



DRAWING UPON *FINNEGANS WAKE*

Peter O'Brien
Independent Artist and Scholar
Toronto, Canada
tpob@me.com

Peter O'Brien has written or edited five books, including *Introduction to Literature: British, American, Canadian* (Harper & Row) and *Cleopatra at the Breakfast Table: Why I Studied Latin With My Teenager and How I Discovered the Daughterland* (Quattro). He attended Notre Dame (BA), McGill (MA) and the Banff Centre School of Fine Arts. He has published widely on art and literature. Further information on LOTS OF FUN WITH FINNEGANS WAKE can be found at tpob.me.

Abstract / Artist Statement: LOTS OF FUN WITH FINNEGANS WAKE is my six-year project to annotate / illustrate / disrupt the 628 pages of James Joyce's final book. I've been reading *Finnegans Wake* off and on for about 40 years, and I consider it to be the most multi-layered, protean, and playful collection of words that we have. As a way to explore the book's circular, recurring, enigmatic pathways, I am involved in the process of transmediation – I am turning some of its words into visual images and some of its linguistic images into words. This project is a way for me to indulge my natural inclination to connect the intellectual and the illustrative, the visual and the verbal.

Keywords: visual art; James Joyce; Finnegans Wake; transmediation; intertextuality

James Joyce's final book, *Finnegans Wake*, is the most intentionally protean and unstable work of words that we have. I would say it is more playful than Lewis Carroll's poem "Jabberwocky," more digressive and diversionary than Laurence Sterne's novel *Tristram Shandy*, and even more slippery, more saturated with potentiality, than Ovid's (anti-)epic *Metamorphoses*, which traffics in "obscurities, those words whose sense is hidden" but which still manages to provide readers with navigable and directional storytelling.¹ I have been reading *Finnegans Wake* off and on for 40 years, continuously finding new shards of linguistic musicality, new historic (and many hysteric) reverberations, and new commentaries on the craft of composition each time I open and anatomize its pages.

As illuminated by the accompanying portfolio of eight pages from my project LOTS OF FUN WITH FINNEGANS WAKE² (Figures 1 – 8), I am also rendering the visual from the verbal pyrotechnics on show, and building the illustrative from the text's intellectual gamesmanship. Joyce invites us to "come into the pictures" and so I am taking him up on the suggestion.³ My 628-page project (one picturing page for each of Joyce's pages) allows me to interpret the book for myself, and to navigate, in my own fashion, its colourful, labyrinthine pathways. Butting my head against the word-based coinages and agglutinations, I'm translating the text into a form that is, perhaps, more immediate.

Marjorie Siegel, invoking educator and musician Charles Suhor, has written about the generative power of transmediation for learning.⁴ Siegel quotes Suhor's definition of the term – "translation of content from one sign system into another" (Siegel, 460) – and says that implicit in this definition is "the idea that moving across sign systems is a *generative* process in which new meanings are produced" (Siegel, 461). I am not sure that *Finnegans Wake* needs any more new meanings (we have barely dented the surface of its current meanings) but I do revel in its spawning, progenitive features. Referencing Umberto Eco – "the sign always *opens up* something new" – Siegel talks about the power of signs to set in motion "an unending process of translation and interpretation" (Siegel, 460). And isn't "art" – from the Latin, *ars* (feminine): skill; art; profession; theory; manner of acting; cunning; artifice – by definition an open, translatable and interpretive thing, enabling whatever transmediation we wish to use?

I find *Finnegans Wake* endlessly generative not just because it is circular and feeds on itself (what we call the beginning is indeed the end), and not just because it is systematically puzzling (amalgamating 80 or so languages will do that to a text), but

also because it is engulfing, intoxicating. It resists quick understanding, facile conclusions, and genteel consummation. Joyce knew the challenges that lay ahead for potential readers of his mutable book, which Hélène Cixous calls “an ark to contain all human myths and types.”⁵ In a letter to his patron Harriet Shaw Weaver, Joyce describes the material he had at his disposal during the writing of his previous book, *Ulysses*: “My head is full of pebbles and rubbish and broken matches and bits of glass picked up ‘most everywhere.”⁶ In *Finnegans Wake* this expanding agglomeration of intellectual fragments is put to new use in his “experiment in interpreting ‘the dark night of the soul’” (Ellmann *Letters*, 327). Joyce fostered and expanded his linguistic maze continuously throughout the 17 or so years it took him to write it, adding echoes, switchbacks, and resoundings, so that each word is “as cunningly hidden in its maze of confused drapery as a fieldmouse in a nest of coloured ribbons” (*FW*, 120:5-6). As in a dream (the immediate precursor, perhaps, to any wake, and in particular the wake of the eponymous Tim Finnegan) each image of the book has a definition, a sharpness, a clarity, even if we may not be able to explicate or connect the dots. We know there is an overarching story made up of multitudinous other stories, but we can never be sure of the contiguous logic, the sequential progression, or of how much distortion is added as the text refracts itself.

Many have called *Finnegans Wake* unreadable, and I would agree, if by the word “reading” we mean explicating, clarifying, spelling out. Christopher de Hamel, arguably the world’s most distinguished palaeographer, says that the book is to him “as unreadable as some pages of the Book of Kells itself must have been, even when the manuscript was new.”⁷ In the introduction to a recent Penguin edition of *Finnegans Wake*, Seamus Deane, one of the most insightful of Joyceans, says: “The first thing to say about *Finnegans Wake* is that it is, in an important sense, unreadable.”⁸ Joyce’s wife, Nora, née Barnacle, once asked him: “Why don’t you write sensible books that people can *understand*?”⁹

But in what way is the book unreadable? Even the most arcane texts (*Being and Time* by Martin Heidegger, *Anti-Oedipus* by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Jerusalem* by Alan Moore – or at least the pages of *Jerusalem* that do not mimic *Finnegans Wake*), are all, after some effort, comprehensible, mostly. The logic may be circuitous and the intellectual path may be intentionally clogged or cloudy, but these books are puzzles that can (for the most part) be puzzled through. I believe Joyce never wanted *Finnegans Wake* to be fully understood. In *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation*, George Steiner says that the linguistic combinations in *Finnegans Wake* “may well be the most paradoxical, revolutionary step of which the human intellect is capable.”¹⁰ Language is, we know, forever in process, forever being infiltrated by slangy inventions, and is perpetually engendering new lexemes, new readings, new stories. I sometimes imagine Joyce asking: Why can’t a singular book do what language

itself does: remain forever in motion, continuously outside our enveloping, delimiting grasp? Why can't it remain perpetually unreadable?

And what do we do with an unreadable book? I think we can do whatever we want with it. Compare, disentangle, annotate, sing, illustrate, entangle, paint, wonder, wander, et cetera. Since I was a kid, I have been interested in how pictures and text intertwine. Not such a surprise there: children's picture books exist for a reason. The more I read words and the more I looked at pictures, the more I yoked together these twinning explorations of the verbal and the visual, the illustrative and the intellectual. Pictures entered my eyes, swirled around in my mind, and sometimes came out as words; text entered my brain (directly, it seemed), looked around, and then sometimes came out as drawings.

As I read *Finnegans Wake* these days, I keep a vast number of sourcebooks and electronic resources at the ready (most notable the fourth edition of Roland McHugh's *Annotations To Finnegans Wake*, and various web-based Joycean tools). I also keep an expanding assortment of other miscellaneous materials close to mind: dictionaries of slang and word origins; critical studies of marginalia; and dictionaries of Latin, German, French, and Irish (I can not be responsible for all 80 of the languages Joyce puts to use!). It is impossible to confront *Finnegans Wake* without continuously expanding one's view. As the book was a collective task (Joyce integrated a multitude of sources, from the daily newspaper to the Bible), so also the reading of it is a collective task (that is, you seek help wherever you can).

These days I have been thinking a lot about Julia Kristeva's allegorical meditation *The Old Man and the Wolves* as I make my way through *Finnegans Wake*. The main character in Kristeva's book is known variously as Septicius Clarus, the Professor, Scholasticus, and sometimes just the Old Man. As we are told, "No one knew his real name."¹¹ Kristeva leads us through, or around, or within, a "screen of dreams," (Kristeva, 112), an "interlacing of scraps of sight and sound" (Kristeva, 113), a linguistic landscape of "secret cabals, mysteries, conspiracies, desires" (Kristeva, 114), all the while invoking "my dear Ovid." (Kristeva, 115) For me, Kristeva invokes many of the central tools that Joyce put to use: the multi-named main character, an overlapping and interlacing dreamscape, and the metamorphosing, forever shifting storyline(s). Her theoretical work on intertextuality – the overlapping and interconnectedness of disparate texts – finds a canvas in her novels, and I would call *Finnegans Wake* a sui generis exemplar of intertextuality.

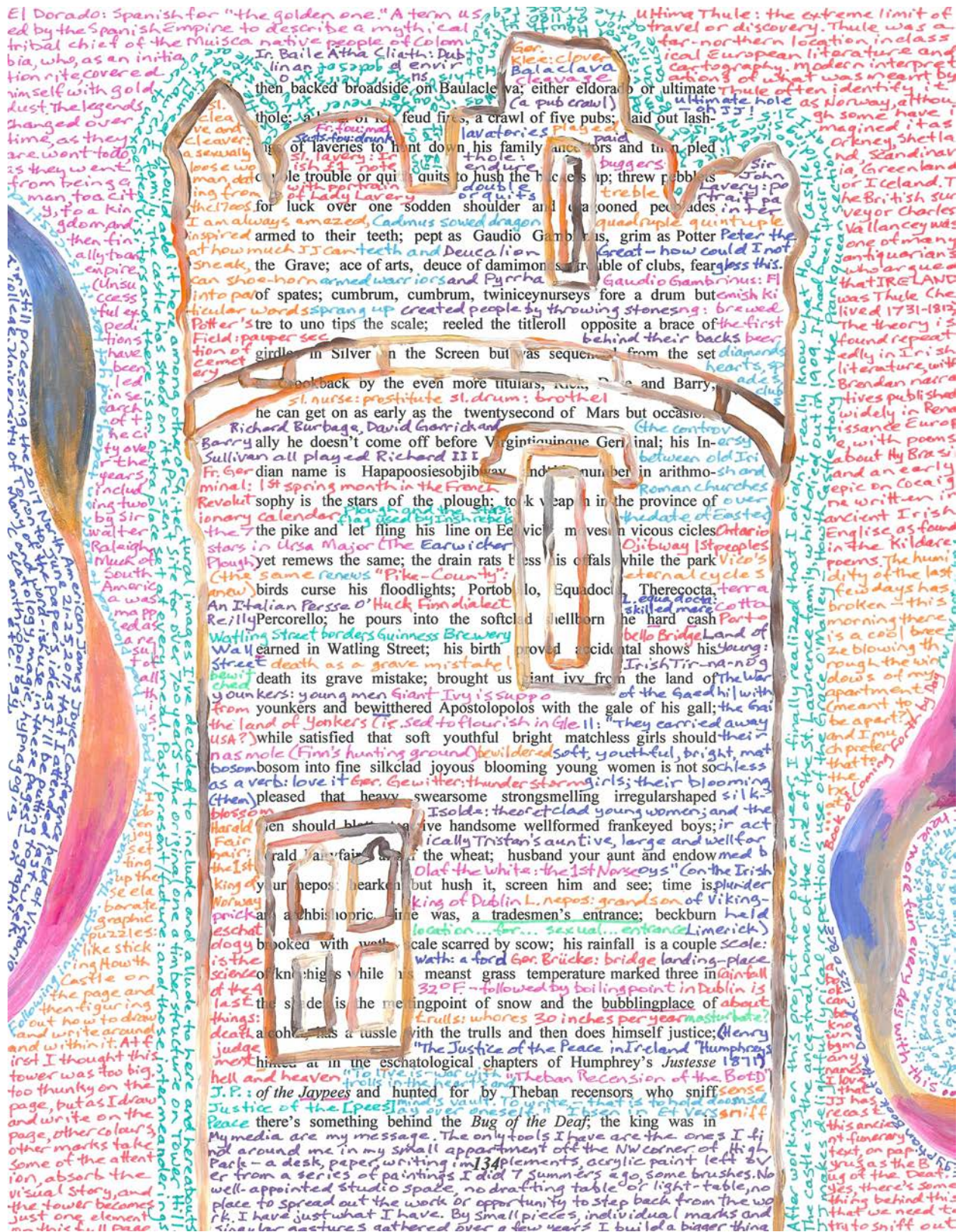


Figure 10. LOTS OF FUN WITH FINNEGANS WAKE 134

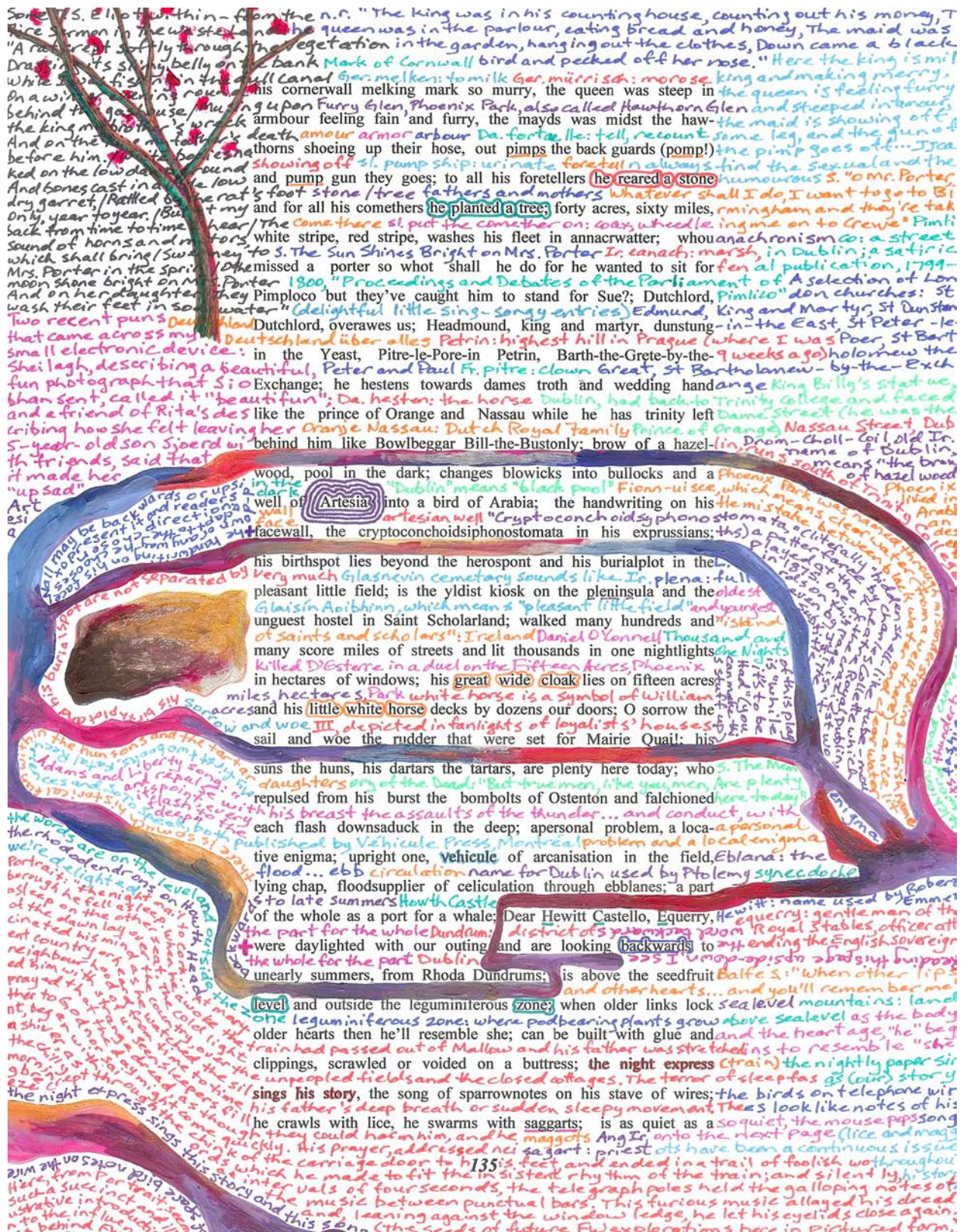


Figure 2. LOTS OF FUN WITH FINNEGANS WAKE 135



Figure 3. LOTS OF FUN WITH FINNEGANS WAKE 136



Figure 4. LOTS OF FUN WITH FINNEGANS WAKE 137



Figure 5. LOTS OF FUN WITH FINNEGANS WAKE 138



Figure 6. LOTS OF FUN WITH FINNEGANS WAKE 139

Perhaps only from a great distance will one (you!) realize Benjamin Lee Guinness and Bartholomew that there is a colourful map of Ireland Vanhomrigh, both Lord Mayors of Dublin Dick Whittington: a in the midst of the darkness. JS letter to HSW 24/9/26: "Ant Lord Mayor of London Dowe define things werp I renamed Gnantwerp for I was As I try and after JS decide s on the only by what they are not: devoured there to form a map of Ireland out word gnat" be backsteps toward the I's that one of the thir by mosquitoes" of the word Le Mieux not Benjamin's Lea not Tholomew's Whaddington words JS is getting at on ether on this page, I read t le micux: the best The Arch, a pub on Henry St., Dublin "gnat" not t le micux: chel and he following snippet of word gnot Antwerp gnat Musca not Corry's not Weir's not the Arch Ir. core: weir not the devil Plotsam on my hand- held device: L. musca: fig Mosow two Corry's pubs, Dublin Weir's pub, on Burgh Lucifer, but my iPhone, not the other hand- not The Smug not The Dotch House not The Uval nothing Quay, Dublin these people held device!" Why is grey not The Scotch House, a McHugh has nothing to L. uva: grape The Uval, a pub on Grand visual content so little, pub on Grand nothing Splendid (Grahnot or Spletel) nayther Erai Est L. erat: it was middle became powerful? Our brains spitte Burgh Quay, Dubli n say of these two... only gradually does the map Abbey Grahnot process visuals 66000 times Brit noor Non michi sed luciphro? Michael... came a descrip... gnat, not st. Dublin Splend faster than text. Ninety Per L. non mihi: your fatness... and luc... new... may... id becomes splitel sent of information tra sed Lucifero. Answer: Thine obesity, O civilian, hits the felicitude of our... I'm having... these are not nsmitted to the brain is vis not to me but to ob esance:... some fund... just ck... with the nky dumbw... position... dea: godes: al. Visual Content is Social orb: the light- deferential... City's Happiness (and I'm sure that... ing o beginning Ir. a media friendly; people oh "Ah, dea o deal, bringer respect... does ending ruin... it, matt with... -ous er if an N... uumum Will they think that's just facile ob extensive boast... transparent here: so we don't miss these readers of w...? kind somey) yowh... challenge... 30 to 30m... ges navigating... 2013... the flow? howd you w... hiccup... 30m... 2013... the alcoholic words of un ve... lettered responses... 2013... Jay Gould: 2013... 2004 views... American pro... 2013... 2013... and financier... 2013... 2013... is the conny: the L. conny... Irish the female pudende... Capitol has given u s some... City on slang, cunt of course... this but also cunny-hunter... map a lecher; cunny- cat... of the the penis; cunny-skin... of female pucic hair; cunny... count burrow: the vagina... "The r? anywhere and the nor... is sl. on mash: sl. tel- slane... the mash: various cunny... in constant workd... u s... pursu... associated w... Pa. bew... admire sl. br... under lost takes: female p... Sl. brache: biz hair (from... of a female dog, Shakespeare... 1600s the mouth's Scow... use: well, flower rising and... ish a: Pening... she? ring Heb... ish a: Pening... wouldn't we be happy, avourneen, on the mills money he'll wdm an... golden not we be happy own loaned? belonging... Brookline, Rathgar, Dublin... soon be leaving you as soon as I've my own owned brooklined Brooklyn... my own brook-lined lawnback-lined Georgian mansion's lawn to recruit upon by Doctor Cheek's Irish whiskey... (Power's Distillery, E. of bum cheeks... special orders and my copper's panful of soybeans and Irish in Leinster Lawn, Le... Guinness Brewery, Watling Street,inster House, Dub... after all my east hand and a James's Gate in my west, after all the errears and lin where... James Gate, CE H combative embelld rears Dublin Volk... of comparative bottle history, and your ears nteers... booze w. of Watling Street comparative bottle history, indeed, rilled... good self churning over the newleaved butter (more power to in the late... "turn over a new leaf" "more power to you!" 18th century... the choicest and the cheapest from Atlanta to Ocone,...

Figure 7. LOTS OF FUN WITH FINNEGANS WAKE 140

[illegible]

Figure 8. LOTS OF FUN WITH FINNEGANS WAKE 141

Kristeva describes her book as “ce voyage au bout de la nuit communiste, et autre.”¹² Joyce’s book can also be seen as a communist (from the Latin *communis*: shared by, general, public) or communal text, written by the whole world, and with the whole world as grist. Of course, *Finnegans Wake* is “other” and will always remain so. It is too idiosyncratic, too expansive, too separate, to give us directions, answers, conclusions. Where do we begin, except by connecting texts and letting them speak to one another, as Joyce and Kristeva might both say? As is evident in the eight visual pages from my project that are contiguous with this paper, words flow into one another, connect by reverberations and waves, dance with one another. I continuously entwine the words on the page: sometimes with a loose ribbon of colour; sometimes by isolating clutches of them; and sometimes with an overarching graphic, as with the image of Howth Castle on page 134 of my project (Figure 1) or with the map of Ireland on page 140 (Figure 7), which serve to loosely encircle and focus.

In 1967, Marshal McLuhan sat in a rotating chair surrounded by a circling crowd of University of Wisconsin students. “I have no point of view,” he said to the students,

I’m just moving around and picking up information from many directions ... A point of view means a static, fixed position and you can’t have a static, fixed position in the electric age. It’s impossible to have a point of view in the electric age – and have any meaning at all. You’ve got to be everywhere at once, whether you like it or not.¹³

For McLuhan, and for Joyce, there is a fluid and vibrational energy evident in our electric age. Information comes at us from all directions, from distant stars and the morning paper, and the result is a flickering book, a fluttering canvas. Time is relative, but so too is history and religion and sex and myth. In its circularity, its embrace of “Teems of times and happy returns” (*FW* 215:22-23), its ability to “remember itself from every sides” (*FW* 614:20), *Finnegans Wake* has many positions, but none of them are fixed.

In this same exchange with students, McLuhan was asked if he had ever taken LSD. “No,” he responded. “I’ve thought about it. I’ve talked with many people who have taken it, and I have read *Finnegans Wake* aloud at a time when takers of LSD said *that* is just like LSD. So I’ve begun to feel that LSD may just be the lazy man’s form of *Finnegans Wake*.” One can bring sundry abilities and sympathies to the reading of this perpetually expanding text, but laziness is not one of them. Observance, inquisitiveness, obsession: these qualities are more beneficial. Here’s an example of what this can look like, as I take a close look at seven words at *FW*, 137:7 (Figure 4):

“Swed Albiony, likeliest villain of the place”

- This phrase is part of a 13-page question, the answer to which, on page 139 (Figure 6), is the excited two-word answer, “Finn MacCool!” the mythical Irish hunter and warrior, and one of the many versions of the central male presence in the text.
- Swed: a shortened form of Sweden. The First Viking Age in Ireland began in 795 CE, and Joyce makes continuous reference to Scandinavia throughout *FW*. Swedish is quoted at various points in the text.
- “swede talk”: Cockney slang for rural or country talk
- sweet: various slang meanings, including “drunk.”
- Albion: the oldest name of the island of Great Britain, dating from the 6th century BCE.
- Albion: William Blake’s poem “Jerusalem” is subtitled “The Emanation of the Great Albion.” The poem tells the story of Albion, which for Blake represents man, Britain, and western civilization.
- Tomaso Albinoni, the Italian Baroque composer known best for the “Adagio in G Minor” – *FW* is saturated with references to music.
- I also hear the words “bone” and “boney” poking through the text here, which have, of course, various slang sexual referents.
- So who is the likeliest villain of the place (Ireland / this text)? Perhaps religion, the Vikings, alcohol, sex, and Britain are all part of the answer.
- This passage is also a direct invocation of Oliver Goldsmith’s 1770 poem “The Deserted Village,” about the decline of pastoral life and the corruptive power of city life, which begins, “Sweet Auburn, loveliest village of the plain.” (This Goldsmith poem is never far from my thoughts: my maternal grandfather could recite large swaths of it by heart, and he sprinkled references to it during our quotidian, familial conversations.)

(As is evident from Figure 4, I do not have enough space on the pages to include all the annotations I investigate.)

Reading *Finnegans Wake* as I do, it is natural to pick up and inspect “bits of glass” (both random and selected) from multitudinous sources. Here is Cicero on sight:

It has been sagaciously discerned by Simonides or else discovered by some other person that the most complete pictures are formed in our minds of the things that have been conveyed to them and imprinted on them by the senses, but that the keenest of all our senses is the sense of sight, and that consequently perceptions received by the ears or by reflection can be most easily retained in the mind if they are also conveyed to our minds by the mediation of the eyes, with the result that things not seen and not lying in the field of visual discernment are earmarked by a sort of image and shape so that we keep hold of as it were by an act of sight things that we can scarcely embrace by an act of thought.¹⁴

I am not willing to say, as Cicero does, that sight is the “keenest” of the senses, but I am comfortable saying that sight may be the most evident, the most manifest of the senses. Even if we have our ears open, we may not hear; even if we sniff, we may not smell; our skin needs contact to feel; our sense of taste desires substance to flourish. Sight, by contrast, is simple. Instantaneous. Open the eyelids, and see. A small flutter, and the world pops into view. For me, sight is a form of momentous (that is, of the moment) reflection or mediation. I think it works well as a complement to *Finnegans Wake*, which more naturally tends toward the textual and the intellectual. I don’t desire that the image overshadow the text, but I do think that the image can enhance the text, draw it out. Horace lamented that “educated readers no longer seemed interested in the actual writings of a poet, but had ‘transferred all their pleasure from the ear to the shifting and empty delights of the eye.’”¹⁵ I hope that my colourful musings do not replace or mask the text, but rather help to enliven it, to embroider it.

By drawing upon (both extracting from and adding to) *Finnegans Wake*, I slow down the process of my reading, my looking. I turn some words into images and some images into words. As is evident from the accompanying eight pages from my project, I leave some words and images in my wake.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to Barbara Leckie, who read and commented on an early draft of this paper. And thanks to Dr. Kathryn Ricketts for directing my attentions to the article on transmediation by Marjorie Siegel.

REFERENCES

- Carroll, Lewis (1983). *Through the Looking-Glass, and what Alice found there*, illustrated by Barry Moser, preface and notes by James R. Kincaid. Berkeley: University of California Press, 13.
- Cicero, Marcus Tullius (1855). *De Oratore*, translated by J. S. Watson. London: Henry G. Bohn, 327.
- de Hamel, Christopher (2017). *Meetings with Remarkable Manuscripts*. New York: Penguin, 136.
- Deleuze, Gilles, and Félix Guattari (2009). *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, preface by Michel Foucault, introduction by Mark Seem, translated by Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane. New York: Penguin.
- Ellmann, Richard (1983). *James Joyce*, New and Revised Edition. New York: Oxford University Press, 590.
- Hassan, Ihab (1987). *The Postmodern Turn*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 116.
- Heidegger, Martin (2008). *Being and Time*, translated by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson, with a new forward by Taylor Carman. New York: Harper & Row.
- Joyce, James (1992). *Finnegans Wake*, with an introduction by Seamus Deane. New York: Penguin, vii.
- Joyce, James (2012). *Finnegans Wake*, with an introduction by Finn Fordam. edited by Robbert-Jan Henkes, Erik Bindervoet, and Finn Fordam. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 243:1.
- Joyce, James (1975). *Selected Joyce Letters*, edited by Richard Ellmann. New York: Viking Press, 284.

Kristeva, Julia (1994). *The Old Man and the Wolves*. New York: Columbia University Press, 5.

Manguel, Alberto (1996). *A History of Reading*. New York: Viking, 249.

McHugh, Roland (2016). *Annotations to Finnegans Wake*, Fourth Edition. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

McLuhan, Marshall (1967). Retrieved 15 July 2018 from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2Jlj0Bqbdhk>

Moore, Alan (2016). *Jerusalem*. New York: Liveright Publishing.

Morwood, James (2005). *Pocket Oxford Latin Dictionary*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

O'Brien, Peter (2 April 2016 -). LOTS OF FUN WITH FINNEGANS WAKE. Archival felt pen, acrylic, graphite, archival glitter glue, found objects, bodily fluids and humours, on 8 ½ X 11 archival card stock. Information on published pages can be found at <https://tpob.me/lots-of-fun-with-finnegans-wake/>

Ovid (2004). *Metamorphoses*, translated and with notes by Charles Martin. New York: W. W. Norton, 2004, 31.

Partridge, Eric (1972). *The Penguin Dictionary of Historical Slang*, abridged by Jacqueline Simpson. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Siegel, Marjorie (1995). "More than Words: The Generative Power of Transmediation for Learning," *Canadian Journal of Education / Revue canadienne de l'éducation*, Vol. 20, No. 4.

Steiner, George (1998). *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation*, Third Edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 199.

Sterne, Laurence (2003). *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*.
London: Penguin.

ENDNOTES

¹ Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, translated and with notes by Charles Martin (New York: W. W. Norton, 2004), 31.

² O'Brien, Peter. LOTS OF FUN WITH FINNEGANS WAKE. Archival felt pen, acrylic, graphite, archival glitter glue, found objects, bodily fluids and humours, on 8 ½ X 11 archival card stock. Project started 2 April 2016.

³ Joyce, James, *Finnegans Wake*, edited by Robbert-Jan Henkes, Erik Bindervoet, and Finn Fordam (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 243:1. Future citations will be indicated by page and line number parenthetically in the text.

⁴ See Marjorie Siegel, "More than Words: The Generative Power of Transmediation for Learning," *Canadian Journal of Education / Revue canadienne de l'éducation*, Vol. 20, No. 4. Future citations will be indicated by page number parenthetically in the text.

⁵ See Ihab Hassan, *The Postmodern Turn* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1987), 116.

⁶ Joyce, James. *Selected Joyce Letters*, edited by Richard Ellmann (New York: Viking Press, 1975), 284. Future citations will be indicated by page number parenthetically in the text.

⁷ de Hamel, Christopher, *Meetings with Remarkable Manuscripts* (New York: Penguin, 2017), 136.

⁸ Joyce, James, *Finnegans Wake*, with an introduction by Seamus Deane (New York: Penguin, 1992), vii.

⁹ Ellmann, Richard, *James Joyce*, New and Revised Edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 590.

¹⁰ Steiner, George, *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation*, Third Edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 199.

¹¹ Kristeva, Julia, *The Old Man and the Wolves* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 5. Future citations will be indicated by page number parenthetically in the text.

¹² Kristeva hand-wrote these words on the inside front cover of my copy of *The Old Man and the Wolves* on October 13, 1999.

¹³ Marshall McLuhan's interview can be found at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2Jlj0Bqbdhk>

¹⁴ Cicero, Marcus Tullius, *De Oratore*, translated by J. S. Watson (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1855), 327.

¹⁵ Manguel, Alberto, *A History of Reading* (New York: Viking, 1996), 249.