors, students, and some just "innocent bystanders" (104). The author, who has "nine brothers and sisters and twelve step-brothers and-sisters, and an almost limitless number of nieces, nephews, cousins" is a man accustomed to crowdsourcing, adding for good measure—"There are a lot of ill shaped, meandering and conflicting stories in a family that size" (101).

Many commentators are more attuned to the visual or plastic nature of the work and liken it to other historical art forms such as Akram Pedramnia who compares it to Persian miniature painting (74). O'Brien does take a cue from narrative art genres when he plays with the way text contrasts with floating shapes, layers of space, and contrasting scale (such as the carefully rendered bowler hat) and when he keeps to the enclosed frame of the page (11). Alice Adelkind offers another rich image, describing O'Brien's work as "glossing and

embroidering upon *Finnegans Wake*" (8), which calls to mind medieval artisans attending to vellum and parchment manuscripts or embellishing a fine piece of Irish linen with gilded thread.

At times, O'Brien parses through Joyce's text with a magnifying lens and veers into the margins with meta-commentary. This is where his work most resembles marginalia. In the essay, "Annotate This: On Marginalia," Ed Simon describes how marginalia "exist(s)" as the material result of a reader having grappled with literature.<sup>1</sup> It can be the private musings and personal notations or "the inscrutable cipher known only to its creator," he comments. In *The Echo Is Where*, however, the notes and illustrations are not a private conversation hidden within the pages of an enclosed book; instead they are laid bare for the viewer to see. This materiality becomes a new personal statement like the one Simon describes. Marginalia, Simon notes, "is artifact, evidence, and detritus, the remainder of what's left over after a fiery mind has immolated the candle of the text."

Some essays in this collection call attention to Joyce's linguistic puzzles lurking within each page. It is indeed, as Bob Shantz describes, a "word saturated project" (80). Peter Quadrino, who hosts the *Finnegans Wake* Reading Group of Austin, Texas, is attuned to close reading a text when he observes, "[T]o read a page is to jot Joyce's polyglot puns in the margins" (76). This is the spirit of curiosity that invites *Wake* enthusiasts to trudge forth and continue reading and re-reading Joyce's *oeuvre* in search of linguistic treasures.

Denis Boyles reminds us that many have been "preoccupied and moved to discover meaning in the 1939 book" (20) and have been inspired to do so in various genres such as film, graphic design, and hypertextual digital projects. O'Brien, as an artist and writer, ventures to straddle multiple disciplines. Some pages are an assemblage of clips of typography, images from magazines, and drawings that are cut and pasted together on top of the text. From seemingly disparate parts, images marry the narrative together into a series of personal pastiches. To draw on fragments and memory in a time of global disruption and rapidly evolving change between the world wars, the artist Kurt Schwitters found a new art form in collage, a modernist medium for artists in exile: "Everything had broken down and new things had to be made out of the fragments."<sup>2</sup>

Joyce scholars David Spurr and Philip Sicker refer to *The Echo Is Where* as an example of portmanteau, suggesting we consider this work under a rubric of linking the visual and textual together. Sicker proposes that the project "challenges categories of aesthetic reception" (84) like Stephen Dedalus as he walks along Sandymount Strand in *Ulysses*, meditating on Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's concepts of *nacheinander* and *nebeneinander* and the collapse of the distinction of space and time.<sup>3</sup>



On one page, O'Brien writes in felt pen: "I've elected to re-read *Dubliners*, *Portrait*, *Ulysses*, as a way to provide some sort of foundation and scaffolding to this project" (21). The left margin of the page is buttressed by an illustration of three jewel-toned, hand-colored columns, one each in Ionic, Doric and Corinthian style mimicking a manual of classical architecture (21). O'Brien is building a framework here to find his own way, inserting these lines of inquiry and allowing himself to re-aquaint himself with the text. One page flows to the next in O'Brien's parallel odyssey: a fluid brushmark harnessing Joyce's recirculating, fragmentary journey from chapter 1 to its conclusion. In the essay "Writing Space," Daniel Ferrer examines how, for Joyce, "the vast majority of his waking life was spent in front of books or manuscripts" and "gazing at 'paperspace.'" <sup>4</sup> "The space that Joyce had before his eyes most of the day," Ferrer explains, "the one he spent the most time exploring, as long as he could see and sometimes even when he could not see and had to grope, was the space of a rectangular sheet of white paper, written on or in the process of being written on" (203). The strongest works in the catalog are the pages where O'Brien follows his curiosity, allowing it to bubble to the surface on that "paperspace."

In the acknowledgments, O'Brien writes of his decision about a title for the project: "I am hoping that the title *The echo is where* acknowledges everyone who helped this catalogue come to fruition. The echo is here. And sometimes, as is evident in the last page of this catalogue, the echo begins before we think it does" (6). Crowdsourcing is where O'Brien draws the most strength to embark on this collective endeavor. On the cover, a singular curved paint stroke of red mixed with yellow reads like a cresting wave; thus, O'Brien leaves his flourish as if to say—the conversation continues.

Reviewed by Kaitlin Thurlow

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Ed Simon, "Annotate This: On Marginalia," *The Millions* (17 January 2020), <<https://themillions.com/2020/01/annotate-this-on-marginalia.html>>.

<sup>2</sup> Rachel Cooke, "Kurt Schwitters: The Modernist Master in Exile," *The Guardian* (6 January 2013), <<https://www.theguardian.com/artand-design/2013/jan/06/kurt-schwitters-modernist-master-exile>>.

<sup>3</sup> See Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Laocoon: An Essay Upon the Limits of Painting and Poetry*, trans. Ellen Frothingham (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1887).

<sup>4</sup> See Daniel Ferrer, "Writing Space," *Making Space in the Works of James Joyce*, ed. Valérie Bénéjam and John Bishop (New York: Routledge Publishers, 2011), p. 203, and James Joyce, *Finnegans Wake* (New York: Penguin Books, 1999), 115.07. Further references to the Ferrer essay will be cited parenthetically in the text.